



■ Joseph with Jamie Camplin, managing director of publisher Thames & Hudson, at Briciole in Marylebone

Jamie Camplin walked into Briciole, in Marylebone: a deep blue shirt with bright white collar, heavy silk tie alive with fuchsia little flowers and a plum-coloured velvet jacket ...! Well good – let's show the kids how it's done. Our mutual love of beautiful things really lets rip though when it comes to books – for Jamie is the managing director of one of the finest publishers on the planet: Thames & Hudson. He has been with the firm – literally man and boy – for 43 years, and head honcho for quite a long time now. Every six months T&H produce a magnificent catalogue crammed

with new art books that you yearn for – their backlist being legendary. The Kindle debate never applies to T&H, because here are heavy boards, thick coloured endpapers, head and tail bands and the most superb photography at remarkably easy prices (this largely down to printing in the Far East and international co-editions) And for the record: there is no Mr Thames, there is no Mr Hudson: it's the rivers in London and New York, see?

And as to Briciole – oh boy, what a find. I have no idea why they called it Briciole – which loosely translates as breadcrumbs or

scraps – for here is a truly vibrant authentic Italian restaurant that is many, many cuts above the sort of dive that will chuck at you a spag bol, and then a partly defrosted tiramisu. The exterior is handsome – a converted Victorian corner pub in holly green with gold Corinthian capitals and bright red awnings. You walk through an attractive though modest deli and into a large and inviting space with exposed pale yellow London stock brickwork, sturdy tables (with dinky little drawers holding cutlery, water and napkins), a mish-mash of old mahogany dining chairs and lit by a vast and multi-branched gleaming brass Flemish chandelier. The staff are beyond charming, all of them with heavy Italian accents that are just this side of impenetrable. On an ordinary weekday lunchtime, the place was nearly full: elderly locals, clumps of office girls, couples, and a party of 12. A large

group is actually a good idea here – as becomes plain when you begin to fillet the corrugated cardboard menu: you want to eat everything on it. Starters are cichetti (small plates) which always encourage greed: four different sorts of prosciutto among a lustful temptation of so much else. From this very drool-making array we went for smoked swordfish, Parma ham, arancini Siciliana (deep fried rice balls) and fried pizza stuffed with ricotta and tomato.

All of this came pretty rapidly and the waitress never stopped smiling. The wine list is lengthy, and can be pricey (I saw a Niebbolo at £127) but there is a selection of 12 half bottles, which is a rare thing nowadays. I found a (full) bottle of Nero d'Avola (Sicilian) for a remarkable £17.25, and it was rather delicious. The Parma ham was lean, dry, melty and there was simply piles of it. Arancini were larger than usual, with that all-important initial crunch followed by the creamy warm goo of risotto within. The 'pizzas' looked like miniature Cornish pasties: crisp, and then yielding. Smoked swordfish – a new one on me – was something of a miracle: in look and texture, you would have sworn it was ham ... but then the light and delicate smoked fishiness insinuates itself upon a willing tongue.

#### Politics

As we waited for our mains – which are full-size portions – I asked Jamie if he had always wanted to be a publisher. "Oh no ... after Cambridge, I quite liked the idea of becoming prime minister, but I couldn't decide which party to belong to. Politics intrigued me: in common with all polite English people, I rather relished the idea of being abused. But I soon found that publishing suited me very well: we were among the very first professionals to wear pink shirts." And as to those mains: Jamie had a thick and tender pork chop (as pink as a shirt) with mixed roast vegetables and roast potatoes – the nearest he could manage, I think, to ordering an English meal in an Italian restaurant. I wanted

tagliioni with prawns and tomato ... but alas, there was no more. So instead I had three superb and large beef meatballs (there are many other varieties) in a rich tomato sugo with roast peppers (yellow and red) and quite a lot of Jamie's potatoes – which were done in that wonderful Italian cuboid and prettily seasoned way. He very much enjoyed the chop – as he did the whole meal: and who could not? "Very interesting restaurant," he said. "Lots of surprising combinations and variations." So then we moaned a bit about how Waterstone's arcane book ordering system seems designed to ensure that each shop is out of stock of a book for days before more can be ordered (Jesus – don't get me started) and then we talked of the passing of years. "Well naturally," said Jamie, "when one is a young man, one is invariably incredibly stupid." And then, following a reflective pause: "some things, of course, never change ..."

So, from a selection of 10 Italian cheeses, we ate some perfectly crumbly Parmesan (not sweaty and waxy, not as hard as a bloody rock) and reflected happily on a damned good – not to say bargain – meal in a damned good place. And then we wandered out into the sunshine: the two Beaux of Belles-Lettres, if you like – but hey, you can just call us Fine and Dandy.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk). Joseph Connolly's latest novel, ENGLAND'S LANE, is published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook.

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“Here is a vibrant authentic Italian restaurant many cuts above the sort of dive that will chuck at you a spag bol and a partly defrosted tiramisu

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