

Restaurant review: Joseph Connolly

'Mean and tasty' food is neither in pub of year

Our critic finds The Grafton a great Victorian boozery housing a second rate ribs 'n' beans franchise - and thinks he should have worn a Stetson



Food trends. There never used to be food trends, but now there are – to keep the idiots happy. And all these trends don't actually have to be nice, or anything – simply new. Like Seitan, for instance: wheat meat. Oh yes, I am not kidding: a lump of gluten masquerading as either beef or duck. Or how about chocolate with garlic? Yuk? I should say so. Chips with cheese curds? Vile enough? If not, try goats' cheese crammed into a choux pastry éclair, and glazed with balsamic vinegar: all these trends are hot right now – said éclairs being available at Harrods, should you be feeling insane. And talking of vinegar, some cocktail bars are selling it by the glass: so no longer is it limited to art previews and book launches. One bar is serving a cocktail made up of malt whisky, Campari, sparkling wine ... citric acid and a 9V battery: the acid makes the drink extra fizzy, and then you lick the battery, because you are a moron.

Okay – so maybe you just don't have it in you to be a truly fashionable diner ... so why not head down instead to a Kentish Town pub? And not just any old pub – because the Grafton has just been named The Sky Great British Pub of the Year 2014. Well blimey. And picture that glittering award ceremony at the London Hilton ...! Lord, that will have been a night to remember. So I decided to find out what makes Pub of the Year. According to the judges, it was down to the décor as well as 'excellent service standards'. These factors combine, apparently,

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to make the Grafton a 'diverse modern business' – which sounds pretty grisly, but just let's see, shall we?

Well the exterior is not a good start: scuffed and chipped matt charcoal paint, and at 1pm on a Tuesday, the Pub of the Year was completely empty. My wife and I were strolling about the large and handsome Victorian interior, taking in the tiling, the broad oak bar, the green glass pendants and sconces, the gold Corinthian capitals atop black cast iron pillars. And then we thought we might like to kick off with a drink in the Pub of the Year ... but there were no bar staff. The place was a void. 'Excellent service standards' were out to lunch. And then I spotted them, the staff – sitting separately in distant corners, consulting their phones. So we loitered a bit – looking at the traditional pumps fronting a serious collection of ales – and then we loitered a little bit longer. I said “hello ...?” to the nearest mesmerised girl, who then wandered around to the business end of the bar, seemingly startled by the fact that there was a punter here wanting a drink in the Pub



of the Year. They had frizzante on tap, so we had a couple of pints of that. No: kidding – just glasses, and these were manfully struggling to remain just on the effervescent side of still.

So we looked at the menu, trying to ignore the din of builders drilling at the back. Texas Joe's, the (temporary) food franchise is called: I should have worn my Stetson. This is no place for ladies who lunch on lettuce: meat is sold 'by the pound', along with such subtleties as 'cowboy beans'. 'Ask your server to tell you what are the ribs of the day', it said ... but alas, no server. It further says on the menu that the pub is 'serving the community': it's just that they weren't serving me. And then suddenly – everything changed! A fellow was asking if the temperature was to our liking – an extremely polite lady was concerned about the building noise, and would we maybe prefer to be seated on the roof terrace, and could she carry up our drinks ...? Well goodness: was it the notebook, do we think ...? So, on

this warm and sunny afternoon, we found ourselves up on the roof terrace – more of a broad balcony, really, with walls, floor and seating all made up of decking recently stained with chilli-infused Bisto Granules.

We ordered smoked slow-cooked shoulder of pork, and the 'ribs of the day' – which turned out to be pork, as, I suspect, they generally are. These came with chips, a ferocious dipping sauce, a nod towards coleslaw and a mess of beans. The menu is, it says, 'mean and tasty', though I should say generous and merely over-cayenned. The ribs were very good – tender and yielding, not too fatty – and so was the pork, though stone cold. This was smilingly replaced with warmer. The meat was rather fine – though overdone and too dry: one ached for something fresh and green. My wife had half a pint of Sambrook's Wardle, described as 'floral hops and a well balanced toffee malt' – and, apparently, was exactly that. I had a glass of red: the list is small – because here, quite rightly in the Pub of the Year,

the accent is on beer and whisky. This, I am sure, is a truly great pub in the evening, with eager ale-lovers blotting it up with 'mean and tasty' food: this is what the place is for, and doubtless why it won the award. The chips were 'twice fried' – which, alas, proved to be insufficiently frequent. I requested the pudding menu ... but no: they only serve pudding at the weekend. Which is ridiculous, frankly.

So there we had it: a fine pub, no doubt ... though not a fine restaurant: which is okay. And so we toddled down Prince of Wales Road, past the Prince of Wales Supermarket and Prince of Wales Dry Cleaners (which between them cater to all the culinary and sartorial needs of our heir to the throne) and then off to Talacre Park, where we bought our puddings from an ice cream van called Pinocchio's: a Bunny's Ears for my wife, and for me, a Magnum. Because finally, I was feeling lucky. Punk.

FACTFILE

- **The Grafton**, 20 Prince of Wales Road NW5. Tel 020 7482 4466. But you can't book for anything ... except, apparently, Christmas lunch.
- **Open** Mon-Thu 12 - 11pm, Fri-Sat 12 - 12pm, Sun 12 - 10.30pm
- **Food:** ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- **Service:** ★★★★★☆☆ (eventually)
- **The Feeling:** ★★★★★☆☆
- **Cost:** A load of meat is about £15, and that will absorb all the ale.