

Restaurant of The Week: Lima Floral

Paddington would love it

Joseph finds nothing dark about colourful Peruvian



■ Restaurant critic Joseph Connolly at Lima Floral with guest His Honour Michael Chism Picture: Polly Hancock

The Next New Thing: that's what the foodies are constantly in quest of, apparently - though usually this news is put out by barren PRs with hollow eyes who are paid to desperately push the Next New Thing. I myself - and I can hardly be alone - am generally content with the Last Old Thing, because look: it will never let you down. But foodies are as spoiled as modern travellers - those who are done with visiting all the beautiful places the world has to offer, and are eagerly seeking out war-torn hell-holes, crime zones and hotbeds of disease. While the foodies scour the planet for esoterica - especially restaurants serving anything but recognisably appetising food. And at the moment, they are having something of a field day: grasshoppers are, dare I say, flying off the shelves. Ants and crickets are having a moment. As are mealworms, fed on carrots. There is a company called Grub (geddit?) who will happily supply

all your insect needs. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has lately championed the squirrel burger (caution: may contain nuts).

And as to coming food trends and restaurants, Waitrose is prophesying that 2015 will be the year of Brazil (what - again?) and also ... Peru. Peru, eh ...? Now what do I know about Peru? Well in common with virtually everywhere else, practically nothing - except that from the darkest part of it, there once emerged Paddington Bear in duffel coat and sou'wester, which must be their national costume. But back to food: Virgilio Martinez runs a restaurant in Lima called Central - number fifteen on San Pellegrino's highly controversial listing of the world's best fifty. And a couple of years ago he opened an offshoot in Fitzrovia called Lima (are you keeping up?) which in no time collared a Michelin star. Now comes Lima Floral, so called because it is on the corner of Floral and Garrick Street in Covent Garden, on the site of

the old and admired Inigo Jones, though it has been many failed and forgettable places since then.

Lima Floral is nice and bright - white planked ceiling, white brick walls - with colourful hangings which may or may not be 'Incan'. Smart teak furniture, turquoise cushions and smilingly efficient service from young and good-looking maybe Peruvians. The downer is that it is very echoey and damnably loud: the place is chocker with younger people (where isn't?) but there is a genuinely joyous feel to it. My guest was His Honour Michael Chism - a retired judge and all-round excellent fellow, always elegant in double-breasted waistcoat and silk bow tie: I'm telling you - youth-packed Lima Floral had never seen anything like us two, matey.

There is a bargain set lunch: two courses for £17.50, three for just £2 more ... both options to include a glass of wine! Very good - but we were intrigued by the strangenesses on the carte. The jug of water came stuffed with stuff, as is becoming the trendy custom. Michael's glass was charged with pulpy cucumber, while mine had bobbing about its rim a single blueberry: weird. Very good cornbread was served gratis, with oil. I was starting with avocado uchucuta - which is a spicy sauce, but not too much so - with muna corn, tomato seeds ... and yellow tiger's milk: the tiger will surely have seen red. (It's actually a lime-based marinade, as used in ceviche). Michael ordered beef crudo with algarrobo syrup (from the carob tree - need you ask?) with green salad and a warm escabeche

FACTFILE

- Lima Floral, 14 Garrick Street WC2. Tel 020 7240 5746
- Open Mon-Tue 12 - 11.30pm. Wed-Thu 12 - 11.45pm. Fri 12 - 12pm. Sat 12.30-12pm. Sun 12-5pm.
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- COST Two course lunch £17.50, three £19.50, each with glass of wine. Otherwise about £120 for three course meal for two, with modest wine.

dressing. The presentation of both these dishes was truly stunning: Chinese yellow pools, in Michael's case, beautifully strewn with rosy raw beef and chlorophyll greenery. Mine too: an absolute poem in colour - and both plates so very creamy and perfectly balanced: a revelation. As were the mains: my guest wanted to know what 'butterfish' was, and the waiter told him that it was a buttery fish, with which he could hardly argue. But he went for beef sudado - seared fillet, with coriander and red onion in a white quinoa stew. I was going to order the organic chicken chalaka - though the waiter warned me it was very spicy indeed ... so I switched to organic lamb rump with eco dry potato (cooked for six hours), queso fresco (soft white cheese) and black quinoa. Which was fantastic, actually - superbly tender and lean chunks of lamb, the sensational flavours (not to say contrast) of the white cheese and black quinoa a veritable detonation of taste. Michael was

similarly enthusiastic about the pink slices of beef fillet nicely afloat in a sort of consommé, within a deep black bowl. Tempranillo was being glugged with all this - the house red.

Michael did not always know that he would enter the law, having come from a defiantly naval family with a long tradition. He rose to be the presiding judge in Hong Kong, where he served for more than twenty years until 1992. "It was wonderful there... but I didn't want to go back, after the hand-over ...". Then he and his wife returned to London, bought a flat in Chelsea, where still they live, and he became a judge at the Royal Courts of Justice. He has two sons and a daughter, she in family law. "Makes a fortune out of divorce," says Michael. "Actually, makes a fortune out of John Cleese alone ..."

What's for pudding? Oh, the usual - purple potato, Amazonian tree tomato, you know the sort of thing.

Amazingly good, actually: Michael had the potato option, with coffee ice cream and red kiwicha (over which foodies will faint with delight - because kiwicha is the new quinoa!). I had a dark chocolate pudding that oozed a centre of deepest yellow - the tree tomato, since you ask: like bitter peach, and wonderful with the chocolate.

"Well," concluded my guest: "what a fine and extraordinary lunch. And before this afternoon, all I knew about Peru was that the Goon Michael Bentine came from there. Then he went to Eton". Probably a moral, somewhere - and very possibly in Darkest Peru.



■ One of the beautifully presented dishes at Lima Floral