

Restaurant of the week: Joseph Connolly at McDonald's

Burger off I'm loathing it

Joseph travels in hope but - perhaps predictably - finds little to love in his local branch of the fast food chain

I'm slummin' it. Yes indeed: this week I am hunkering down with the street folk in the Finchley Road McDonald's, following its recent reopening after a complete refurbishment - this maybe to celebrate the company's forty years in Britain. Back in 1974, Woolwich had the honour of becoming home to the world's 3000th outpost of the Golden Arches, and the first over here. This Finchley Road branch can't have been far behind: certainly I remember my daughter driving me utterly crazy with her obsession with collecting all the (often Disney) toys given away in Happy Meals in order to complete the endless sets, and then, years later, my son doing the same damn thing (often Lego). Those chalet-shaped boxes (still going strong) containing the cherished toy along with the totally disregarded food may indeed have made the children happy, but the parents always looked about as festive as the blackest Good Friday in Hades.

Standing on the pavement opposite is an illuminated advertisement for the joys to come. It reads: 'McDonald's 24 hours. 30 seconds. I'm lovin' it'. Does anyone born actually understand just what that can possibly mean ...? Does it suggest that it is open round the clock, so that you can virtually live in there? And that lunch takes 30 seconds, and so consequently you're lovin' it? Christ knows. In the old days (because I can't have crossed the threshold of one of these places in the past quarter century) they used to

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be quite cheerful, in a ghastly sort of a way. The clown Ronald always featured somewhere, and everything was red and white and yellow and shiny chrome and plasticky - like the bastard child of Wimpy and Woolworth's. A bit of a novelty, a bit of a lark: fast food, costing very little. I was always rather annoyed by the determination of Hampstead to prevent a branch opening there: the key was to stop them bagging the Village's largest premises - what is now Waterstone's - but other than that, why would it matter? When they did finally open further up the High Street, it was modest in size and appearance - a smart black frontage, specially commissioned Hampstead murals, all quite inoffensive. And following its recent closure, I would guess that of all the local eateries that have come and gone, this branch of McDonald's is genuinely missed. I'm pretty

enlightened, no? So you see, I genuinely travelled in hope.

Anyway - back to the dung-coloured hellhole that this newly refurbished Finchley Road 'restaurant' truly proved to be. Not too long ago, I spotted knock-off Jacobsen 'egg' chairs in the window: this did nothing for the sales of Jacobsen 'egg' chairs to design-conscious locals. Now there are ugly and generic swivel chairs, with a few approximations of Jacobsen 'ant' chairs, to show willing. The interior is one of the most soul-sapping I have ever encountered: it leeches your spirit, guts you - it renders you blanched and miserable the moment you enter. The ceiling is black. Dark mauve abounds. Black-and-white blow-ups that are as incomprehensible as that illiterate come-on on the pavement. An enormous close-up of a man's face, looking as depressed as well he might, with a drinking straw dangling from his mouth. And spliced between panels the colour of rotting lemons, huge depictions of legs encased in scruffy jeans. As were the legs of everyone present,

actually - save the scattering of very old and solitary figures in corners, staring unseeingly with milky eyes into a paper cup which may or may not have contained a Maltesers McFlurry. All overlaid by loud and enervating street music.

Oh dear. There are, but of course, electronic touch screens where you can order your food ... so it is only a matter of time before the few people at the counter will lose their McJobs, leaving all the digitally illiterate to starve - or else, conceivably, go somewhere good. The service actually was very polite - but not, any more, fast. Which was the whole idea, no? The person who takes your order no longer fulfils it: she gives you a numbered ticket, and you wait ... for nearly ten minutes. My ticket was 007, about which I make no comment except to say that by now I could well have done with a treble vodka martini, shaken, stirred, or else delivered intravenously. But there is not even the anaesthetic of booze in McDonald's: yes in Paris, no in London.

The menu is comically large: ten variants of burger, two fish (breaded fingers in a bun ... or not in a bun) ... and get this: how many chicken things? Don't bother guessing, I'll tell you: twenty-two ...! Extraordinary. My wife had one of them: grilled chicken salad sandwich. And I had a quarter pounder with cheese and fries, because that's what I always used to fool with all those years ago, when I was unhappily surrounded by Happy Meals. There was no discernible meat texture or burger flavour - just that sappy and leaden handful of ancient memory over which you ruminate disconsolately like the poor cow it came from and wipe your fingers and wipe your mouth and feel very grubby within and without for having

FACTFILE

McDonald's. Everywhere in the Universe.

- **Cost:** Still very cheap, but I'd prefer a Mars bar.
- **Open:** 24 hours and 30 seconds, seemingly.
- **Food:** ★☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
- **Service:** ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
- **The feeling:** ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆ (I would actually give it minus 10, as it makes you feel awful)

done just any of this. Not to say still hungry. Chips were dredged in salt. Coca-Cola was watery iced syrup. The chicken was okay - but rammed into a loaf that was impossible to eat without its entire disintegration. Only eight quid the lot ... but God, how very awful an experience. Couldn't face queuing again for some or other fearful muffin, so went to the lavatory to make myself clean. And you don't actually expect the facilities to be captioned, do you really? But they are. They are labelled 'waterless urinals' - which, apart from being laughably oxymoronic, is just not what you wish even to contemplate when so low in spirits, assaulted by rap, and really quite queasy. More ...? There are Samsung tablets set into tables for 'kiddies' to play games on. There was a seventy-five year-old woman clearing away the unspeakable debris: or possibly she was a school leaver, drawn, shredded and made bloodless by all that she was doing. Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God. I'm loathin' it.

