

Round-up of the year: Joseph Connolly



The good, the bad and the hideous

The Ham&High's tireless restaurant critic sums up the year on a plate

■ Joseph with Melvyn Bragg at The Fish Cafe and below with Mail on Sunday editor Geordie Greig Pictures Polly Hancock

One two three. This is not a musician's excitedly beatty count-in to the intro of a peppy song: why would I burden you with that? No: 123 is the number of times that this year I have lunched or dined in a restaurant. Crumbs. Forty-nine of these are accounted for by the weekly reviews that have appeared in this paper ... but where can the remaining seventy-four have sprung from? Well – life goes like that. Or mine does, anyway. In the spring I published *The A-Z of Eating Out*, and that entailed a meal or two. Then there are clubs and old favourites that one must attend to ... the odd surprise invitation, the occasional whim. Still, though ... quite a lot – but I know people not professionally engaged in food who could easily double that score. The funny thing is, I don't really feel like I've been out much at all: I always seem to be eating at home (and very well too, courtesy of my frequent lunch guest, 'er indoors) but obviously this can hardly be the case. So here, then, are the forty-nine: a review of all this year's Ham & High reviews: the good, the bad and the downright hideous.

The local eating scene – while not yet showstopping – is immeasurably improved since, say, seven or eight years ago. There linger on in Hampstead and environs a few long established restaurants that in any sane sort of situation would have closed down ages ago, for the simple reason that they're no damn good ... but Hampstead is very

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loyal to the old survivors, which continue to rely solely upon the return of the same few people who themselves can't survive for that much longer. And what then? Meanwhile, names continue to come and go in the gastronomic graveyard that is Heath Street almost faster than I am able to review them, and then observe their passing. Sometimes, rather good places come a cropper, while the dire go on and on. The bitter truth about restaurant economics is, of course, that you have to be pretty full most of the time, or else the essential profits simply won't be generated.



My Ham & High lunches have largely been a joy – and I have been lucky enough this year to have had among my guests a clutch of authors, a doctor, an antiquarian bookseller, artists, a professor, journalists, a barrister, a comedian, a caricaturist, a club chairman, publishers, a chef, a principal, a screenwriter, a publicist, a drama critic, a broadcaster, a newspaper editor, a four-star general and a peer of the realm. Always a bit of pressure when I invite a guest because I am earnestly hoping that they will enjoy a good meal, but by definition I have rarely if ever before eaten in the chosen restaurant, so it's always something of a gamble. Contrary to the popular imagining, restaurant critics don't actually hunt out somewhere terrible in order to gleefully subject it to a thorough trashing, much to the delight of all you readers. And ... although there have been appalling experiences (coming up soon) on the whole I've been exceedingly lucky. As you know, I score out of ten for food, service and 'the feeling'. In this round-up, though, I am talking only of the grub itself – but all the reviews are on my website in descending order of date, so do dig in for details. Nowhere this year scored 10, though half-a-dozen managed a glittering 9 ... and three of these were Richard Caring establishments: they do know how to do it. So: the ancient favourites LE CAPRICE and J.SHEEKEY, and the newish 34 in Mayfair: LIMA FLORAL scored

9 (for the sheer explosion of colours and flavour) – and so did a seemingly humble 'gastropub' in King's Cross, THE DRIVER: best steak ever. Also with 9, and truly close to home, is BRADLEYS, an understated and truly good family-run restaurant in Swiss Cottage, bobbing proudly amid a sea of dross.

Lots of places scored 8: ODETTE'S in Primrose Hill (still extremely good), the new FISH CAFE in Hampstead High Street where I am pictured above with geust Melvyn Bragg, the Indian HAZARA in Belsize Village, BELGO NOORD and Q GRILL, both in Chalk Farm, and BALLARO, near England's Lane – which closed inside of six months, rather sadly: it is now NW3 BAR & KITCHEN, which I shall review in January. Marylebone came up with the fabulous FISCHER'S (Corbin & King's recreation of a high society Austrian café), THE LOCKHART (very fashionable southern American), ZOILO, and the old-school DURRANTS: wonderful if you are in the mood for dark wood panelling and silver trolleys. Also with 8 are FREDERICK'S in Islington, ROTUNDA in King's Cross, GREAT QUEEN STREET: good old RULES, HAWKSMOOR SEVEN DIALS and THE REX WHISTLER RESTAURANT at Tate Britain. Almost as many places scored a 7 – pretty good, though below which you don't really want to go: BACCO, THE SALT HOUSE, L'ESCARGOT, OSTUNI, SMITHY'S, THE BULL STEAK EXPERT, MAXWELL'S, THE

TRUSCOTT ARMS, PETER'S, MELANGE, FORA, THE BREW HOUSE (in Kenwood House, soon to change), THE QUEENS in Primrose Hill ... and the most overhyped restaurant in years: THE CHILTERN FIREHOUSE, in Marylebone. It's good, not great, and pretty expensive.

On 6 were SPIAZZO in Crouch End, OTTO'S, THE HOLBORN DINING ROOM and BRASSERIE BLANC (which should have been lower, actually). Also LUIGI'S, to the side of Waitrose – which I only went to because the deluded proprietor of the very uninviting LA VOSS, opposite the Swiss Cottage Odeon, demanded I leave because I was, um ... writing down the prices of his food: dear God. THE GRAFTON in Kentish Town and ROTISSERIE in St John's Wood notched up a disappointing 5 ... and from there we lithely plummet to 2, which was achieved by the frankly ludicrous COMPAGNIE DES VINS SURNATURELS, and also OTTOLENGHI in Islington: a total joke. As was the shambles at Tate Britain, to which I generously awarded just one star: awful. Also awful, and also scoring 1, was McDONALD'S. I sort of wanted to sort of like it ... but no. And here's a shock: St John of Lewis in Oxford Street scored a perfect zero: the very worst of the year. Highly amusingly, they call it THE PLACE TO EAT. I shall be back in the new year (sorry) – but in the jolly meantime, I urge you to have yourself a merry little Christmas. Or, better still: large.