

Restaurant of the week: Joseph Connolly at The Red Lion and Sun



Red lion and red hair heralds entente cordiale

Joseph and his French guest prove abstemious at gastropub - avoiding starters, spuds and puds

We British seem to like Paris an awful lot more than French people do. They will grudgingly acknowledge its enduring beauty, while dismissing it as just a museum – not a place to seriously inhabit, but simply a chocolate box magnet for tourists. Well I'm one of those, of course – a tourist – so I just love it: the Eurostar, the restaurants, the fabulous avenues, the restaurants, the glamour, St Germain, the restaurants (and only whisper softly the truth that on the whole, London restaurants are a good deal better). I also love the fact that France in general, and Paris in particular, takes writers and writing far more seriously than does London's so-called literary establishment. Long interviews with authors, and not just film stars. A year ago, a French TV station sent a crew to Hampstead to make a shortish film about me – and that ain't never going to happen in Blighty, matey. And we all know that chic

“She loves Hampstead with all the zeal of a convert, to her it is the epicentre of the universe: wise woman

Frenchwomen never get fat and have impeccably behaved children ... though still and all, London is now home to not much shy of half a million Frenchies – and we hope it isn't all down to the severity of President Hollande's tax system.

Certainly that had nothing to do with my French lunch guest's arrival in London, just a year ago. Guillemete is hopelessly in love with England, but particularly Hampstead: the Heath, Keats, Constable, the whole caboodle. Originally from Orleans, Guillemete attended the Arles School of Photography for three years, and has many degrees and qualifications from elsewhere, including Leeds University. “That is where I got a taste for England.

Then I saw a Constable sketch of a tree on Hampstead Heath, and I thought: I just have to find that tree ...!” She has taken many beautiful photographs of every aspect of Hampstead, as well as videos of dances she has created at places such as Kenwood House: she loves with all the zeal of the convert. To

her, Hampstead is the epicentre of the universe: wise woman, then. Her literary heroine is Virginia Woolf. And Katherine Mansfield. And Charlotte Mew. Not to say the Brontës. The only non-English emancipated woman to get a look-in is Emily Dickinson.

So I thought I had to find somewhere close to her beloved Heath for lunch – but I've done all of Hampstead, so settled on a very English Highgate pub. The Red Lion & Sun did sound enticing: ‘We make all our dishes on-site daily and they are cooked to order. Nothing is brought in prepared, or frozen’. Very good – and increasingly rare. And they list the meat as being free range, 100 percent traceable, and bought from Highgate Butchers, the name of the proprietor being Lee Harper (not to be confused with Harper Lee – because as there were none of the menu, this man can never be disposed to kill a mockingbird. All of that, you know, was really so extremely convoluted, and barely worth the effort).

The pub is on a busy road, but set back amid a row of beautiful early Georgian houses, flanked rather incongruously by a mini petrol station. I am so bored with telling you that all such places are grey, but blimey – inside, this place is really grey: all over everything, and unalleviated by pictures – just a sconce or so and a couple of mirrors, gloomily lit. The menu is long – eleven little lunches, a dozen proper lunches and nine puddings – as well as very English. And I think that my guest's Anglophilia does not

extend to our cuisine: “In France, I am very close to a Michelin starred restaurant and my father is a wonderful cook. In London I am broke, so eat baked beans. Which, fortunately, I love.” She expresses everything in very good English and with great vivace – this accentuated by her startlingly red hair, which we think might not be natural. The first time I met her it was electric blue. Mine was white on both occasions, so between us we have nicely made up the tricolor.

From a menu that included such as half-a-kilo of rope-grown Shetland mussels in a white wine and shallot sauce and smoked haddock with pea risotto, Guillemete selected pan fried lemon sole fillet with lemon butter, sautéed new potatoes and broccoli. I was torn between many things, but went for braised Welsh lamb shank with champ, green beans and a red wine jus. Were I a beer drinker, I could have gone for Colonel's Whiskers, or maybe Scrumdigitty ... but I had a Languedoc Merlot, and my guest a glass of champagne. The fish turned out to be whole, not a fillet ... but Guillemete didn't care for it. I could see that it was overcooked, but apparently the lemon butter had rendered it far too astringent. She liked the broccoli, and ignored the spuds. My champ (mash with cabbage), green beans and jus were really good – but the lamb was just not falling away from the bone as it really ought to: I had to work for it a bit, but the flavour was okay. Aware that my guest had hardly eaten, I suggested cheese – while she talked irrepressibly about Hampstead. At the moment

FACTFILE

- The Red Lion & Sun, 25 North Road N6. Tel 020 8340 1780 Open for food Mon-Sat 12 – 10pm. Sun 12 – 9pm.
- FOOD★★★★★★★
- SERVICE★★★★★★★
- THE FEELING★★★★★★★
- COST Usual gastropub prices, and good value. Two of you should be okay with £50-£60 with drink.

she is working part time in a famous local pub while living in Agincourt Road (the irony of which is hardly lost on her). She yearns to involve three high profile Hampstead actors in one of the many creative projects she is hatching – though one of them currently is possibly the most unattainable actor on the planet: Benedict Cumberbatch. She also wants Emma Thompson and Tom Hiddleston – whom, she feels, she is destined to marry. The cheese was good, if meagre: Quick's cheddar, Stilton and brie. “I hate,” she said, “crackers with cheese: it just makes me think of Wallace & Gromit”. So prior to becoming Mrs Hiddleston, any plans in the offing ...? “Just to continue creating and being in Hampstead. I want to die here. There is a place, actually, in the graveyard ... just next to John Constable”.

■ Joseph Connolly's *The A-Z of Eating Out* is published by Thames & Hudson. All previous restaurant reviews on www.josephconnolly.co.uk

