

Restaurant of the week: The Bountiful Cow



Old boys' club

No more sitting on the old school bench for Joseph Connolly and his school chum as they swap Tabasco sandwiches for plentiful portions at a Holborn gastropub

The Old School Tie: you still do hear so very much about it – and particularly if it happens to be the Etonian variety, because toff-bashing has become a perennially popular national sport.

Sweet little furry foxes and badgers must be left alone to gambol at will, but upper class humans are fair, as it were, game – they can be hounded to death. But how strong is it, this mythical bond that supposedly links for life? Does it really translate into Masonic handshakes, nods and winks, jobs for the boys? In the case of Eton, probably ... but with the rather humbler public schools such as my own, I really don't think so. A club will forge a far stronger bond between members because by definition they will have much in common, and have actively striven to be a part of this thing. But a school ... one is sent there randomly by one's parents, that decision becoming the only common factor. Which is why, having left The Oratory in Oxfordshire sometime around the death of Queen Victoria, I never troubled to keep up with anyone there, nor to revisit the place. But just the other day ... I had lunch with

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someone I was at school with: well well.

I met Christian Poltera again quite by chance at a dining society of which I am a member, and so is he. The name is singular, no? So I could hardly forget it – although he was a year or two above me, and so at school we did not consort: not done. But improbably, there exists a highly regarded cellist of the same name, and Christian thought I had mistaken him. No no, I explained: we were at school together. He

peered at me warily – for he, you see, has altered not a jot since those distant days ... whereas I have transmogrified from pink-faced cherub to the highly alarming thing you see here depicted weekly. It turned out that Christian

is highly active and informed in all things Old Boy – and as he recalled this old lunatic master, that very arcane rule, the criminal form of punishment ... I did, I admit, feel quite queasy. His own two children were not sent to boarding school because his wife of 44 years (non public school) had seen the film *If*.

Anyway: lunch beckoned, obviously. It generally does. And as we are both eager carnivores, we sloped off to The Bountiful Cow in Holborn, run by legendary cook and landlady Roxy Beaujolais – a rather twinkly corner pub with the name writ proud in red neon (defective, alas, so it simply read 'FUL COW') and a cosy interior whose walls are crammed with colourful pictures and posters, the common theme to all being guess what? So there is Warhol's cow and an advert for the Laughing Cow and the Rolling Stones sitting in a field of cows – and in the gents, very blokily, sexy cowgirls. Desperate Dan would love it here – and so, actually, did we. There is something you can sign up for called 'The Almost Free Lunch' – and at £8.50, they are hardly joking. The main menu is divided into meat, meat and meat, while below that there's meat, and a fish. Cow reigns supreme, so it would have been rude not to: so, for Christian an unusually large 10oz fillet with sautéed field mushrooms, and I was going for the sirloin – both, naturally, with chips. But before that my guest was having fried garlic prawns – six: large, juicy, and much enjoyed. My smoked salmon was delicate and dry, and a hell of a lot of it: this

place caters for men with manly appetites – or, as women term them, pigs.

When it comes to catering, Christian's family has considerable form. In the 1930s, his uncle was the general manager at the Dorchester, while his father was running the five-star Lausanne Palace Hotel. His father was Swiss, and a fine chef who spoke six languages. “I,” said Christian, “am the black sheep. I don't cook. I am not a linguist. But I do like to eat ...” Although he attended boarding school from the age of five-and-a-half, he learned his impeccable English as an infant in the Mayfair Hotel, where his father then was cooking. “His idol was Escoffier”. Christian's elder brother John – whom I also remember from school as having been a fine Nanki-Poo in a production of *The Mikado* – went to the Lausanne School of Catering, and now runs a five-star hotel in South Africa. Christian, however, is an alumnus of the London School of Printing, and became director of a seventeenth century printing house called Burrups, which actually has no connection with overeating. Oh and by the way: he was born on Christmas Day, and hence the, um ... Christian name.

We had asked for the steaks to be pink, not red, and the charming waitress was eager for us to cut into the centres to ensure that they were right: they were – and both of them truly good. Oh yum: just what you dream of, when you dream of steak. Chips too – just so. The Bearnaise was mustardy, very oddly, but okay. Crozes-Hermitages did hit the

FACTFILE

- The Bountiful Cow, 51 Eagle Street WC1. Tel 020 7404 0200
- Open Mon-Sat 11am – 11pm.
- FOOD ★★★★★★★★
- SERVICE ★★★★★★★★
- THE FEELING ★★★★★★★★
- COST About £120 for three course steak meal with wine for two.

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

spot. “I always,” said Christian, while finishing everything on his plate, “finish everything on my plate. This is down to school, of course”. Of course: we were permanently starving. The food was quite terrible – you had to fight to survive. We existed on Lea & Perrin's sandwiches and mashed potato and Tabasco sandwiches and – on a very good day – a Mars bar. Christian was a strong rugby player, while I was a weak conscientious objector who somehow wangled managership of the tuck shop, which is how I am alive today. Now then: pudding ...? “We're probably full, aren't we?” asked my guest. Indeed we were – so, an excellent Eton Mess for him (because no Oratory Mess was listed) and I had a chocolate ice cream. And there we have it: prawns, smoked salmon, steak, chips and pud. We loved it – but then ... we're old school.

