

Restaurant of the week: NW3 Bar and Kitchen



FACTFILE

- **NW3 Bar & Kitchen, 154 Haverstock Hill NW3. Tel 020 7586 4991**
Open Tue-Sat 12 – 3pm. Mon-Sat 6 – 10pm.
- **FOOD: ★★★★★★★★**
- **SERVICE: ★★★★★★★★**
- **THE FEELING: ★★★★★★★★**
- **COST: Our two course lunch for two, with a modest bottle of wine, was £75. Dinner considerably more.**

Over-priced, undersized and over here

Joseph Connolly butters up his editor Geoff Martin with a pub lunch including burgers that recall the American TV of his youth

At every dawning of a brand new year, people's thoughts will turn towards the shedding of festive weight, the eschewal of alcohol and the reining in of expenses – because the credit card bills now in may best be described as titanic. Forgoing the booze in January strikes me as unnecessarily masochistic: it's the very time of year that can stand enlivening by a stiffener or so, the occasional belter. Diet ...? Well fine, if you want to ... but you still have to eat ... although now there is also this factor

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of economy to deal with. And this is why restaurateurs (and cabbies) do not enjoy January at all: a collective frugality does not pay the bills. London's top restaurants? They're fine – they're always fine. Fast food joints? They're laughing too – it's the squeezed middle that is hurting, as ever.

Now there is fast food and fast food, of course. Just before Christmas I reviewed McDonald's: £8 for two of us, and unremittably dire: pappy food swallowed in a rush, the sooner

to be free of the soul-rending surroundings. If it's a burger you're after, head to Byron. Founded only seven years ago by Old Etonian Tom Byng, there are now three dozen in London, all with different and appealing décor and – this is the point – serving very fine hamburgers (or, as they quite rightly call them, 'proper') at a decent price. Fewer than 10 per cent of diners order a pudding – because the burger is the beginning, the middle and the end.

So the bar has been set ... but still, so many brasseries and gastropubs are keen to flog us a very inferior product at a stupidly inflated price. Why do we keep on falling for it? Just as I did (again) the other day in the newest incarnation of the old Haverstock Arms pub, midway between Belsize Park and England's Lane ... yes, and that very midwayness is actually something of a problem. Last year, a restaurant called Ballaro opened on the site: I gave it a rather good review, but within the blink of an eyelid it was gone. Why do you think? Possibly down to location: were it further up the hill in Belsize Park proper, jostling with all the other eateries around the tube station, then I think people would be packing the place. This could work equally well in Chalk Farm – an actual place, in short: because there are no passers-by in this stretch of Haverstock Hill: you have to make the NW3 Bar & Kitchen a destination. So: is it worth it?

The décor is unchanged from Ballaro – pleasant lime green upholstery, a clean if rather



utilitarian set-up. The vast and vainglorious mural that the previous owners commissioned, featuring themselves in living colour, has been discreetly concealed. The place is now being run by a young man ... who, twenty-three years ago, was born upstairs. Isn't that a nice local story? His dad was the landlord when it truly was an unmitigated pub: a blokey boozier, full stop. I was lunching with Geoff Martin, much esteemed editor of this very organ. Geoff is a vegetarian, and there was very little on the menu he could have chosen. "I suppose," he practically sighed, "it's got to be the fish and chips" – with all the joie de vivre of a non meat-eater habitually reduced to that. The lunchtime offering comprises what they call 'little plates',

though few would consider fish and chips or steak and chips to be anything of the sort, but there you are.

And then I saw it: double beefburger, cheddar cheese, homemade coleslaw. I was hungry, and I knew, just knew, that again, yet once more, I was to be seduced by the lure and siren promise of that elusive 'perfect' burger: Geoff was not always a veggie – he well remembers a childhood ambition to virtually live on burgers, this largely due to American television in general, and the character in Popeye in particular: Wimpy was his name, the bowler-hatted fellow never to be seen without a burger in his fist – in honour of whom the erstwhile chain was named: this column is nothing if not an education. The service, by bright young chaps – one of them presumably the new proprietor – was very polite, if a little shy. Geoff's beer battered haddock, chips, pea puree and tartare sauce ... was the tiniest bit of fish I have ever seen served. The size of a lobster tail, really – and once the carapace of batter had been penetrated, there amid the vacuum was lurking a shrinking violet of a weeny fillet, coyly winking out. "I could definitely have wanted more," said Geoff. And the burger? Did I have before me Shangri-la on a plate ...? No, afraid not. The 'double' burger proved to be two minuscule beef patties not cooked medium as requested (too thin for that) but sadly grey, encouraging memories of dear Mr Birdseye. No depth or juiciness whatever – but good coleslaw and generous

cheese. Ketchup was ice-cold, and served in an old screw-top jar: not good. What were absolutely fantastic were the duck fat chips: big, golden and crunchy, wonderfully fluffy within. But: these were an extra, bringing the cost of my plate to £17 – and this is, frankly, ridiculous. My fault for ordering it? Or can it ever be the punter's fault ...?

I had a very good slice of chocolate tart with Bailey's ice cream: all the girls will love it, and so did I. Geoff had a most disappointing plum and apple crumble: no crunch, simply a shallow layer of orange dust. "The custard is pretty good," he said. So ... I wish the place well (the dinner menu looks far more interesting) but they're really going to have to remember that they're rather out on a limb, and so a special journey really has to be worthwhile. And if you hanker for a burger, think Byron: sane, good and wonderful to know.

HAVE LUNCH WITH JOSEPH CONNOLLY

Last week we foolishly omitted the website address to apply to have lunch with Joseph to celebrate his 300th review for the Ham&High.

To win your own slap up lunch with our restaurant critic send a little bit about yourself and your contact details via: josephconnolly.co.uk