

Restaurant of the week: The Pembroke Castle

I capture the grey castle

Joseph Connolly banishes all thoughts of dreadful school dinners at a beautifully refurbished Primrose Hill gastropub with generous portions and a suspiciously long menu

School dinners: one of the very most lowering phrases known to man – not that that's what they were called in the schools that I attended. Nor did we have 'dinner ladies': the insufferably patrician headmaster of St Anthony's School in Fitzjohn's Avenue, back in the days of the Industrial Revolution, casually referred to them as 'servants'. The lunches there in my time were dire beyond imagination, though mercifully minuscule. A slice of Spam and half a boiled potato. Full stop. That was one of the better ones, in that there was nothing actually to gag on. The dreaded Friday 'cheese pie' literally made me retch – though the openly sadistic wife of said insufferably patrician headmaster would stand over me until I had swallowed it all, and then became promptly sick. This happened once a week. Then I went to a boarding school where the meals were marginally more generous, though even more vile. I cannot describe them, because both of us will become ill. So I engineered for myself

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Swiss roll and Coca-Cola.

Now, naturally, there is a move afoot to close down all school tuck shops across the country, while instead providing a healthy and nourishing choice in the canteen (or, as we called it, refectory). A choice ...! My God: a choice ...! In my day, the choice was stark: eat it, or don't – except in the case of the sadistic headmaster's wife, where even that simple option was not to be tolerated. Look – I just have to get off this subject now, because I have just remembered warm and curdled milk in third-of-a-pint bottles rattling in their galvanised crates, and I am feeling rather queasy.



The modern schoolchild would surely feel right at home in the Pembroke Castle in Primrose Hill: the choice here in this rather beautifully restored and whizzed-up ex-boozier is quite literally incredible: never before in what we might loosely term a 'gastropub' have I seen nearly forty dishes on offer, this not including the sides, extras and puddings. I shan't trouble to tell you that the handsome corner exterior is grey, because obviously you will have surmised as much: you've been around, and so you know that all cool pubs in fashionable areas shall be grey, this grey to continue within. As is the case here, though actually the interior is rather fine: lots of white deep cornices and pillars, stained glass lit by both lamps and the sun, a generous dark wood bar and an enticing part-covered garden winking from beyond. Chairs comfortable, tables polished wood and generously spaced in order to allow for lots of standing room for the jolly drinkers who throng the place in the evening: this is a very popular local haunt, and it is easy to see why. Although Regent's Park Road just around the corner is loaded with places to eat and drink, the Pembroke retains its pull.

But back to that astonishing menu: risotto, six sorts of burger, pasta, pies, fish, curry, grills ... which is all, frankly, just a little bit worrying, isn't it? How can a kitchen aspire to excellence in all these disparate fields? And their freezer, blimey – it's just got to be the size of a mortuary. "I simply can't decide," my wife said, indecisively. "There are so many things that sound good". She eventually did decide

on chicken Milanese (flattened breadcrumbed fillet) filled with Parma ham and herb cream, tomato and garlic sauce, grated grana padano, roasted vine tomatoes, watercress and chips. And I was in the mood for big food: look, I am a severely lapsed anorexic, what can I tell you? The 5:2 diet simply doesn't suit me, and so I am sticking loyally to the 7:0. So a 'classic' mixed grill comprising flat iron steak (a trendy Manhattan cut, and always a risk), Cumberland sausage, chicken breast and gammon steak with a fried egg. So not a classic mixed grill at all, then – but never mind.

And just as the vastness of the menu was a concern, so too was the lightning speed with which the food arrived – politely and enthusiastically served by a bearded and top-knotted hipster. So what did we get ...? My wife's chicken escallop was cruelly overcooked – or, more accurately, overzapped: for this, clearly, is how it is done here. The promise of oozing creamy cheese and ham was not fulfilled – the whole thing was exceedingly dry and not so much crispy as crunchy, in the manner of a ginger nut. My small steak was something of a curate's egg, as it were: good in parts – though more well done than the medium rare requested. The actual egg was cooked to a frazzle, the gammon salty and chewy ... the chicken okay and the sausage good. The best bit was the unadvertised large grilled Portobello mushroom.

Then came a generous offer on the menu that I have not encountered before: all puddings two-for-one. So for my

FACTFILE

- **The Pembroke Castle, 150 Gloucester Avenue NW1. Tel 020 7483 2927**
- Open Mon-Thu 11am-11.30pm. Fri-Sat 11am-12pm. Sun 11am-10.30pm.
- **FOOD:** ★★★★★★★★★★
- **SERVICE:** ★★★★★★★★★★
- **THE FEELING:** ★★★★★★★★★★
- **COST:** All very reasonable: two of you will be fine for £40 or less for two courses and a drink. 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

wife a Bramley apple crumble with custard, and I chose 'luxury Belgian brownie (warm) with vanilla ice cream'. And Lordy, with these puddings the zapping went into overdrive. 'Warm' possesses the lovely connotation of just freshly baked, and left to slightly cool on the windowsill: here was radioactive heat that would strip your palate and fry your eyeballs – this resulting in a sludgy consistency that didn't actually taste too much of chocolate, or anything else. Exactly the same story with the crumble – which was far more crumble than apple. But my heavens, a very great deal of food, in all. That evening, I still was feeling so very full that I only just managed to squeeze into me a packet of Golden Wonder smoky bacon crisps, a Lyons Swiss roll and a pint of Coca-Cola.