

Restaurant of the week: Pesantissimo

Italian ain't heavy but it's damn good value

To celebrate his 300th Ham&High restaurant review Joseph Connolly takes a special guest to restaurant near Regent's Park where he gets a bellyful of food

Okay, folks: contain your excitement, please – for here it is! My 300th restaurant review for the Ham & High (that adds up to more than a third of a million words ... what on earth am I doing with my life ...?).

I offered you readers the chance to write in and become my lunch guest, and write in you did. Such varied letters, as ever: one read 'I would like lunch. Where will we go?' Not a winning approach, really. Another insisted that we just HAD to meet because we were bound to bond because I am an Aries, and it is written in the stars. There was the lady who was simply desperate for lunch – nothing to do with me, it was just that she hadn't been into a restaurant in more than twenty years: sad, but hardly conducive. The triumphant letter was modest, and very pleasant – and so the unfeasibly fortunate winner is ... one Adam Weitzmann! I knew that Adam grew up locally ... but I was unaware of the coincidences that had unknowingly touched our lives along the way. Long, long ago, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, my mother took me – aged about two – to a photographer's studio in Finchley Road, very close to where Toys Toys Toys used to be, and is now some unspeakable sports store. Apparently I clutched with eagerness the multi-coloured leather ball that was handed to me to quieten me down, and once the pictures were done, became more

cacophonous than ever when they wanted me to give it back. Anyway ... that photographer was Adam's father ...! I know: too spooky.

Part of the famous Kindertransport from Vienna in the 1930s, photography had become his passion – and although in the 1960s he gave up the studio and went into property instead, the legacy lingers on in the form of that curious little 'shop' at the foot of Fitzjohn's Avenue with cameras in the tiny window. Seemingly there for ever, it is owned by Adam – but is very much more than it seems. Below, there is a cavernous warehouse crammed with cameras and, particularly, binoculars, of which Adam is the nation's largest distributor. He is also into commercial property in a rather big way, and so we may safely assume that the wolf is very far from the door.

As this was a celebration, it was my intention to go to a restaurant rather grander than Pesantissimo – but the first choice turned out to be one of those that states on the website that it is open for lunch, and then, very maddeningly, turns out not to be. Regent's Park Road becomes more and more swish – apart from all the eateries, lots of shops with expensive clothes for the kiddies and a Paris-style lingerie shop for their very yummy mummies. Pesantissimo is a long narrow room, bright and spotless – tiled floor, 1950s pendants, plain wooden furniture, a bit of orange pelmet lighting and a wall of rough brick and stone. Funny name though, isn't it? I thought it meant Extremely Peasant, in which case I'd fit right in ... but no: it is Italian for 'most heavy'. Most odd.

You are used to set lunches (£9.50 for two courses, £11.50 for three) but are you used to set lunches that offer six starters, fifteen pizzas, and a dozen other mains ...? While the carte (from which we ordered) comprises seventeen starters, twenty-five pizzas, eight salads, more than thirty pasta and risotto dishes and sixteen secondi ... not to say fourteen puddings. Lordy, Adam chose bruschetta prosciutto crudo, and then veal Milanese with spaghetti Napolitan. I was going for polpette – pork meat balls – in sugo with shaved parmesan and basil, baked in the pizza oven, and then tagliatelle carbonara: such a hard thing to get right. The best I ever had was in Switzerland, oddly – where the raw egg yolk was added to a hollowed nest of steaming creamy tagliatelle, whereupon the heat

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would cook it: superb. Adam got a pile of good and lean prosciutto – and my meat balls were terrific, the chunky sugo truly good. A lot of food already – but you should have seen the size of the mains...! Enormous escalope, a cliff of spaghetti ... and my tagliatelle was easily enough for two. The first few mouthfuls were a luscious delight ... but soon it became rather claggy and rigid, as is often the way. Nuggety pancetta, good flavour, but the texture was blown. Adam thought both the veal and pasta pretty good ... but it was far too much. We were sharing a half bottle of Bardolino (listed as being 60percent Corvina, 30percent Rondinella and 10percent Other: well Other just happens to be my



FACTFILE

- Pesantissimo, 57 Regent's Park Road NW1. Tel 020 7483 8733
 - Open Mon-Fri 11am – 11pm. Sat-Sun 9am – 11pm
 - FOOD ★★★★★☆☆
 - SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆
 - THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆
 - COST Fantastic value – two of you will receive an enormous amount of pretty damn good Italian food and drink for £50 or so.
- 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

arranged a meeting at a press conference for Adam with his hugest idol: Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin: he showed me the picture with quiet, though enormous pride. Pudding: tartufo bianco zabayon for Adam: "tastes mass-produced, but all right". I had a so-so pannacotta with an avalanche of berry coulis. And when we left, - boy, was I pesantissimo ...! Truly ... most heavy.



Joseph and guest Adam Weitzmann at Pesantissimo picture: Polly Hancock