

Restaurant of the week:

The Greek Larder



My big fat Greek letdown

Lamb's tongues and a disastrous casserole greet Joseph Connolly at a King's Cross Greek restaurant with not a sign of retsina or 'the usual leaden Zorba dross'

Trends, trends, trends – that's what currently the London restaurant scene is really all about. Tipped for later this year are alcoholic milkshakes (oh yuk), gourmet fried chicken (yum yum) and poutine. Poutine is a Canadian comfort food made up of chips with a heavy overlay of gravy and cheese – this proving that Canadians really are so terminally bored that they simply can't wait for a naturally occurring coronary, but feel they must egg it along. And if it isn't trends, then it's tweaks – as demonstrated in the brand new Greek Larder in brand new King's Cross. And Lordy, if any cuisine on earth was needing all the tweaks it could get, then it's got to be Greek. So here we have a large and airy corner glass cube more or less opposite the new Guardian building, each side lined with shelves displaying attractively packaged Greek produce: olives, olive oil, tomato paste ... that's about it. Oh and champagne-looking Greek sparkling wine, for a bottle of which they fondly imagine some passing crazy person is going to part with forty-five quid. So it resembles a giant's larder without and within – a bright expanse, the floor an amalgam of blond wood and crazy paving, the tables laminated, the chairs very pleasing strap bentwood, and a

“The waiters are smiley because while the mothership teeters on collapse their wages are in a British bank

long open kitchen counter and sort of deli: all very cool. My guest was Steffan Williams, and this man is in PR on a very grand scale, being director of a company called Finsbury. His quite terrifyingly responsible job is to advise the top companies and many countries on reputation. “We do not lie and spin,” he says. “We present the truth in a way they cannot themselves”. He has advised the governments of Germany, Belgium, Italy, Egypt and Pakistan, among others, and travels all over the place around once a month. Last year he shared a platform with Vladimir Putin. Uh-huh – and how did that go ...? “Oh, that man ... he has it so



wrong”. News to us all.

Steffan is a large, generous and extremely affable fellow, who likes his meat and drink. “At school,” he says, “I was called Fred Flintstone. Then Desperate Dan”. He also used to play rugby professionally (didn't we all?) – and while playing in Japan was surrounded by hundreds of squealing groupies. “After basketball,” explains Steffan, “rugger is Japan's most popular sport”. Good Lord ... and yet they're all so small: kamikaze spirit, I suppose. There is an all-day menu – becoming quite usual in the groovier joints – comprising seventeen meze, six mains and three sides. Most of it sounds enticing – not the usual leaden Zorba dross. “I was in Crete last year with the family,” said Steffan, “and on the first day you think the food is great. But then ... you just can't face another moussaka, more stuffed vine leaves ...” We ordered three meze to get us going: grilled beef, roast beetroot and horta (wilted greens – and at this time of year, you know exactly how they feel). Then elephant beans, grilled artichoke and feta, and finally Steffan wanted oregano potatoes, red pepper and lamb's tongues because never before had the tongue of a lamb touched his lips.

Then there was the question of wine: oh dear. Well neither of us had thought to bring any tarnished brass or silver, so we didn't require retsina – but there is a decent list of other Greek things, and the extremely helpful waitress talked me through all sorts of grapes I had never heard of: roditis, malagouzia, loads of them. Then a smiley fellow was offering me tasters – because

all the people who work here do seem so terribly happy ... maybe because the mother ship still teeters on the brink of collapse and they are over here with their wages in a British bank. Having said that, any financial expert will privately tell you that unofficially the safest place for money in Britain today is in an old Roses tin under the bed. Well one wine tasted of Beaujolais (quite nice), another tasted of nothing at all, and the third was cherry with an undertone of Benylin chesty cough linctus (non-drowsy) so I plumped for that: even if it didn't complement the food, it was bound to be good for my congestion. “In Crete,” recalled Steffan, “the most expensive wine on the island was fifteen euros”. And how was it ...? “All right. Just about”.

The meze were very good: fresh, nicely presented, plentiful and moreish – particularly the beef and beetroot and the elephant beans. Steffan said he loved the sensation of tongues on his tongue: I held my tongue. The water was served in a charming copper jug; the wine was served in a dopey copper mug: brimful, so the waitress had to be very deft. She managed it the first time – less lucky with the second mug. Steffan then ordered roast partridge with borlotti beans: not notably Greek, even with tweaks. “I shoot,” said Steffan, “and have vast freezers stuffed with game – but we never eat it”. I was having veal casserole with winter squash and smoked aubergine puree. His bird was nicely jointed (say that out of context and the feminists will string you up from a tree) and well flavoured, he said. While my casserole ... was a complete and

FACTFILE

- The Greek Larder, ArtHouse, 1 York Way, N1. Tel 020 3780 2999
 - Open Mon-Fri 8am-10.30pm. Sat 10am-10.30pm. Sun 11am-5pm.
 - FOOD ★★★★★☆☆☆
 - SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆☆
 - THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆☆
 - COST Difficult to say: not really a three-course place. But two of you will be fine with £90, including drink. Stick to the meze.
- 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

utter disaster. Now we all know that with a casserole you don't use the best cuts, but preparation needs care. I had gristle. I had fat and connective tissue: I even had bone. I ate the two small pieces of actual meat. From the worryingly entitled ‘Sweets’ (oh God please spare me the baklava!) my chocolate mousse with sour cherries was rather good, and Steffan sort of enjoyed his slightly stodgy quince cheesecake. So: they had observed my notebook, they certainly had observed the photographer, and they equally surely saw my barely touched quite dreadful casserole. So was this the moment when I had to beware of Greeks bearing gifts ...? Well no, actually: I was offered nothing at all. And so that was that, really.