

Restaurant of the week: The Duke of Wellington



In Marylebone I met my Waterloo

As the 200th anniversary of Wellington's famous battle approaches, Joseph Connolly tries a shabby pub named after the Iron Duke

"All the business of war, and indeed all the business of life, is the endeavour to find out what you don't know by what you do. That's what I call 'guessing what is on the other side of the hill'". Now although this very easily might have been said by a restaurant critic (every meal only barely informed by experience, though always bolstered by a determined optimism), these words were in fact uttered by Wellington, the Iron Duke himself. And who better to be quoting, in this bicentenary year of the Battle of Waterloo? Desperately sad, I thought, that the eighth Duke, Arthur Valerian Wellesley, died on the very last day of 2014, thus missing out on not just the 200th anniversary of his ancestor's glorious triumph, but his own 100th birthday. Fate, you see? So often a cruel and twisted force.

All these idle ruminations were flitting about my head, like so many drunken midges, as I awaited my guest in a much-liked Marylebone bar and restaurant called ... well of course: the Duke of Wellington. It is opposite St Mary's, a very fine stone and Ionic pillared church – looking very Nash, but in fact by Smirke (he of the British Museum). Crawford Street is rather smart, and although the interior of the pub has a very lived-in air (pretty shabby, frankly) the menu and the wine list soon put paid to that: they're aiming at gentry, I tell you. Upstairs is a rather spiffy dining room, where I assumed we'd be sitting – but it isn't open on weekdays. So there I was at

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a bare scrubbed wooden table next to a scuffed and battered bar. But most bars of this nature do not display on the blackboard 'Pauillac Ch.Batailley 2003 £95'. We have a blood-coloured Anaglypta ceiling, 1960s Sputnik chrome pendants with clusters of golf ball bulbs, several of which were working. The full wine list runs to sixty scrupulously annotated pages, and is bound in the filthiest stained and dog-eared covers I have ever had to handle.

My guest was Robin Simon, a noted connoisseur of art who wears his considerable learning with commendable lightness. The son of an Archbishop of Wales, he is an expert on 14th century Italian art and 18th century English, a professor at UCL, editor of *British Art Journal* (having previously edited *Apollo*) and the art critic of the *Daily Mail* – which he has been for more than quarter of a century. He is also the author of definitive art monographs and recently has curated a major exhibition of Richard Wilson (no, you fool – not Victor Meldrew, I mean the 18th century landscape painter) and is currently writing a history of the Royal Academy. I have known this very amusing fellow for

more than twenty years, and have enjoyed quite a few press trips in his company – when we were young, and even less sensible than we seem to be now.

From the eight starters on offer, Robin chose Dorset crab on toast, and I was having pork and whiskey pate with piccalilli, toast and salad. Two surprises from a place that clearly takes its wine so very seriously: Robin's glass of Albarino had to be sent back, as it was oxidised, and the interesting-sounding bottle of Loire pinot noir I selected was unavailable: so back to the grubby ledger for another bash. The crab was fresh and plentiful, and clearly enjoyed by a foodie – for Robin is married to Joanna Simon, for decades the *Sunday Times* wine writer, and now the wine and food editor of *House & Garden*. "We do get sent quite a lot of things," admitted Robin. "The other day

it was eighty-seven sausages. We counted them". She is a great cook, and he is no mean hand either: "risotto," he said, "is my speciality". The pate was good and earthy, the piccalilli fine if you like piccalilli. From the choice of nine mains, my guest was having Scottish hake and spinach with pomme mousseline, pied de mouton, smoked prawns and chive beurre blanc (you see: they're aiming at gentry, I tell you) – though was told that the pied de mouton mushrooms were to be replaced with chanterelles. The dish was really good – a sound, if smallish piece of fish, with all the disparate bits successfully converging. I was having South Downs lamb rump with kale, carrot puree, confit potato, pickled walnut jus and kale pesto (gentry, I tell you). This too came together rather well ... excellent gravy, but the lamb itself was pretty bouncy and not adjacent to a memory-foam mattress topper.

Robin's Georgian terrace house in Camberwell is, as you might expect, filled with pictures. "I'm not a collector, though – I just like pictures". Given the choice of any painting in the world, he would take the Hogarth self-portrait featuring Trump, his pet pug. "The Tate has it at the moment," he says, "but I have my plans ...". Although he describes art as "a thriller", he has many enthusiasms that actually trounce it: his native Wales, for a start. "But," I mildly protested, "it rains ..." "Well of course it RAINS," he riposted. "Is the Pope a Catholic ...?"

We were sharing a platter of cheese: there was a circle of goat,

FACTFILE

- The Duke of Wellington, 94a Crawford Street, W1. Tel 020 7723 2790
- Open Mon-Sat 12 – 3pm, 6.30 – 10pm. Sun 12 – 4pm. 7 – 9pm.
- FOOD ★★★★★☆☆
- SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆
- THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆
- COST No set lunch, so it can mount up. About £110 for three courses for two, with a so-so bottle.

CORRECTION

Last week we wrongly printed the telephone number of The Grill at 424 Finchley Road. We apologise. To contact the restaurant call 02077940455

a tiny bit of cheddar; an equally tiny bit of sort of Camembert and a piece of Stilton that was basically rind: not great. Another of Robin's areas of expertise is cricket. "Cricket," he says, "is EVERYTHING. There's art ... and then there's CRICKET ...!". I begin to see why his lectures are so popular and wonderfully refreshing in the world of academia. "Well of course," he says, "a lecture is an appalling way of imparting information. Only two per cent is ever taken in. The best way is to make one point effectively, and then shut up".

And so to conclude, I ask him: what are we to do with 21st century art ...? His reply is unequivocal and on the record: "Ignore it". Another of Wellington's tenets that Robin and I share, then: 'Publish, and be damned'.

