

Restaurant of the week: Ivy Market Grill

Buerk has it rare at The Ivy offshoot

There were no kangaroo testicles on the menu when **Joseph Connolly** took former I'm a Celebrity contestant Michael out to lunch just a rare steak and a few cheeky added charges

The Ivy, of course, was the huge success story of the 1990s – for many years London's most famous restaurant by a mile, and legendarily impossible to book unless you were a celeb, or else were willing to have lunch at 3.45 on a Monday in four months' time. The opening of The Club at the Ivy rather clipped the restaurant's wings, and since then there have been so many fashionable openings as to rather eclipse the Ivy's once invincible supremacy. Which may explain why it is undergoing a refurbishment so radical as to appear to be almost wilfully destructive: babies and bathwater easily spring to mind. Everything we all loved and fondly remembered about the old place has just been auctioned off – the artwork, the silver ... not just the stary glass-panelled door that formed the background to a million paparazzi shots, but even the doormat beyond it. I think that all we might be left with are the diamond stained glass windows.

In the meantime, there has sprung up in Covent Garden Piazza the Ivy Market Grill. This is a great site where the old Boulestin used to be (now in St James's) outside which are massive bottle green square umbrellas that will make the outside tables the area's most coveted (come the spring, come the summer). The interior is a pleasing French brasserie pastiche with dark panelling incorporating tan brass-studded leather, green banquettes and bentwood. It is (presumably deliberately) nothing like the Ivy, nor as glamorous as Balthazar just around the corner, though it does remind me of the Dean Street Townhouse: all these restaurants are under the same Richard Caring ownership ...

who I think is very good news indeed. He brought Ivy-Lite to the high streets in the form of Cote – though

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Michael Buerk

now he has sold the chain – and here now is a one-off and different dilution of the brand, at considerably lower prices.

I had been here once before in the company of the PR – but, as you know, I never review freebie meals ... so on this occasion my guest was the profoundly famous newsreader-turned-jungle-dweller, Michael Buerk. Always excellent company – an admirable blend

of English gentlemanly style and reserve, liberally spiced with wit and drily caustic commentary. How to encapsulate this fellow's illustrious career ...? Although he sort of fell into journalism as a result of being rejected by the RAF because of his eyesight, he became one of the most recognised and respected foreign news reporters for BBC television, most memorably telling the world about the Ethiopian famine in 1984 (which prompted Gelfof's awful Band Aid song, though we can hardly blame Michael for that). Between 1983 and 1987 he reported on apartheid in South Africa to such great effect that eventually he was forcibly deported. “That was the period that meant the most,” he says, “though I hated being lionised by all those lefties ...” Then for twelve years Michael became a welcome fixture in our living rooms as one

of the chief BBC newsreaders: a weighty and reassuring presence, as in those days was expected. And please don't get him started on the flibbertigibbets who front and anchor programmes these days ...! Since 1990 he has presented Radio 4's Moral Maze, he has voiced a Marmite ad, was one of 2014's Oldies of the Year ... but, as he readily admits, all this pales before the exposure he has received since last November when he beardedly appeared in the jungle on I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here! “It's quite extraordinary,” he tells me. “The recognition factor has simply soared”. He also readily admits that he did it for the money. “Why else?” His friends had advised him not to do it, but if he really must, then simply to be himself. “Then,” says Michael, “I spoke to my two sons. They have both left journalism, thank God, and are now PRs in Dubai. They said to me, whatever you do, Dad, don't be yourself: pretend to be nice”.

The breakfast-onwards menu here is pretty huge ... and on my first visit I enjoyed a very good lobster cocktail for only a tenner ... which now has been removed from the menu: it was too cheap to be worth it, apparently. So Michael ordered smoked salmon and crab with chive cream and sourdough bread. Be careful if they offer ‘bread for the table’: a nice warm circular loaflet appears, but it's nearly four quid. I was having creamed wild mushrooms with marjoram on toasted brioche, and these were very gorgeous: add a few chips, and you had a meal. Michael's salmon was attractively presented on a large glass plate with a mound of white crabmeat, and greatly enjoyed. I then had a half chargrilled Banham chicken with thick cut chips – which were

actually pretty slim, and not crisped up enough. The chicken was well flavoured and tender, though there was some unadvertised paprika going on in the basting. Michael's rare rump steak, also from the grill, was just what he wanted, he said: cooked exactly right, with a side green salad. The Bearnaise sauce at £2.75 was a little cheeky, I thought – while the Jaboulet Cotes du Rhone slipped down the gullet as silkily as it will. As we ate, Michael reminisced about his four months as a restaurant critic. “Best job ever. Daily Telegraph. A grand a time, and limitless expenses.” I know what you're thinking – and no ... I don't. “I came home one day and I said to my wife ‘they've sacked me ...!’ She was aghast. ‘The BBC has sacked you ...!’ ‘No – the Daily Telegraph. I wouldn't care if it was the BBC”.

We walked the short distance to our mutual working men's club, and almost immediately Michael was called upon to oblige a gurning family with a group photo. He smiled and complied, barely breaking his stride, the conversation not even interrupted: clearly, this happens all the time, and he hardly notices it. So he's a celebrity all right – and he ain't getting out of there any time soon.

FACTFILE

- Ivy Market Grill, 1 Henrietta Street WC2. Tel 020 3301 0200
 - Open Mon-Fri 7am – 12pm. Sat 8am – 12pm. Sun 8am – 11pm.
 - FOOD ★★★★★☆☆
 - SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆
 - THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆
 - COST About £100 should do two of you for lunch, with drink.
- Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *STYLE*, published by Quercus in hardback and ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

