

Restaurant of the week: L'Artista



Paradise by way of Golders Green

Joseph Connolly finds there's more to NW11 than a crematorium - it's worth delaying the inevitable with a visit to a great value local Italian

Have you heard George Harrison's song Going Down to Golders Green ...? No you haven't, because it was never released. The Beatles' company Apple used to manage a group called Badfinger who all lived there, apparently, and this gave rise to the song – which, due to its non-release, proved to be not so much deathless as lifeless. And what of Golders Green these days? Lifeless? Well, Many moons ago Brent Cross well and truly put the boot into the high street, no question – but how is it bearing up now? It's unfortunate really that in many people's minds Golders Green is associated with one thing only: the Crematorium. Who hasn't attended a service there? Many local worthies were honoured there for the last time: Freud, Pavlova, Michael Foot, Kingsley Amis and, more recently, Amy Winehouse. Well I hadn't been to Golders Green for just ages – but my memories of the place stretch way back, and are actually very groovy indeed ... for it was here, in the early 1960s, that I got seriously into clothes. Let me (as politicians say) explain: I was a pupil at what was then called 'St Anthony's Catholic Preparatory School' in Fitzjohn's Avenue, and every Friday there were two concurrent religious classes, one of which was dubbed 'Catholic', the other 'non-Catholic'. Which translated as Jewish. I should think at least half the boys at this nominally Catholic school were Jewish, and I numbered my best friends among them.

“Golders Green used to have so many smart shops in the 60s, now there's just chain coffee shops, a hardware store and the crematorium

And what did I notice about these friends, when I visited them in their much-nicer-than-mine houses in Mill Hill, Hendon and Golders Green? That they were all a great deal better dressed than I was, that's what – and I coveted all their gear with an aching passion. One friend I remember had not just the clothes but a room with fitted wardrobes and an upholstered window seat (an upholstered window seat ...!). He also had a full drum kit that he couldn't play and a red electric guitar exactly like Hank Marvin's which he couldn't even plug in. His glamorous mother wore eye shadow and a mink tippet, and his dad – a lovely man, I well remember – not only

drove us to Wimpy Bars in a dark blue Jaguar, but got us tickets to the very first Beatles Christmas concert in Finsbury Park ...! His belt buckle bore a golden G intertwined with another golden G: I didn't know it was Gucci – I thought it just had to stand for Golders Green, and that here was some sort of members' insignia.

Anyhoo ... this chum of mine revealed the secret of those amazing clothes: Connick's Young Esquire, in Golders Green. Oh, what treasure! Italian jersey bumblefreezer jackets in mustard or kingfisher with narrow lapels – just like Cliff's. Shirts in a Bengal stripe – with cufflinks! These ties with horizontal bars and a cut-off end with a fringe. Tapered trousers ...! This at a time when my school trousers resembled the sails on a yacht. There were so many smart shops down there in those days – in addition to one of the very last traditional Woolworth's. I also remember the Ionic cinema – so-called because the frontage bore very handsome Ionic columns: destroyed now, and replaced by a shack that is Sainsbury's.

Symptomatic of the rest of the place, I'm afraid – just huge branches of Starbucks, Costa and Caffe Nero, low-rent hardware stores, a Costcutter, a 'gent's outfitter' that makes the average Oxfam look like an outpost of Savile Row, and a couple of kebab shops. According to that flawless source of information Wikipedia, there are more than fifty Kosher restaurants around these parts, but I was damned if I could find one (admittedly I didn't look that hard). So

my wife and I went Italian instead: L'Artista, opposite the flank of the Tube station. Established thirty years ago, it's quite a local institution, and has wonderful kerbside advertising in the form of a vintage-style truck adorned in its yellow logo of an artist's palette, and rather reminiscent of Corporal Jones's butcher's van. Do not mistake L'Artista with The Refectory next door: this has interiors resembling a Manchester nightclub c.1975 and offers not just 'Live Football' but 'All Day Breakfast'. It is part of a hotel which is called 'The Unique', so let us at least give thanks for that.

L'Artista is cavernous – it goes back forever, its travertine floor and successions of arches and seemingly random pictures of famous people and oversize decorative bottles apparently endless. There is a sort of lean-to at the front where the lunchtime crowd tends to congregate – daily regulars, they look like, and it's easy to see why: here is just what you want from a local restaurant – friendly Italian waiters, an enticing menu and very low prices. What with the exterior troughs of bay trees and spring planting, there is a bit of a jaunty seaside feel to it. So my wife and I decided to share some antipasto: fifteen slices of mortadella, salami and Parma ham along with mozzarella and salad (this intended for one person). There are twenty-six mains, though this doesn't include thirty pasta dishes and a couple of dozen pizzas. My wife went for ravioli stuffed with ricotta and spinach in a ragu, and I had tagliatelle with meatballs. The perfectly decent Italian red is £12.90 the bottle – a record low, in my experience. The



FACTFILE

L'Artista, 915-917 Finchley Road NW11. Tel 020 8731 7501
Open seven days 12 – 12pm.
■ FOOD ★★★★★★★★☆☆
■ SERVICE ★★★★★★★★☆☆
■ THE FEELING
★★★★★★★★☆☆
■ COST Amazing value: two huge courses (you won't manage more) for two people with house wine, about £50.

food was served in massive white porringers, and was generous beyond generous, actually. A fellow at the next table was explaining to his guest that he could only ever eat half of what he was given, but it was always delicious and so cheap that it didn't matter. The ravioli was more than okay, the ragu really, really fine: a perfect Bolognese. My tagliatelle could half been a touch more al dente, but the tomato sauce and (largely veal) meatballs were just what you want.

The laminated and popping Technicolor pudding menu is crammed with gooey favourites, but is a particular delight for the bambini: crazy plastic toys called Vacky, Friky and Kuaky filled with ice cream! Some of it in blue bubblegum flavour! So there we have it: L'Artista is a very good and friendly local Italian, and infinitely more fun than a cremation.

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel **STYLE** is published by Quercus in hardback and ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk