

Restaurant of the week: Orso

No foie gras but a culinary faux pas

Joseph Connolly finds no 'foie gross' or even 'faux gras' at the famous Covent Garden restaurant where enjoyable starters are followed by disappointing main courses

Foie gras. There – said it: got it out of the way right at the beginning so that those of you who are actively enraged and appalled by even the sight of the very words by now will have angrily binned the newspaper, while energetically planning an indignant letter to the editor about how foie gras is the most heinous practice in the world today (these people do have a tendency to overstate their case) and further, how I should be sacked as restaurant critic for ever mentioning such beastliness (in fact, why don't you just sack him anyway? I'm just so fed up to the back teeth with that bloody Connolly, frankly).

For those of you who remain. I shall continue. I was down at Fortnum & Mason the other day, and a stocky little woman offered me a flyer. Well, you know – in London, we become quite adept at dodging these, just as we can with ease affect both blindness and deafness when approached by anyone grinning manically and wielding a clipboard. But my deft deflection was clearly not acceptable: the flyer was no longer casually tendered, it was being aggressively thrust upon me, and the stocky little woman's stocky little eyes were blazing with an ill-concealed fury. Behind her was a lanky and ill-looking fellow with a loudhailer who was loudly exhorting a gaggle of bemused Japanese to boycott Fortnum & Mason – to not walk through the

“Outside Fortnum & Mason anti foie gras protestors were handing out flyers. Coercive picketing is it even legal?”

door – because they stocked foie gras. Is such action legal ...? Coercive picketing? I suppose it must be. Certainly there were no cops around (but then, when are there?).

I mention this because I was at the time heading for a restaurant in Wellington Street in Covent Garden – not in itself known for foie gras, but opposite one that very much is: a bistro and delicatessen called Champagne & Fromage. They prominently advertise the sale of real foie gras in the window – and, amazingly, they still have a window. I've never been in – nothing to do with the foie gras (which I adore in silken pate form, though I find the whole liver repellent)

but because the concept of champagne with cheese leaves me gagging. So there it is: the foie gras furore waxes and wanes – though many sellers have packed it in because they reckon it's no longer worth the aggro. Some American restaurants still serve it, but at the next table will be someone to tell you how wicked you are. They have taken to calling it 'foie gross' – and of course now there is a vegetarian and 'ethical' version called 'faux gras' – which is made from lentils, walnuts and onions, and I for one simply cannot wait to consume simply loads of it. Not

And soooo ... to the restaurant in Wellington Street I was actually going to: Orso. This is a rather famous, upmarket and innovative Italian place, established exactly 30 years ago – five years older, then, than Christopher's, the upmarket and innovative American restaurant, bang opposite. Orso's main innovation back in 1985 seems to have been prices that had never before been seen in an Italian: i.e. high. That has simmered down quite a lot – but I was eager to find out if it was actually any good, because despite its renown and history, I'd never been. My wife and son were in tow – and the first thing we discovered about the place is that it's a basement: not too welcome on a warm and sunny day, but never mind.

The décor is pleasing, in that it is refreshingly ordinary: no message, no concept, no theme – just a dull parquet floor, utility furniture and art deco lighting. It has something of the feel of Joe Allen (another

basement very nearby) but the colour scheme is exactly that of Oslo Court in St John's Wood: peachy walls with pale grey ... but it's much less bedroomy, less draped: you don't expect to see Terry and June in bathrobes emerging from the en suite.

There is a set two course lunch for £16.75, three courses £19.50, together with a sensibly sized carte. I ordered zucchini fritti as a starter – struck by a memory of how wonderful these deep fried courgettes used to be in Hampstead's Villa Bianca ... but on the last occasion I was there had transmuted into something rather heavy and soggy. These were in thin ribbon form, and very fine (turned out to be the star of the meal, which wasn't too hard). My wife had crispy Parma ham, goat cheese and apple and rocket salad with a beetroot dressing, while my son wanted good old deep fried calamari with caper mayonnaise (tartare, really). The salad was okay, and so was the calamari – not too bouncy, it's true, but still not quite unbouncy enough.

For mains, we were variously having pan fried calf's liver (not goose – calf) with pancetta and roast onion – and with that my wife wanted rosemary and garlic roast potatoes and broccoli. My son went for linguine and meatballs, I was having pappardelle al ragu. Which was actually rather dreadful: not a true and creamy ragu, but granular and disparate mincemeat, the broad flat pasta one great solid claggy thing amid far too little sauce. I ate it because I was hungry. The linguine was good, the meatballs three in number, small in

FACTFILE

■ Orso, 27 Wellington Street WC2.. Tel 020 7240 5269
 ■ Open seven days, 12 noon – 12 midnight.

■ FOOD ★★★★★☆☆☆
 ■ SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆☆
 ■ THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ COST Set two course lunch £16.75, three course £19.50. Otherwise, about £120 for three course meal for two with modest wine.

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

circumference – “and”, said my son, “they taste a bit chemical”. The liver was quite good – “but”, said my wife, “it doesn't cohere – it's all a bit separate”. And now we come to the roast potatoes: black. Truly. Burnt to blackness. Okay, I sent them back – but how can a chef think that's all right? How can a waitress put it on the table? The replacements came too late. Then a poached pear in Marsala with thick cream – okay if you were in the mood for Silver Jubilee street party food. My son contented himself with affogato – vanilla ice cream ... but the espresso for pouring over it was stone cold. Amazing. So that went back as well. I paid in cash, and although the service charge was included, I was asked if I wanted the five pounds change. I did. I actually think they should change the name from Orso to So-So, but they probably won't.

