

Restaurant of the week: Franco Manca



Get yourself a pizza the action

Joseph Connolly tries the Belsize Park branch of a restaurant that has a fanatical following and discovers they excellent pizzas and good service

Summer is icumen in – llude sing cuccu ...! No indeed, they don't write songs like that any more – and I have no doubt at all that these very lyrics written in the thirteenth century by somebody or other (nobody quite knows who, nor, one suspects, cares) have been gaily tripping off your tongue of late, now that all the pretty flowers are forcing their way through the sod, and the sun doth shine upon us. And so we turn our thoughts to the great outdoors – we covet the ghastly restaurant table on a busy pavement, with passers-by knocking our plate askew and laughing at us while we struggle to cope with pasta. Men – of course, men – will rediscover the Paleo Diet, whereby you return to your caveman roots and eat accordingly – although Waitrose don't run to dinosaur, woolly mammoth and bison, so a certain amount of compromise is called for. Also due for earnest rediscovery are foraging and, naturally, the barbecue.

Foraging is an extraordinary phenomenon. I mean, yes okay country folk and the crippled impoverished have been garnering this slimy detritus since time began, but these days it does seem a trifle affected, not to say deranged.

“Summer heralds the paleo diet, foraging, ghastly pavement tables, and ruining your own food on the barbecue

And although the main foraging season for mushrooms is autumn, still people are doing it, and still people are feeling just a little odd having polished off their plateful, prior to keeling over and dying. Hundreds a year fall victim to such idiocy, happily mistaking Giant Puffballs and Hedgehog mushrooms (both good) for Death Cap and Destroying Angel: the names are a bit of a clue as to their mortal toxicity, but alas in glade and dale they don't come labelled. But it is the barbecue that reigns supreme – not so much popular as an epidemic. But now, of course, there is fashion and status to be dealt with by many driven men (of course, men).

To trot out the trusty old £17.99 Homebase job is to grossly miscomprehend the serious business of onepmanship. Cheapos are out, and

so is gas-powered: too suburban. It must be wood-fired – but Lordy, not just any old wood: completely banish from your mind all thoughts of paper sacks of impregnated briquettes from the supermarket. What you have to burn is British woodland charcoal, the crème de la crème being Bramley apple at £6 a kilo. And you must burn it in a Jamie Oliver oven (he of the common people will charge you nearly two grand for this) or else a Green Egg ceramic-lined number at around the same price. Do you think that's a lot of money ...? What a cheapskate you must be: the range goes up to £24,000.

Conversely, if you are sane, you will know that ruining your own food in the garden is not the way to go. How about getting someone professional and competent to do it for you? The original and most famous wood-fired oven grub is, of course, the pizza ... so my wife and I trotted off to London's seventh branch of Franco Manca in Belsize Park for a pizza the action: to give pizza chance. These places attract a fiercely loyal, even fanatical following, so I wanted to know why. Because I've never really understood pizza. Pasta I could happily eat every day ... but a pizza is all down to the toppings alone, surely? The base is merely a quasi-edible plate, rather in the way that the bun on a hamburger is something to hold: nobody goes on about the bun – it's the meat, right? Well they're very proud of their slow-rise sourdough bases here, and urge you to eat the whole of the pillowy rim. You can't slice these pizzas – too floppy: you just attack it with

knife and fork. The restaurant is on the site of a wholly forgettable Mexican place I reviewed some time ago: the best thing about it was the red telephone box outside, which was inherited from the previous incarnation of Ask. The box is now gone – I wonder where: I might have made a bid for it. The exterior is smart and monochrome, the lavish front patio (blessed are the restaurants in Haverstock Hill) covered by a large square white umbrella with built-in heaters. The interior is rustic and pleasing – oak floorboards interspersed with mismatched coloured and patterned ceramic tiles, and the lovely sight of orange fire in the oven, behind a cool white marble counter.

It is unusual for a pizza place to sell nothing else at all, but here is just such a one. And only six of them at that, with two more specials on the blackboard, one of which my wife ordered: mozzarella, organic tomato, wild pig fennel salami, Provola cheese and wild broccoli. And I had No 4: they don't give them names. Home cured Gloucester Old Spot ham, mozzarella, buffalo ricotta, wild mushrooms and tomato. A No Logo lager (Kentish) for the missus, and a glass of organic red for me – which is, it says, 'mineral driven and the soil has the upper hand over the fruit content'. No idea what that means – but it was fruity, actually, and rather good. As were the pizzas – really excellent, if pizza is your thing: ...and for a lot of people it clearly is: the place was nearly full on a Monday lunchtime. Piles of wonderful ham and gooey mushroomy cheesiness on

FACTFILE

- Franco Manca, 214 Haverstock Hill NW3. Tel 020 7794 2773
 - Open Mon-Fri and Sun 11.30am – 11pm. Sat 11.30am – 11.30pm
 - FOOD ★★★★★★☆☆
 - SERVICE ★★★★★★☆☆
 - THE FEELING ★★★★★★☆☆
 - COST' Good value. Two pizzas and two drinks for about £22
- 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.co.uk



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mine, and my wife very much liked the wild broccoli with the salami, though I thought it rather bitter. We asked for a glass to accompany the bottle of lager, and the waiter smiled quite pityingly, as if to say 'oh yes of course – I'm sorry, I was forgetting that you're old'. But actually the service was very attentive and friendly: I rather enjoyed the whole very good value experience, though still I'm not too eager for another pizza for quite a while. The trouble is, they really do pack a punch: you do feel rather leaden as you waddle away – and I only managed half the pillowy rim. That said, you should probably get down there and bag an outside table. Why? Because, silly – summer is icumen in – llude sing cuccu