

Restaurant of the week: The Gay Hussar

I met her in a pub down in old Soho

Joseph Connolly wines and dines Soho royalty at one of the area's surviving institutions and finds it comforting, if gastronomically underwhelming

The novel is dead. Masculinity ...? Chivalry ...? Dead. Pop music? Oh, just so dead. Nonsense though really, isn't it?

Good God, some people even think that Elvis is dead! And one other very much alive and continually self-reinventing thing of whose irretrievable demise we keep on hearing ... is Soho. I've been hearing about the death of Soho for decades, and every time I go there, dressed in suitably funereal weeds, I look about me, see and feel the vibrancy, and laugh out loud. Which, in Soho, goes completely unnoticed as the streets are filled with people doing loony things. The latest Soho obituary arose because of the demise of Madame Jo-Jo's, a very jolly drag burlesque and watering hole on the site of the old Raymond Revuebar. Well it was a blow, no doubt – but Dean Street still has Sunset Strip, and 'adult' shops still abound – selling all sorts of things I couldn't begin to understand. More concerning was the closure of The Colony Room some years ago – that bilious green upper room where lots of well known artists and writers would congregate, sometimes merrily. It was best when it was shoulder-to-shoulder packed out, because as people began to leave and the pressure eased, everyone left would tend to fall over.

And although new bars and restaurants are opening in Soho all the time (the latest is fairly optimistically devoted to selling only variations on the toastie) there remains an awful lot of 'old Soho' that is in very fine fettle indeed. The Groucho Club, the Union Club, Soho House, the Coach & Horses, the original Patisserie Valerie (the only decent one) and Maison Bertaux. Ronnie Scott's, Gerry's Club, Blacks, L'Escargot ... and the peerless Bar Italia. A twenty-four hour newsagent with all the foreign titles, two tremendous Italian delis – Camisa and Lena – Berwick Street Market ... dear God, if this is an area which is dead, Heaven help the rest of London. And right up there at the summit is the French House, a truly great original pub (and I'm not a huge fan of pubs, generally) presided over for the past quarter century by Lesley Lewis – truly Soho royalty, though a more modest royal you never will meet. The French used to be called the York Minster, but acquired its

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nickname from its former very Gallic landlord Gaston Berlemont. Good French wine was on offer at a time when pubs sold only rotgut. Conversely, Gaston rather frowned upon beer, so it was sold only in less vulgar half pints – a tradition that persists – and Bastille Day remains a very big deal down at the French. I have known Lesley for a very long time, and was delighted to take her to lunch ... but where in 'old Soho' should we go? Well what about the Gay Hussar – another place we keep on hearing is about to expire, but here it is, more than 50 years on, and breathing still. Sitting right next to another Soho institution – Milroy's the rare whisky and wine merchant – the façade is very handsome and old school in red, black and gold. The name of the place, of course, long predates the current usage of the word 'gay, but it's maybe just as well, for clarity's sake, that it is in Greek and not Old Compton Street, where homosexuality is more or less mandatory.

The small and cosy interior is rather like a slightly expanded first class Pullman railway carriage, with close set tables the length of it. Proper white tablecloths and napkins, King's Pattern cutlery, bread wrapped



in linen in a silver basket – all unchanged. This place has been much loved by journo and politicians for ever, and the walls are hung with caricatures of the most eminent by Martin Rowson, a great cartoonist, and also a chum. It's got a reputation for being a leftie place – but clustered about Michael Foot and William Keegan there are true blues such as Heseltine, Home, Portillo and Keith Waterhouse. Now here is a Hungarian restaurant, and so what we have is BIG food – which has never been even remotely great, and so therefore is much loved by blokes.

Lesley ordered fresh asparagus with bacon salad, to be followed

by smoked breast of goose with red cabbage. This dish is billed as solet, the classic cassoulet ... but it isn't really. Pink sliced goose breast (which tasted unmercifully of gammon) on top of a basket made from the bastard children of crisps and Shreddies, and filled with what were more or less baked beans. Lesley quite liked the goose. She had loved the fat asparagus spears, though – new season English, and very yum-yum. I started with Hungarian sausage, expecting thin-sliced salami: silly me. What I got was a vast and brazen orange banger – but actually rather good. Then I had a veal schnitzel – huge, paper thin, crispy and utterly tasteless; the 'saute' potatoes were equally dry and actually identical, rather oddly. Look, there are loads of better places in Soho to eat, but this is a comforting and rather lovely place to be.

Lesley lived in Hampstead for five years in the seventies, having attended the New College of Speech & Drama, in Anna Pavlova's old house. Then, naturally enough, she choreographed strip shows in Soho before running the phenomenally successful Peppermint Park and Coconut Grove restaurants – two of London's coolest, at the time. Soon after, she landed the French. "I love it," she says. "And I love Soho too". She certainly does – and is hugely involved in all sorts of

FACTFILE

■ The Gay Hussar, 2 Greek Street W1. Tel 020 7437 0973
Open Mon-Sat 12.15 – 2.30pm.
5.30 – 10.45pm.

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

★★★★★★★☆☆

■ COST Two or three course lunch (£21, £25 with various annoying £2 supplements). Wine is reasonable.

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



local charities – including the fifth annual Soho Food Festival on 13th and 14th of June. This is always a wonderful outdoor event involving all the local restaurants and famous chefs, with all profits going to the local school, and I urge you to go. With a not too bad 'mixed berry pudding' – actually a jellied slab with Chantilly cream – we enjoyed a glass of Hungary's one undisputed contribution to human happiness: Tokay. Creamy, rich, sweet and luscious. Which just left room for a digestif in the French. So let me hear a hurrah ...! Viva Soho! Soho for ever ...!