

Restaurant of the week: Le Pain Quotidien

Please Lord, don't give us this daily bread

Joseph Connolly finds dried veg, microwaved egg, pond slime juice and cement-like pastry during a 'lousy lunch' at the new Hampstead branch of the French-style cafe

In terms of regret, I am not as one with Edith Piaf – more of a Sinatra man: because regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention. Except for one, which I'm about to mention now: I wholeheartedly regret not having photographed every single shop front in Hampstead Village when I was but an infant, and then rephotographing each of them whenever they changed hands or had a revamp. What an archive that would be! Are you ancient enough to remember Chic in Heath Street? Next to Iberica and another little shop called Choses: a seller of attractive and largely useless objects, which these days seems to be most shops' speciality. Boots, with its upstairs lending library. Maxwell's, one of London's first American hamburger joints that was in Heath Street too: the largest premises in the Village, apart from Waterstone's, and now mysteriously empty and derelict for decades. And talking of Waterstone's ... that used to be Woolworth's, and then a supermarket called Vinegar Joe. Just next door was the beautiful old-fashioned 'draper' Gaze, with much to gaze at – lace handkerchiefs, Sylko thread in a thousand colours, bolts of calico and skeins of knicker elastic. I own a tall Thonet bentwood 'counter chair' from there, to

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which ladies were escorted. Which doesn't happen in Lidl.

Fowler's the ironmonger was opposite – it reeked of paraffin – and that was next to Finlay's tobacconist (a tobacconist! Smelling gorgeously of loose pipe shag and cigars: can the young even imagine such a thing?). Maynards sweetshop ... Knowles-Brown the jeweller was just down the High Street, with a clock in the window in the form of a Labrador whose red tongue would protrude at the passing of each second. Stamp the chemist was next door, splendidly fitted out in gleaming mahogany and acid-etched glass.

Opposite that was Forster's, our very own mini Fortnum & Mason. The very smartly turned out elderly ladies and gentlemen who worked there would slice you bacon, ham and cheese, and they sold caviar, foie gras and Bertorelli ice cream. What is

now Maison Blanc was Sam Cook the greengrocer, with the most marvellous displays of fruit and vegetables filling their considerably front courtyard. Then the Coffee Cup ... and guess what? It hasn't changed a bit: the red-and-white striped canopy, the rustic outside benches and the panelled interior – all just the same. Further up the High Street were Tip Top dry cleaners and King the stationer, selling everything from Basildon Bond to ink blotters by way of Conway Stuart, Platignum and Osmiroid fountain pens. Mac Fisheries was up there as well – always a bit pongy. Crossing the road brought you to Cullens – on the site of the present Ryman, with the original marble columns still intact. More bacon, ham and cheese slicing went on in there, and all the staff in white coats and hairnets. Bookshops abounded – my own Flask Bookshop in Flask Walk next to Steele the butcher, and opposite a record shop, Serendipity. Frank Norman in Perrin's Lane: he was a lovely old man, once you penetrated the crusty exterior. His only interest was in sixteenth to early eighteenth century books, of which his knowledge was unrivalled. Anything later than that could be picked up for a song, as he regarded it all as beneath his consideration. Four more bookshops towards Rosslyn Hill including the High Hill, and one that sold only books in French. Hampstead was still truly literary in those days – we did not know of people who looked after hedge funds (which we would have assumed was something you paid into when saving up for a decent stretch of privet).

But back to Cullens: because it

was next to that where the other day I had a lousy lunch. What a transformation these premises have undergone – because here, until quite recently, was McDonald's. The black frontage and restrained interior, complete with Hampstead murals, was rather nicer than in its present incarnation, which is a branch of the ubiquitous Le Pain Quotidien. What a stupid name: even if you are French, it hardly trips off the tongue. Loosely translated, it means one's daily bread, which is also stupid, as well as quite horribly pious. Inside is all pine 'dressers' and an attractive display of bread (£8 a loaf) and pastries. Also the long communal table that is a motif that runs through every branch like a rheumy cold, because they have a very tedious 'philosophy' about 'sharing'. The British, who hate other people, don't like communal anything, let alone eating, so the table was empty, while all the smaller tables were jammed.

My wife ordered the wonderful sounding smoked salmon and asparagus frittata from the pleasant and attentive waitress, and I had chicken and leek pie with roast potatoes, carrots and beans. Sounds good? Wasn't. The pie was very small for nearly twelve quid, the shortcrust pastry pretty good, the insides meagre and bland. The beans were dried out and burnt. I remarked on this to the waitress, who said she would "tell chef". Ah, but chef already knows, doesn't he? Yes he does – and evidently doesn't give a single damn. A reduction in the bill was made ... but that's hardly the point.

FACTFILE

■ Le Pain Quotidien, 46 Hampstead High Street, NW3. Tel 0203 617 6632
Open Mon-Fri 7am – 7pm. Sat-Sun 8am – 7pm.
■ FOOD ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆
■ THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆
■ COST Quite a lot for nothing much: you'd be better off in Cote.

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

The frittata was no such thing: barely any potato and microwaved scrambled egg, like a very overdone quiche. She drank some of her 'one-a-day green juice' – this was £4.20 and looked like pond slime. But do you know what ...? It tasted of pond slime. I had fizzy water: there is no licence here because alcohol is the tool of the devil. And then two tarts: banana and toffee, and strawberry. They came with a dinner fork and knife because their bases were fashioned from Portland cement: I cursed myself roundly for having left my Black & Decker at home. The tarts came on white slabs, while espresso comes in a little porcelain bowl, because cups with handles and saucers in which to place your spoon have yet to be bloody invented. We left feeling bloated by pastry: all pretty awful, really. On the blackboard was written 'Spread the Love', but I thought no – I think I'll spread the word instead.

