

Restaurant of the week: Percy & Founders



There's nothing like a dame

Joseph has a near erotic experience with truffle fries and whipped chocolate at a new restaurant in the company of Hampstead lass Esther Rantzen, soon to be made a dame

Whenever I hear of a brand new restaurant in a brand new development, my heart hits the floor, this briskly followed by my soul. It's that word 'development' that does it: we used to talk of buildings and streets, but now it's all just a development. Which means lacking in all human scale or sensitivity, and obviously insultingly ugly. This one – Fitzroy Place – is on the site of the old Middlesex Hospital, and although it's as stark and slab-like as you might expect, it could have been a whole lot worse because the Candy brothers had been after the site – they of the grotesque trilogy of Knightsbridge eyesores all bought by foreign billionaires who don't live there. And they wanted to call it NoHo Square. Oh God ... can you imagine anything more self-consciously wince-making and faux-Manhattan hip than NoHo Square? Anyway, the site went elsewhere, and amid the facelessness the rather lovely hospital chapel has been retained – not, I imagine, due to the aesthetic sensibilities of the developers so much as the fact that it is Grade II* listed. It has been subject to a £3m restoration, and its gothic and Romanesque interior, with lavish use of marble and mosaic, suggests that it was built long before its actual date of 1929. You can view its splendour through a large window in the adjoining new restaurant, Percy & Founders. Well of course there's a restaurant – why else do you imagine I was there?

And is this place what we have come to expect? A big and dingy

warehouse with concrete walls and floor and exposed ducting and industrial lighting and furniture fashioned from crates and driftwood and some or other morbidly depressing 'concept' ...? Reader, it isn't ... oh God, it so very much isn't. Here is actually one of the most beautiful modern restaurant interiors I have ever laid eyes upon. Vast, but not in an airport way, with a superb long marble bar, limed oak panelling and the suggestion of bookshelves forming interesting bays, all sorts of elegantly framed pictures and, predominantly, a vast oil of a dog in a flea collar: weird, but good – you have to see it. The quality throughout is magnificent – God alone knows what it can have cost. Tables are large and generously spaced, and you are shown to yours by Cara Delevingne. Actually ... just thinking about her profile and also her earning power, it maybe isn't her – but goodness, you'd never know.

I am always early for lunch – and for the very first time, my guest arrived at the very same time. A guest who barely requires an introduction, but I'll give you a little one anyway: Esther Rantzen, a true Hampstead lass, a household name remembered with love for the long-running series *That's Life!*, among much other TV work, and more recently celebrated for having formed ChildLine and *The Silver Line*. In recognition of this, next week Esther – this to coincide with her 75th birthday – will go to the Palace to be created a Dame. "I used to be late for everything," she said, "but now I'm always early. I think that as you get older, your actual personality changes". And then Esther – looking as elegant and glamorous as ever –

told me that she had skipped her customary breakfast, and so this lunch had a fair deal to do.

The menu is concise, and rather cool: English things, with a European overtone. Possibly undertone. Anyway – toned by Europeanism. Esther ordered English asparagus with onions and chicken skin ... with reservations about both onions and chicken skin – and when it arrived she demurred further at the sight of asparagus that had been charred. Then the quite ecstatic praise began: "asparagus ... extraordinarily good. Onion puree ... divine. And the crispy skin – fantastic". I had a superb lobster and prawn Scotch egg – beautifully fresh minced seafood in place of sausagemeat, an orange and molten yolk, and terrific crunchy coating: a joy. Later, as we were leaving, we ran into Nick Ross – he of *Crimewatch* fame – who also was babbling with delight about the asparagus: it's maybe a BBC presenter sort of thing. Or maybe it's an NW3 thing – because Nick was born in Hampstead, while Esther's grandmother lived in Maresfield Gardens, both her parents were born in Hampstead, she attended North London Collegiate school, and for more than 20 years she lived with her late husband Desmond Wilcox and their children in one of the Village's most beautiful and historic houses: East Heath Lodge. Now she has a flat in one of Westfield College's old buildings quite nearby. "I call it," she says, "Little Old Lady Land".

About 20 years ago, she formed a Hampstead lunching society whose members congregate monthly for boisterous feasts at either Cote in the High Street

or LEMONIA in Primrose Hill. She also favours The Wells, Villa Bianca, La Gaffe and Piccola. "I never used to love food because when I was a child I was fat, and never thought of food as pleasure, just guilt. Isn't that awful ...?" She's over it now: next came dry-aged sirloin with salsa verde and truffle fries – and for me, lamb rump with artichoke and peas ... and more of those truffle fries. Which were the most delicious things – tawny and sticky and dangerously moreish. Esther's very thick sirloin (looked more like a fillet) she said was excellent, and cooked exactly as specified (medium rare). My lamb too – just so. She was filming later on, so no wine ... "but actually, it doesn't agree with me. I like the taste, but after just one glass I'm telling the Director General how to do his job". She loved her lemon and yoghurt almond crumble with prosecco sorbet, and I was speechless with delight over my whipped dark chocolate with caramelised oats and honeycomb: damn near erotic, actually.

FACTFILE

- Percy & Founders, 1 Pearson Square W1. Tel 020 3761 0200
 - Open Mon-Thu 7.30am – 11.30pm. Fri 7.30am – 12pm. Sat 9am – 12pm. Sun 9am – 10.30pm
 - FOOD ★★★★★★☆☆
 - SERVICE ★★★★★★☆☆
 - THE FEELING ★★★★★★☆☆
 - COST It can add up. About £140 for three course meal for two with 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.co.uk

So: a fine new restaurant in a new development: who'd have thought it? A lovely surprise. And a lesser hack than I might now end the piece with a jocular 'Well – That's Life!' – yes but not me, matey. I'll just end it. There. It's ended. There is no more.

