

Restaurant of the week: The Spaghetti House



Re-branded Spaghetti House not worth the label

Joseph and guest are disappointed to find a '50s institution updated, revamped but its menu sadly not improved - and no ravioli

Are you a collector? More of a hoarder, maybe? Or do you hold both inclinations in contempt, regarding all possessions as unnecessary lumber? You might be a minimalist, possibly, to whom the glimpse of a utensil in an anaemic kitchen or a toy in the nursery would be utter anathema. Well I'll tell you something about this week's lunch guest, Robert Opie: he ain't no minimalist. Collecting might be said to be in his genes, being the son of the justly revered Iona and Peter Opie, who amassed a fine collection of rare books and were the joint authors of many classics such as *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* and *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. They collected for posterity an irreplaceable trove of folklore, children's games and sayings – the seemingly commonplace and everyday – and in a different context, that is precisely what Robert has devoted his life to. He is the founder of the Museum of Brands – a unique and magnificent collection of advertising and packaging that truly does reflect the sociological development and enthusiasms of this country better than most other museums put together. Nothing is more provocative of a nostalgic rush than the packaging of pet products from our childhood – and all this is very beguilingly explained by Robert in a recent DVD called *Throwaway History*: you'll be much more interested than you might imagine, and the same is true of his 20 books on the subject.

“While enjoying a packet of Munchies he had an epiphany to preserve the wrapping along with every throwaway bit of packaging

Robert was the sort of child who, when given a Matchbox toy, kept it in pristine condition inside its pristine box. In later years, he was enjoying a packet of Munchies, when he underwent an epiphany – as which of us has not? He thought this red and white fragment of paper, along with every other throwaway piece of packaging, ought to be preserved ... and then set out to do that very thing: a sole and valiant pioneer striding bravely into the world of empties. He has collected everything he could from the past, but is most concerned with gathering



the ephemera of today, before it is the landfill of tomorrow. The museum – which is in Notting Hill

until July 5th, to reopen elsewhere later in the year – is a truly marvellous place: 12,000 artefacts on display, from a total collection of way over half a million, this figure rising every day. So where to take such a man for lunch ...? I know, I thought – London's very first Spaghetti House: this opened in Goodge Street in 1955, when an Italian restaurant outside of Soho was virtually unheard of. I was last there two or three years ago and it was blissfully unchanged: so I cantered along there happily – even though there was on the corner some oaf playing intensely annoying Irish diddly-diddly music on an electric fiddle. You probably can't legally kill these people, you know – there are laws against everything, these days. Never mind, I thought – soon I'll be back in 1955!

Well ... wrong. Because in order to celebrate their 60th anniversary, Mr Spaghetti House had clearly brought in a 14-and-a-half year old marketing and image consultant who, regardless of context and history, had completely bugged the whole place up. A rather pertinent example of what Robert is trying to prevent on a daily basis. So, gone were the little windows with half-curtains – all big plate glass now.

No pine pews and tables with vanquished cushions, no Italian flags and raffia-bound Chianti bottles, no ancient and laminated menus. There is an open kitchen (of course), a central 'station', a counter at which they imagine there might be born the person who would want to sit, the usual

red amaretti tins ... and waiting staff who were anything but Italian. Oh dear. But Robert didn't mind, because he doesn't eat out much. He doesn't really have time for anything outside of the running of the museum, writing wonderful books on his speciality subject, lecturing, consulting ... and meanwhile existing on the contents of packaging destined for conservation, following his twice-weekly supermarket trawls. “I do,” he said quite glumly, “get through quite a lot of yogurt. Chocolate bars. Mainly breakfast cereal ...” But he surely does eat at least one hot meal a day ...? “Well ... I wouldn't go that far.”

We shared a 'plank', God help us, of Parma ham, spicy sopressata salami, Gorgonzola, marinated artichoke and olives. The cheese was outstandingly good, the rest very so-so. There are 17 pastas on offer ... and no ravioli. There so seldom is – and when there is it will be stuffed with spinach and ricotta, not meat. I like ravioli. I am at one with Reggie Perrin when he started his dinner with ravioli, followed with a main of ravioli and rounded it all off with a nice dessert of ravioli. No chance here, though – so instead I had spaghetti with meatballs and Robert ordered tagliatelle with chicken and asparagus in a cream sauce with Padano cheese. This looked very appealing, and he enjoyed it very much – not least, I imagine, because he did not have to extract it from the underside of a can with an old-fashioned opener so as not to damage the label. Which he does most days. Robert tells you all this with great good humour and wit – he knows how nuts it sounds, but is content to be the sacrificial lamb at the altar of a greater good. My

FACTFILE

- Spaghetti House, 15 Goodge Street W1. Tel 020 7636 6582
- Open Mon-Sat 12 – 11pm. Sun 12 – 10pm.
- FOOD ★★★★★☆☆☆
- SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆☆
- COST Reasonable enough.
- THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆☆ (because they've bugged it up)
- Two of you will be fine for £70 with modest wine.
- Joseph Connolly's latest novel *STYLE* is published by Quercus in hardback and ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website josephconnolly.co.uk

spaghetti was completely okay ... the meatballs completely okay ... and that's about as much as I have to say.

Robert then told me about how he was called in by Heinz to advise on the celebration of the 100th anniversary of their tomato soup in 2010. He pointed out that in fact this landmark date had fallen in 2005, but they were quite unfazed, and commemorative tins were duly produced five years late. He loved his pud: roast pear and ricotta cake with caramel ice cream – maybe partially because it wasn't a Lyons Individual Fruit Pie. My pannacotta was pleasant enough, with nice fresh raspberries, blackberries and blueberries. “Marketing and attractive presentation”, Robert concluded, “have always existed. Ever since Eve offered Adam an apple”. And had Robert been Adam, he too would have succumbed ... and then saved the peel.