

Restaurant of the week: Bill's Covent Garden



Dedicated follower of food fashion

Joseph Connolly may eschew hipster trends like the cronut or the crogel but he's certainly not going to get stuck in the 70s like the rest of the country

New and stupid trends in eating continue to be unleashed upon our apprehensively blinking and frankly gastronomically sated nation ... but for nation, actually, read London. If you're opening somewhere new in a 'cool' and 'edgy' part of the capital (i.e. until recently a no-go slum) you need a gimmick. Everyone long ago ran out of things that are actually new, and so hybrids, mergers and fusions are the order of the day. Cronuts – a croissant/doughnut compromise – are just SO 2014: we now have the crogel (croissant/bagel) and the duffin (doughnut crossed with muffin – desperate, isn't it?). The latest, I hesitate to tell you, is a dowich – doughnut and sandwich, you see, and this ... oh God : you know what? I can't

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actually be bothered to tell you any more: it's all only some idiot hipster's propagation of mess, so let's just leave it at that. Outside London, they wouldn't even attempt all this – because outside London it's 1973. True statistic: approaching half the people in the whole of Britain barring the capital have never tasted lobster, sushi or oysters, let alone anything twenty-first century.

So when I go to a brand new place in London, I am metaphorically ducking: for what fresh hell is to be wheeled out this time? Well Bill's is pretty new – but there's nothing here to frighten the horses. Set in a pleasant and recently created courtyard off St Martin's Lane in Covent Garden, it's handy for Dishoom, Laredo and Jamie's Italian – not to say Stringfellow's, should you be so inclined. The lofty two-storey interior is attractively got up, if only with all the usual chunky raw wood furniture, mesh cage shelving crammed with homemade sauces and vintage tins and packages. It looks like – as is the intention – an old converted warehouse, but it's all quite spanking new. It was a perfect sunny day, so I bagged an outside table to share with my guest, Peter Miall. Peter has spent his life in the

field of conservation of buildings and furniture – a lot of the time for the National Trust – having spent a good deal of his youth in France and Italy, similarly involved, and hence his enviable fluency in both languages. He lives near Tunbridge Wells, and delights in giving people directions: “The village is called Denny Bottom. Turn right at Dingley Dell, and into Harmony Street”.

Paper napkins and rudimentary cutlery are in an old oatmeal tin on the table (of course) and the menu is an enormous printed card (naturally). It says at the top: ‘2 courses £9.95, 3 courses £11.95. Please see attached menu for details’. Though of attached menu there was none. Instead, a brown paper bag bearing the legend ‘Bag O'Bill's’: you tick off what you want from the listing on the other side, and they bag it up for you. Handy for office workers. I suppose – or anyone eager to shoot into Stringfellow's. All so ‘cool’, isn't it? We were sitting opposite what a thousand years ago might have been called a coffee bar, but here was The Department of Coffee and Social Affairs: that's how ‘cool’ it is. The menu is wide-ranging and attractive – and Peter immediately wanted warm roast red onion tart with Gruyere, while I was having crab, chilli and prawn cakes. We also had a side of large green pitted olives – good, but of course they severely interfered with the Valpolicella (which Peter pronounced “a lovely thing”). The crab cakes were very good – crunchy, but gooey and properly seafoody within, with a fine and zingy sauce. “I love the tart,” said Peter, “but the Gruyere could be more pronounced, or maybe riper”. He is an enthusiastic cook: spoiled

by a year in Paris as a youth – and so back in London, when he wasn't studying fine and decorative arts at the V&A, he was studying Julia Child's bible Mastering the Art of French Cooking. “I had to learn to cook. Food in London was just so dire in those days”. After the V&A he went on to be curator at Charleston, the house that has become a shrine to Vanessa Bell and the Bloomsbury Group. His aesthetic eye had been honed as a schoolboy at Stowe, where he returns once a year for a reunion. “So beautiful – but I was never so interested in paintings as I was in the three-dimensional.”

And lo, there appeared before him a three-dimensional plateful of slow-cooked Gressingham duck with feta and spring onion potato croquettes and a salad of watercress, red cabbage, peas, broad beans and basil dressed in lemon with a wasabi mayonnaise. “Excellent duck – very good flavour, properly cooked. Subtle dressing. Croquettes are all right, but not beaten enough. I would have added an egg”. I had rather good pecorino and parsley crumbed chicken schnitzel with a shaved fennel, rocket, quinoa, plum tomato and orange salad with ‘Bill's Dressing’. All good and fresh, the dressing decidedly fruity; the chicken escallop was moist – always vital, because the alternative is cardboard. We shared decent chips – ‘skin-on’, practically unavoidable now – and ‘kale chips’, which weren't chips at all but deep fried crispy kale: like Chinese seaweed, though much too salty.

What does Peter like to cook the most ...? “Well I always wanted to be an Italian living in Italy, so there is my passion. My tomato

FACTFILE

■ Bill's, St Martin's Courtyard, off Long Acre, WC2. Tel 020 7240 8183
Open Mon-Sat 8am – 11pm. Sun 9am – 10.30pm.

■ FOOD ★★★★★☆☆
■ SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆
■ THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆
■ COST Most will graze ... but a three course meal for two with wine, about £100.

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

sauce is extraordinary: the colour of mahogany”. And when he is not cooking, he loves to play the violin and embroider. “And I make marmalade – do you?” Um ... no. What he is most proud of, however, is his Bakewell Tart. “It has to rise, you see. Like a sponge. Butter, sugar, eggs, almonds, vanilla, apricot. Puff pastry. It mustn't be a flat little thing. It must sing ...!” It was on the menu. I ordered it. It was a flat little thing. And from it there burst no song. Peter shook his head in sadness. He rallied, though, when presented with his enormous Eton Mess. “Terrific! One of the best ever. My goodness, I'm full. I had a doughnut for breakfast, you know. It had been in the freezer for three years”. At least it wasn't a crogel. Peter clearly loves to live – but, as he says quite cheerfully, “I shan't mind it, when it comes. Dying. It'll be a very nice rest”.

