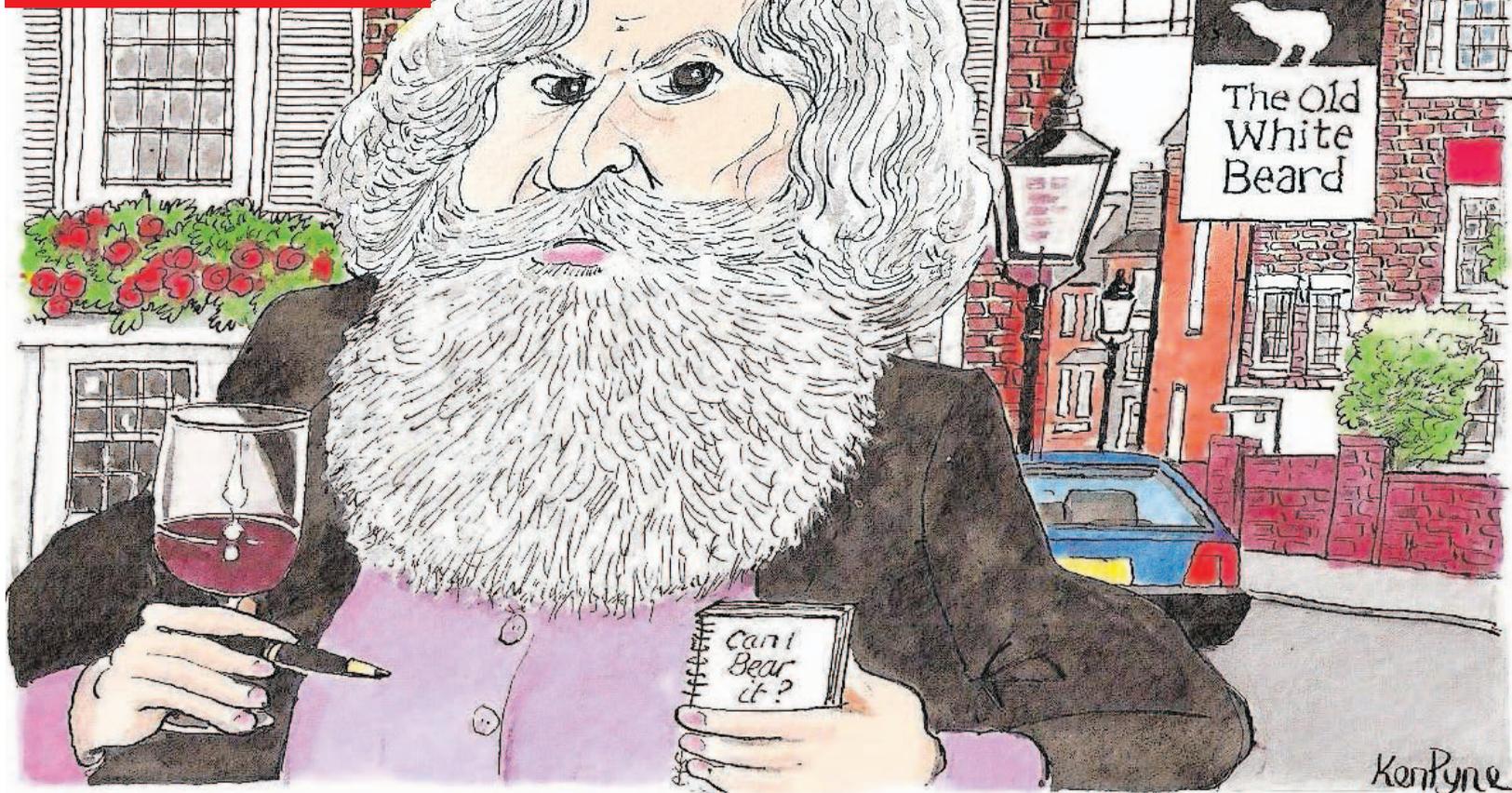


Restaurant of the week: Estancia Brasil



So long, farewell, obrigado, goodbye

Joseph Connolly ends his six years as Ham&High restaurant critic with a valedictory lap of Finchley Road's worst restaurants

Okay – here's news! Get ready either to weep uncontrollably, or else go nuts with happiness and celebrate beyond the bounds of reason: this is my final restaurant review for the *Ham&High*. So ... how are you feeling, my dear ...? Quietly sobbing – wrenching at the roots of your hair? Or maybe already planning the party of the year. Equally possibly, you couldn't give a sod either way. Well whatever you feel, kiddies, here is the fact of the matter: You are currently reading review number 320, the culmination of more than six years toil at the gastronomic coalface. But the dear old *Ham&High* is not to be abandoned: I shall return to haunt you on the first Thursday of every month with a diary of sundry observations and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise, and still popping in to restaurants around Hampstead – so if you have any tips or suggestions, do please be sure to keep them to yourself.

For this, my swan song, I should really have gone out on

the most tremendous bang – feasted on swan, or something – but instead I humbly set before you something of a Brazilian whimper. Estancia Brasil is opposite the Swiss Cottage Odeon, next to the preposterous La Voss. It was from here that I was turfed out by the proprietor for writing down dishes and prices from the menu without his express permission. Loony tunes, right? Anyway, this new and large Brazilian joint is on the site of the very short-lived Tara-Tiri, which I reviewed soon after it opened. This was a buffet deal, as well as an ambitious though horribly misguided stab at offering the 'cuisines' of just about every nation on the planet: all together, all piled up,

all you can eat, at very low prices. Nothing was adequately represented, needless to say – just a vast array of interchangeable grub sweating with resentment beneath the radiation of overhead lamps. Fat and greedy people unerringly seek out such places and proceed to make a plague of locusts appear altogether rather restrained and oh so dainty in their eating habits. 'All you can eat' becomes a challenge, their

gruesome appetites outdone only by their dexterity in balancing towers of food on the little plates. The new place works on a similar principle: at lunchtime there is a flat charge of £12.95 ... but what does this include? When my wife and I wandered in a couple of days after their opening, a polite young girl was eager to bring us up to speed, so it was unfortunate really that her first language turned out to be Martian. "Do you know how is?" is what she said. Ah – what an all-encompassing, not to say metaphysical question that is. If only I know how is, I should have made something of my life instead of disintegrating into the shabby wastrel who slumped before her. I bowed my head and admitted to her No ... I don't know how is. I think she then went on to tell me, but who can say? I didn't even understand her punctuation.

The space is large, and deeply without soul. Rows and rows of laminate tables with the high-backed brown vinyl dining chairs so abidingly beloved of 1980s conference halls in the basements of commercial hotels. It is billed as a steakhouse, so some might be alarmed to note that the sole nod in the direction of art and décor is devoted to the horse: rampant chargers on vast canvas prints, and a couple of horse's heads, as often used by the Mafia in place of a hot water bottle. A central buffet bar offers all sorts of basic cold salad bits, and irradiated hot

things such as croquette potatoes, pasta bake and something called mince pie – which should not be confused with the festive confection of precisely the same name, for here is something more on the lines of a meat dish: cottage pie, very broadly speaking. The star of the show is the carved meat: on your table is a card that reads 'Nao Obrigado', which translates as 'No, Ta'. Ah, but turn it over and you see 'Sim Por Favor' – which means 'I am going to eat so much of this meat for my £12.95 as to ensure that you will go out of business even quicker than Tara-Tiri, so bring it on, baby ...!'

The waitress brought us a Peroni and a glass of merlot and said "Enjoy!". I promised her I would. Then a fellow came with a sword, upon which was impaled what he said was sirloin of beef. One sliver apiece. "Enjoy!" he said – and I promised him I would. The waitress then brought water and quite tersely commanded me to enjoy it, and I said I would do my bloody level best. Then the fellow returned with chicken thighs – a bit thick, pink and bouncy (the thighs, I mean) whereas the sirloin had been salty and way overcooked. "Enjoy!" he exhorted us, to which I just about managed to nod. And then he brought very good crunchy chips and said ... well you know what he said: "Enjoy!" ... and I thought Oh Jesus Christ Almighty. Then quite sugary pork belly, followed my rump. "I LOVE rump!" he shouted,

FACTFILE

- Estancia Brasil, 117 Finchley Road NW3. Tel 020 8099 0707
- Open: no actual times seem to be forthcoming – but open for lunch and dinner.
- THE FEELING ★★★★★★★★★★
- FOOD ★★★★★★★★★★
- SERVICE ★★★★★★★★★★
- COST Set price of £12.95 at lunchtime for all you can eat. Good if you value quantity over quality. Pudding no includes.

and I simply couldn't help thinking of Benny Hill, but that's maybe just me. My wife then asked about puddings. The waitress said "no includes". There were a few bowls of various goo revolving forlornly in an illuminated vertical coffin. The 'cream caramel flan' was not a flan, more of a rejected breast implant – granular, lumpy and retchingly sweet. The waitress had yodelled "Enjoy!" and it was all I could do not to kill her; quite frankly. So there: this place will be filled in the evenings by hordes of gluttons who will either keep the plate afloat, or else ensure that it sinks without trace. I can't really tell you which, because after all these hundreds and hundreds of restaurant reviews ... I just don't know how is.

