

Your Table is Ready



Lobstered into submission

Sniggering Londoners, vacuously vain in their sham sophistication and mincing metrosexuality, are abidingly fond of saying that whenever they are forced to leave the capital, they fall victim to a staggering regression in time: that with every 10 miles travelled, the cutting-edge zeitgeist retreats by a decade.

Largely true – and these days, I cannot think of a better reason for fleeing. The sheer expanse of the city is not the problem. But London's utter abandonment of the human scale: that has become something of a worry – increasingly vile, immense and stupid new buildings that seem to spit down their contempt upon mere people.

Ah, but Rye in Sussex, it's not like that. Oh God – it is so not like that. Rye – one of the Cinque Ports – is utterly the England rapturously glimpsed in those John Mills films deliberately created during the war to remind our island race of all that we were fighting to protect.

Rye is medieval – fine Queen Anne and early Georgian buildings are the parvenu upstarts here – but the real and true joy of the place is that it is completely unbuggered-up. Everywhere you look is a perfect blend of art, nature and quietly modest English civilisation. People smile at you in the street, as if quietly conscious of their good fortune.

There are tea shops galore, but the two best places to eat are both hotels: neither does "gourmet", but both offer (at London prices) a selection of the nation's favourites, when it comes to a slap-up feed at the Hotel du Posh. The Mermaid Inn is justifiably famous – a superb and romantic ancient pile displaying a sign that says it was "rebuilt in 1420". Americans shake their heads in wonder, and excitable Japanese photograph it, about a hundred times. The other is The George in the High Street – a medieval core overlaid by Georgian, and billed as four-star. The comfortable interiors make a fair stab at marrying history with a rather more contemporary vibe: the low beamed lobby has a set of Richard Avedon's psychedelic Beatles portraits, and nearby is a poster for the film *Summer Holiday*. And so there you have it – with Cliff and the Fabs, at a stroke, white-hot modernity has been amply addressed.

The restaurant here is called The Grill, and the reason it is called The Grill is because they are inordinately proud of their Jospser. The Jospser is a sort of combination grill and oven – wood-fired, bewilderingly expensive, and also still just about fashionable – so when a place is the smug possessor of one of these, it tends to trumpet the fact loudly while getting its money's worth by cooking in it practically everything, not

necessarily to the benefit of the food. The room is by no means how you would imagine a Grill in an old hotel in an ancient place to look. The lighting is a contemporary cluster of globular pendants, the walls are of a colour you might attain by boiling up army surplus battledresses and the mash of thrice-pressed olives; while the floor is bare wood with odd and random snudges of different-coloured paint dotted about it, leaving the place looking like

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the tatty aftermath of a ticker-tape parade. Green buttoned leather banquettes are a nod in the right direction, and the similarly upholstered armchairs are supremely comfortable – and you know how rare that is. The tables are polished and naked, the napkins and stemware fine quality and pleasingly proper. Eager young waitresses wear striped blue matelot sweaters, possibly to echo the town's hereditary of pirates and smugglers, or maybe just because they collectively have a thing about striped blue matelot sweaters. Our fellow diners were

dressed in the way that nowadays is usual: the women had made all sorts of effort, while the men looked as if they had just come hotfoot from lagging the loft.

My wife was starting with scallops, roasted in the shell with pastis, and a fennel, orange and dill salad. The scallops (three) were large, juicy and served with the coral, the hit of Pernod evident even to me, way across the table. She loved it all: "yum-yum" is what she said. I had half a lobster from the Jospser. Utterly fresh... but flabby. Because this is what the Jospser tends to do: it bullies plucky ingredients into giving up the ghost. And Lord, what a terrible mess I got myself into, what with the pincers and the probe and the cracking and the tugging... I always forget the sheer yuck of it, when I order lobster. Restaurants, I imagine, don't do all the work for you because it would become immediately and startlingly evident just how very little meat you were getting for your money.

I had asked for two glasses of champagne at the outset, and 10 minutes later I asked for them again. The sweet and diminutive waitress said she would see how they were coming along.

Mains were poached sea trout with ratte potatoes, cherry tomatoes, "sea vegetables", and an oyster beurre blanc; and a rib-eye supplied by the excellent Aberdeenshire butcher Donald Russell, and cooked on our old friend Señor Jospser.

Rib-eye is a clever cut from the point of view of restaurateurs because although it looks like sirloin, a third of it is fat and gristle. It was good... but flabby. Almost boiled – or even boiled: here was one defeated steak that just lay there, Jospsered into submission.

A Béarnaise was more of a liquefied hollandaise, the chips were skins-on and so-so. There was also a sole vinegary mushroom with puffy fried onion rings that would have disgraced a fairground burger van. My wife, though, adored her flavoursome trout, as well as the rather luscious surrounding broth... and then the waitress swabbed down the table with a sopping wet blue J-cloth: not really four-star grill-room behaviour, is it? And by 9.30, they were setting the tables for breakfast.

A strawberry soufflé was nice and light – though with no coulis to pour into it, and tasting rather jammy. Fresh strawberries in "aged balsamic" were simply sour; basil ice cream quite excellent.

But it was Rye itself that was the star of the show. Rye is the secret sanctuary to which all that is left of old and sweet England has absconded, there to hide in safety.

● To buy a copy of Joseph Connolly's *A-Z of Eating Out* (Thames & Hudson, RRP £16.95) for £14.95 plus p&p, call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

Pinttopint

Our beer gazetteer stops off for a swifty at **The Robin Hood and Little John, Notts**

A woman is rapping on the window of what is known in these parts as the "beer-off" and elsewhere as the jug and bottle. Many pubs had them at one time. Customers, usually female, would arrive with a white jug to be filled up with draught ale and conveyed home to husbands or fathers – or whisked away for personal consumption.

This woman, however, only wants to borrow a set of stepladders. While her husband Mark obliges, Lorraine Swain, joint manager of the Robin Hood and Little John, is in the public bar pulling a pint of Marion Gold for a regular who has been for a long walk with his collie. Tongues are hanging out in both cases: one literally, the other metaphorically.

A bottled beer for dogs is on offer. It's called Snuffle and comes laced with chicken or beef stock. "Council pop's good enough for her," says her master. A bowl of water is laid on the bar's handsome slate floor and duly slurped.

The Marion is to be savoured rather than slurped. Pale yet full-bodied, it has a citrusy edge that goes perfectly with a chunk of pork pie, one of the specialities de la maison, along with ham "cobs" and pickled eggs. Marion shares the bar with a varying line-up of Merry Men-themed beers from the nearby Lincoln Green brewery: Hood bitter, a Tuck porter and Archer, an American-style IPA. Plus a couple of guest beers and the ever-reliable Everard's Tiger from over the Leicestershire border.

The perfectly balanced Hood rekindles memories of Home Bitter at its very best. Home Brewery was housed just up the road and its products were much in evidence around here until the company was swallowed by Scottish and Newcastle in 1986.

Mercifully, the only memory of the late-but-not-lamented S&N is resurrected by a startling tartan carpet in the lounge. Atop it is a piano that bursts into life for a sing-song every Wednesday.

As piano, pickled eggs and pork pie suggest, the Robin Hood and Little John is a shrine to the traditional street-corner "boozier". Except that it offers more. Much more. There are eight draught ciders, an espresso machine and a range of 44 whiskies from all over the place – Japan, India and even England.

And there's Big Ben mild, also from Lincoln Green, named after a local 19th-century bare-knuckle fighter, one Ben Gault, rather than a medieval outlaw. A hefty 6%, smooth and dark, it rolls over the tongue like liquid velvet, flattening any vinegary residue from a "free-range and locally sourced" pickled egg that gives the impression that it hasn't spent several years in a jar – unlike its eye-wateringly acidic predecessors from the "good old days" of street-corner boozers.

Chris Arnot

● 1 Church St, Arnold, Notts NG5 8DF (01159 201054; therobinhoodandlittlejohn.co.uk)

This week: **Joseph Connolly is hot under the collar about The George Grill, Rye, East Sussex**

CRATING 7/10

98 High St, Rye, East Sussex TN31 7JT 01797 222114; thegeorgeinrye.com Three courses with wine about £60 per head

Something for the Weekend

Get dressed up for the gee-gees, dressed down for the solstice and get ready for the end of primary school this June...

What's on

Horse sense
Royal Ascot: Ascot, Berks SL5 7JX; June 16-20
Hats! Horses! Champagne! Britain's most elegant race meeting is almost upon us. If the gee-gees aren't enough to pique your interest, there's going to be some pretty high-end catering on offer too (see Angela Hartnett in next Saturday's My Perfect Weekend). And if the dress code's a bit perverse – strappy dresses and cravats are deemed a more potent threat to Western civilisation than hats modelled on a full English breakfast – remember that "overseas visitors are welcome to wear the formal national dress of their country" and break out your trusty dirndl, djellaba, kurta pajama or kilt.
● ascot.co.uk

Post haste
Yorkshire Post Motor Show, Harewood House, Harewood, Leeds W Yorks LS17 9LG
Originally starting life as a classic car rally, this event has now swelled into a veritable juggernaut, featuring over 1,000 classic cars of all types in contention for various gongs. This year the event will focus on the Land Rover Defender, which is due to go out of production in its current form at the end of this year. Alternatively, in the Event Arena, you can witness displays of four-wheeled madness including Nigel Morris and his Bigfoot® #17 Monster Truck. Non-petrolheaded members of your party can always admire the house, with its fine interiors, paintings and porcelain, and an outstanding rustic stable block, a minor masterpiece

by John Carr of York, finely restored by ace minimalist Seth Stein.
● harewood.org

The long day closes
Summer solstice festivals: Stonehenge, St Petersburg, Reykjavik and elsewhere
It's the longest day in a couple of weeks (We know! Already?) and if you're of a new age/hippyish tendency (or a devotee of ancient Aztec blood cults) you'll be wanting to mark the occasion by leaping over fire, or possibly doing a spot of drumming. Stonehenge is a polite travesty of the wiggled-out days of yore, but it's free (see english-heritage.org.uk for access policy). But you might head north, where during these days the sun never sets. Relations with Russia are tricky but there's a world-class arts festival in St Petersburg, the Stars of the White Nights (marinsky.ru/en) – or the Secret Solstice in Reykjavik (secretssolstice.is) is unrivalled, if you like the idea of a three-day sleep-deprived bacchanal in an eerie volcanic landscape.

What's trending

Où sont les nits d'antan?
With the last half-term of the school year behind us, those Mumsnetters with children in Year 6 are anticipating the day their darlings leave primary education forever. As one relieved poster confessed, "the cool indifference of secondary beckons invitingly". Primary school is a bubble of loveliness, of course, but it is rather demanding vis-à-vis parental input. MNErs won't miss World Book Day ("Never again will I make another sodding costume") and will



Wheel meet again: above right, Nigel Morris and his motor. Above: some characteristically understated headgear at Ascot



We're loving... Thomas J Fudge's florentines

Ok, so they happened to show up in the office during our statutory press-day sugar crash. But further research was commissioned, and these turn out to be pretty good: rich, fruity and lightly

spiced, with a sort of lamination of overlapping thin-cut nuts creating a pleasingly robust bite. Choose between dark, milk and white choc on top. We also like the Monty Pythonesque

cod-Victorian packaging (though we may be nearing Peak Whimsical Niche Foodstuff). Florentines: the new macarons? You heard it here first. ● thomasjufudge.co.uk



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