

The wonder of Woolies

It might be one of the 'It' restaurants but the Wolseley in Piccadilly is the real deal – with its authentically Gallic and ordinary tuck done extraordinarily well, writes novelist **Joseph Connolly**

THE "It Factor". That indefinable thing that just a few restaurants are reputed to have – the usual suspects which litter those newspapers still clinging with fervour to the demented belief that some or other scrawny bint or bloated swaggerer eating a meal is somehow an item of news.

And yes, The Wolseley in Piccadilly is one of them.

But here we have truly the real deal – a restaurant that should be lauded for all the proper reasons – with the glut of celebs never really accounting for more than the colourful speckling of hundreds and thousands upon a particularly toothsome trifle.

It is my favourite restaurant in London by quite a way (I call it Woolies, now that that chummy appellation is again up for grabs).

It is a top-class brasserie with an endless menu of all the food you actually want to eat, ably steering a steady course between the authentically Gallic and ordinary tuck done extraordinarily well.

Just to enter the volume of this beautiful room with its massive black and Tuscan columns, red and gold chinoiserie panels, the vaulted stone arches and awesome chandeliers – it lifts the spirits every time.

You're in a very fine mood before you've eaten a thing – before even there's a drink on the table, which is saying a good deal.

It started life as the showroom for Wolseley Motors (hence the name) and then became the headquarters of Barclays (its majesty assuring the depositor of the grandeur and unwavering stability of banking).

The breakfasts and teas are epic. But on this occasion, my



The real deal ... The Wolseley, left, a favourite of novelist Joseph Connolly, above.



wife, my son and myself were out to lunch – fresh from the nearby Royal Academy's Palladio exhibition, though The Wolseley was even more uplifting.

Noble architecture is all very well, but here they feed your inner temple.

A word about seating. There can be no other restaurant in the capital where the finest tables are so very obviously set apart from the rest. There is a square and fatly self-satisfied central section

and it is here you must aspire to be.

The rest of the tables have the air of being something of a ring road circling the core of a splendid empire.

But wherever your table, you still get the knobby linen cloths, good glassware and a wonderful welcome from the best front-of-house in the business and excellent service.

The nattily got-up waiters and waitresses – lined up at dawn and

briefed on the vagaries of the day – are expert at blending friendliness (not jokey familiarity) with the effortlessly efficient (never robotic nor officious).

My wife kicked off with six escargots. These come in the shell with a moreish garlicky sauce that begs to be mopped – and do actually taste of something. They are not the usual and chewy could-be-a-mushroom thing.

My son Charles went for whitebait – plentiful and crunchy, though rather a meal in itself.

He doesn't mind. He eats like a hog and his waist size is 28. I eat like a hog and my waist size is ... larger.

I had a starter that is sin on a plate – four gooey quails' eggs on a wafery bed of millefeuille pastry all gorgeously enrobed in as rudely creamy an hollandaise as ever you dream of. Coronary-inducing, doubtless, though nonetheless blissful.

There are always one-off specials – a generous tranche of trout in this case, on a bed of chard, leeks and a spinach risotto.

My wife wanted this somewhere between pink and well done, and lo it came to pass. One of the best and freshest pieces of fish she had had in a year, is what she said.

Charles had a superbly meaty and flavoursome duck confit (they do them on the premises, not always the case) and I went

for Wiener Schnitzel. Rare on a menu, these days, it was vast and addictive, the coating properly eggy and crispish.

We all shared a plate of green beans and sugar snaps and a couple of scoops of so-so chips. If The Wolseley needs to work on anything, it's the chips – bit pale, bit flabby.

The house Medoc is a very good bet (we drink red with everything) though the price has recently risen to £29.95. A lot of the prices here have recently risen, actually.

I think that the proprietors, the legendary Jeremy King and Chris Corbin (no doubt wholly at one with governmental thinking) are determined that we should spend our way out of this crisis.

And so to the joys of pudding. The choice is limited to just the 10 desserts, five coupes, 10 patisseries and six other delights on the trolley.

They also do savouries such as buck rarebit (for those who believe that the perfect rounding off to a damn big meal is cheese on toast with an egg on top).

My wife had a passion fruit meringue – cool and creamy layers alternating with the crunch of meringue, all exuding the sweet-sour passion of the fruit.

Charles had a pear Tarte Tatin, which had the darkness and stickiness that you need – warm, with a scoop of cinammon ice cream.

Then there was fresh mint tea – a swirl of vivid emerald in a big glass pot.

I had nothing because I'm well behaved and my waist size is ... larger.

Celebs? There were a few, but then again not too few to mention.

It was quite a bookish day – uber-agent Ed Victor said hello, Joanna Trollope was at the next table.

There was also a famous thriller writer who will be truly hacked off to know that I can never remember his name.

Anyway: him, he was there. And so we left the party. It's like that – a non-stop party, spiked with the carnival spirit.

Food, wine and happy smiling people – that's the Wonder of Woolies.

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad And Bloody Mary, published by Faber and Faber, priced £8.99.*

FACTFILE

- **THE WOLSELEY**
- 160 Piccadilly.
- Telephone: 020-7499 6996
- Food: ★★★★★
- Service: ★★★★★
- Cost: About £100 for two, with wine.

Painter who's bringing an artistic touch to cupcakes

CAT Lyne was 10 years old when she watched her brother's French exchange student lovingly bake a delicious chocolate gateau.

"The taste of it was wonderful. It was dark but quite rich, almost a soufflé inside, we made him give us the recipe and I have made it ever since."

It got her interested in cooking and baking. At the age of 16, she worked in the tea room of a farm in Sussex, near to where she grew up.

"They made their own scones and bought in cakes from small businesses. There were huge Victorian sponges 25 inches wide and eight inches high."

As a student on her art course, she realised that she was unusual in shunning the standard student fare of pot noodle and quick fix pasta by going to great lengths to make meals for herself.

"Sometimes I would spend two hours or more making what I wanted to eat."

Now the West Hampstead-based 25-year-old has brought her artistic and baking skills together in a business – Cat and the Cream – making bespoke cupcakes.

"I started doing it nine months ago for family and friends, their birthdays, parties and weddings and it has grown. Cupcakes can



Focusing on quality products and ingredients ... Cat Lyne's cupcakes.

be very individual and are small and delicious – for people who don't want a big slice of cake."

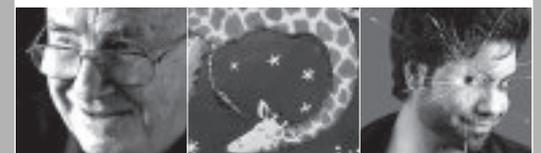
Lyne focuses on the quality of the product and ingredients, injecting chocolate ganache into her minty chocolate cupcakes or putting real fruit into her vanilla

ones. "I like the creativity. I draw and paint as well – and decorating or tailoring the cakes to people's requirements or colour schemes plays to those skills. You can have whatever you want, butterflies, glitter, or fresh fruit.

"I also like the science of baking. I would love to experiment and get to the point where I could make my own recipes."

□ For bookings, email cat@catandthecream.com.

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