

Joseph Connolly goes boldly in search of the holy grail of old-fashioned restaurants and finds the unknown

Out of sight, out of mind

GOD, I did feel such a fool, though – that very first time I was invited to Oslo Court (the restaurant so famous for being unknown). My host's instructions had been as specific as they could be, but still too vague for me: "You go into Prince Albert Road, right? And to the left a bit there's this big block of flats, see? There's no sign proclaiming 'Restaurant' – no menu, no doorman, nothing. Persevere. Walk in. You'll blink into the dimly-lit foyer of a 1930s building, not unlike the old Odeons before their ritual bugging about. Persevere. To your right of the porter's desk – there it is."

Yes well – the porter, he begged to differ. "Go away," he said, "you long-haired vagabond. You go away or I call the police". And God I did feel such a fool, though: wrong block of flats entirely. The real Oslo Court, I'd sailed right past it – it's so very easy to do. Got there eventually in one hell of a lather (seemed to me just identical to the last place: thought I was losing my mind).

Anyway, until last week I had only ever been there during a Test at Lord's when the room is absolutely heaving with chaps in blazers and the egg-and-bacon MCC tie, and very jolly it is too.

But on a Monday lunchtime in March, things are quieter. Everything else though, I am pleased to say, was very comfortably exactly the same. In a nutshell, Oslo Court is old-fashioned, a phrase that to some is a singularly seductive promise of a warm embrace, the fleeting escape from the beastliness of modern day reality and a kiss on the botty from Nanny for being extra well-behaved (maybe not that last bit).

To others it is something to jeer and run away from.

Right, then, here's what you get – everything bar the dado (baby blue) is baby peachy pink: with the judicious addition of an occasional deep-buttoned Dralton headboard, you could be in the big screen version of Terry and June's front bedroom. Good cloths, napkins origami'd into Marie Antoinette fans (whereupon, somehow, they become 'serviettes'), butter in curls, Melba toast, paper doilies, King's Pattern silverware, waiters in bow ties, comfy velvet chairs and your bottle of wine cradled in a basket of tortured silver wire.

By now you either swoon or are damn close to retching. Me, I'm a swooner – and as to the menu... well, let me say this: it is no place for someone whose idea of lunch is a little rocket on a spoonful of puy lentils, followed by a Fairtrade banana.

What we have here, writ large, is the food that time forgot – schnitzels, chateaubriand, duckling, cutlets, the finest and favourite seafood (Dover sole downwards) all in enormous portions and often accompanied



Joseph Connolly at the Oslo.

by the richest sauces. There are nearly 40 starters and mains (no prices on the guests' menus), but you just wait for the very adept and friendly head waitress to come along: she quite by heart recites to you the specials, a further 30 dishes at least.

I was determined to go as retro as I could, and Lord there's scope. My lobster cocktail was huge: really good meat in a glass suspended in another glass filled with crushed ice (as with caviar), this on a paper doily, natch, and then a plate beneath. My wife had a fine fish soup – served from a tureen with a silver ladle – very creamy, almost a veloute, studded with haddock, salmon, crab, prawn and lobster. My son, entering into the spirit of the thing, went for good old deep fried scampi. "Good health!" exclaims the waitress.

My wife was reluctant to let me taste the veal escalope Oslo Court, so eagerly was she wolfing it down: cream, mushrooms, wine – the lot. I nicked a bit anyway – and, yes, quite excellent. My son had a special – beef Wellington, which he said was very yum. The pastry wasn't crisp and puffy – rather wet and slightly suety, I thought, though the fillet was fine. Me – I wanted steak diane (I know – bliss or what?) I was yearning for the old-time theatrics of it all – the gleaming silver brazier, the Top Gun juggling of wine and brandy bottles, the whoosh of flame, the whole damn thing. Alas! No, no – it was brought to me on a plate. Health and bloody safety, if you can believe it (which you can): all that's been out for years (and don't get me started).

Anyway, the steak was properly thin, lean, tender, very boozy and deeply nostalgic. The selection of vegetables was vast: good al dente broccoli, spinach, zucchini fritti,

saute potatoes – and, by way of an afterthought, mushrooms and chips. The wine list is long and good: we had a fine and underpriced claret – Chateau Lyonnat 2004 at £20.50. "Good health!" exclaims the waitress.

Talking of which... then comes pudding. The man in charge is a joy to behold, raising campy to a level that renders John Inman rather more akin to John Wayne. His colourful waistcoats and gestures never disappoint – and he has a pudding, he whispers confidentially, that is reserved just for you: only one left, and it's yours!

It works every time – you have whatever he decides,

FACTFILE

- ❑ **Oslo Court**, Charlbert Street, NW8 7EN.
- ❑ Telephone 020-7722 8795.
- ❑ Food:★★★★☆
- ❑ Service:★★★★★
- ❑ Closed Sundays.
- ❑ PRICE £28.50 for three courses at lunch, £40.50 dinner.

fundamentally – usually a gorgeous strawberry pavlova, raspberry tart piled high with fluffy cream, or a creme brulee: often, as in this case, all three. Grief. And then came chocolates. "Good health!" exclaims the waitress.

This is a place that bestows great pleasure – it is for treats and blow-outs. When they deliver to a table a glowing birthday cake, they dim the lights and suddenly all the older diners are convinced they've just gone blind. And older and very loyal diners there are aplenty: rumour has it that the residents in the block above phone down not to book a table but to tell them the days they won't be coming.

It's very good value for such quality and quantity: £28.50 for three courses (a few things attracting a small supplement), this to include a plate of crudites, bread, all vegetables, coffee and choccies – service charge being a good old-fashioned 10 per cent.

To the faithful regulars, future heaven would be never to leave this singular restaurant (so famous for being unknown) – and then, very many years later, peacefully to die of good health.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack the Lad and Bloody Mary. Faber and Faber, £8.99.*

CUPPA CHARM



Indulgence at the Ceylon Tea Room. Picture by Nigel Sutton

IT IS not often that you have a chance to sit and relax and enjoy a good cup of tea. As English as that sounds it is not always possible these days to be in a position of having the time to do it.

But at the new Ceylon Tea Room at the Elephant Walk restaurant in West Hampstead the most stress comes in choosing between the more than 30 teas – and whether to have the scones or the traditional high tea.

The award-winning restaurant now offers black, green white, Oolong and puerh teas, as well as herbal infusions. There is also the amazing flowering tea – rolled large green tea leaves plaited with lilies, jasmine or chrysanthemums into a tight ball that, when boiling water is

poured over them, break open just like, well, a flower.

Because all the teas are served in glass pots – and drunk from glass cups – you can watch as your flower unfolds.

A pot of tea for one starts at £1.95, with cream teas at £5.75 and afternoon teas at £12.95.

There is also the option of a champagne afternoon tea – "a bit of an indulgence", according to the menu – for £17.50.

So sit back and enjoy.

❑ *The tea room is open every day 10am to 6pm at Elephant Walk, 98 West End Lane, West Hampstead, NW6.*

For more information see www.ceylonteareoom.co.uk.

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