

Acting on an impulse

Novelist and guest food reviewer

Joseph Connolly finds that the eyes in pictures of old thespians follow you around the room... and into the loos

NOW this is really spooky: I was just a tad too early for lunch with a newspaper features editor in J Sheekey, so I leapt at the excuse and nipped across the road to The Garrick for a sharpener.

And don't ask me why I bounded up the back stairs to the bar instead of taking the grand and newly restored main staircase, but on my way I noticed for the very first time a rather fine portrait of Donald Wolfitt.

Donald Wolfitt... that gruff and magisterial actor hadn't so much as crossed my mind in years – except that the night before I'd seen him in a video of Room At The Top (he being representative of The Top that Lawrence Harvey's Joe Lampton aspired to getting Room At). And then, but a glass of champagne later, when I got to my table in Sheekey's surrounded by all this dark oak panelling bedecked in strings of framed black-and-white photos of past and present greats from



Joseph Connolly gets a warm welcome at J Sheekey.

Theatreland ... blow me if I wasn't seated directly beneath an autographed head-and-shoulders of Donald bloody Wolfitt.

I mean – what are the odds? It is, isn't it? Spooky, no? And then (get this) the man himself walked into the restaurant ...! No – just kidding: he's been dead for ages; all the rest is true, though.

What did walk into this marvellous fish restaurant was a constant stream of youngish and confident, rather good-looking regulars, interspersed with knots of determinedly masculine businessmen seeking to close the deal (if, these days, deals are even opened).

I just sat there, rubbing my head (there's this Laliquish pendant hung low over the table and, squirming in, I managed to clunk my skull on it). The Ed was late, of course, but you expect that – they always are late, editors, on a point of honour: they blame it on the "pages" (also, apparently, always late) which, before I knew better, I used to imagine as a casual army of layabouts all got up as Buttons, their pill-box hats impertinently tilted.

Anyway: time to sit and stare. It's one of those institutions, Sheekey's, rather like The Daily Telegraph, that seems to have

been comfortingly the same for just ever, but in fact is always subtly changing – nothing to frighten the punters, but gradual tweaks and improvements. It started when Jeremy King and Chris Corbin resurrected it from the dingy and overpriced hell-hole it had become following just decades of complacency: surly waiters in their 70s (and the fish, you suspected, roughly contemporaneous), the hue of the panelling owing not so much to Ronseal as a steeping in Edwardian Bisto.

Then these two boy wonders waved their magic wand and all at once, there was Sheekey, sleek

and chic (try saying that that after a couple of cosmopolitans) and serving, by way of properly trained and affable staff, the best fish and seafood in London.

Then Richard Caring added it to his Caprice and Ivy empire, along with most everything else in the capital, though I'm very pleased to say that the style and quality remain. Up until a few months ago, next door was a scruffy old bookshop – now it's been annexed and is as glamorous an oyster bar as you could wish for, seemingly in situ since the 1920s. It takes money, flair, sympathy and will to pull off this sort of thing, and the boss, he has them all in lades (caring by name, caring by nature).

The editor came after one hell of a while ("Sorry, sorry – it was the pages, you see" ... yeh yeh) and soon we were sipping bubbles and she was tucking into smoked salmon – good, as you might expect, but not really a patch on my potted shrimps, served with triangles of toast that were actually hot, folded into a damask napkin. It had been chopped about a bit so that one did not have to dig for shrimp beneath a slick and unyielding carapace of hardened butter, as is so often the way.

Then Ed went for Dover sole because, she said, she always does because it's the best in London. So it is – presented in all its gorgeoussness before the bone is removed and served with a half lemon wrapped in muslin: £28.50, though – with an excellent bearnaise, but no veg; steamed spinach was a perfect addition. I went for the fish pie because, I said, I always do and it's the best in London – and a total bargain at £13.50.

This famous pie (quite as justly renowned as the fishcake) is truly the bees' knees – big, just-firm-enough and juicy chunks of the best and freshest fish (they vary, but always haddock and salmon) in a creamy sauce and topped with mash and granular crunchy crumbs: superb.

Although it shouldn't, a Cotes du Rhone goes rather well with

FACTFILE

- J Sheekey, 28-32 St Martin's Court, WC2 4AL.
- Telephone: 020-7240 2565.
- Food: ★★★★★
- Service: ★★★★★
- Mondays to Saturdays noon to 3pm, 5.30pm to midnight. Sundays noon to 3.30pm, 6pm to 11pm.
- Cost: £100 for two with wine (if you're careful).

this – though not as well as the chilled Morgon which is no longer on the list; when I latch on to a thing, it's generally discontinued.

Ed, more correctly, had a white Bourgogne Aligote (both £8 the glass). We passed on pudding – because despite their pale and interesting appearance, these fish lunches do pack a punch.

This really is a lovely place – always full, very casual, though still very much something of an event. If it's celebs you're after (and you shouldn't be) then Thursday evenings are a good bet, as is post-theatre any night of the week – most of the casts seem to drift there eventually.

The set weekend lunch, by the way, is not to be missed – £24.50 for three courses, usually to include the option of the sainted fish pie.

Ed had vanished ("Sorry, sorry – it's the pages, you see" ... yeh yeh) so I sluiced back the dregs, got up, clunked my head on the Laliquish pendant, squirmed my way out and went downstairs to the very lavish new loos whose urinals someone thought it wise to, um – uplift: the effect is strange. (To reach them, incidentally, you turn left at Oliver Reed, on down past Beryl Reid, then some Brilliantinted cove in a monole and that man who was in The Thirty Nine Steps – and once you clock Inspector Morse, you've cracked it).

I left then, still full and fond of the great fish pie: it's that good – you really ought to savour every forkful, though it's awfully hard to not just Wolfitt. Getting spookier and spookier, I'm telling you...

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

Around the world in 80 – or so so – wines



They're two of a range of Plantaze bottles which have a link with Ham&Highland – their importer, Mountain Valley Wines, is run by Nemanja Borjanovic, who came to London from Serbia at the age of nine, went to school in Swiss Cottage, still spends most weekends in NW3, and has just given up a banking career to devote himself to wine full time.

"There can be all sorts of misconceptions about wine from eastern Europe," he says. "It's always fun to crack open a bottle of something Montenegrin at a dinner party: people simply aren't often expecting such high quality wine from this part of the world."

All the wines are at the New Istanbul Supermarket in Finchley Road, Swiss Cottage – the vranacs £8 and £11, plus a merlot, £8, and cabernet sauvignon, £9, which both have

good varietal character and soft depth of fruit.

You can buy through www.mountainvalleywines.co.uk too – cases of six are £44, £56, £44 and £49 respectively, delivery £6.

The merlot, under a different Plantaze label, is also in Waitrose, another reduction (to £5 from £7.50) in the current Mediterranean wine showcase, which sources bottles from Lebanon and Greece as well.

Georgia is rather too far from the Med to qualify for inclusion – and despite its sound argument for being the home of wine, styles it produces don't always suit western European tastes (that's a polite way of saying I didn't enjoy some I sampled recently).

I'll skip over a similarly forgettable Peruvian experience, but Patagonia is another matter.

Bodega Noemia has its predominantly malbec vineyards in the Rio Negro valley, once a glacier, now desert, 620 miles south of Buenos Aires. Cuvee J Alberto (£25, www.vinedirect.co.uk) has a wonderful aromatic complexity – due in large part, surely, to the purity of the air and huge day/night temperature differences in the vineyards. Posh stuff, indeed.

Conditions are almost as extreme a little to the west, at Familia Schroeder, whose wines are rather more affordable. The Saurus pinot noir 2007 (£10) is pure and flowery, and very attractive. I haven't tasted the others, but Moreno in Maida Vale (020-7286 0678) has six more. That could well be a wine journey worth making.

LIZ SAGUES

READER OFFER

Bordeaux 2008 is being heralded as a fine vintage – and Ham&High readers can be among the first wine-lovers in London to taste examples from more than 50 of the top chateaux when Primrose Hill-based agent Bibendum takes

over the Nursery Pavilion at Lord's next Wednesday (4pm-8pm) for its annual tasting.

To buy tickets at £25, a £5 reduction, call 020-7449 4120 or email sales @bibendum-wine.co.uk quoting Ham&High offer.

London
Chamber Music
Society

The Elias String Quartet
19 April 2009
Philippe Graffin (violin)
Claire Desert (piano)
Susanne Traut (soprano)
26 April 2009
Carducci Quartet
8 May 2009
Trio Parnassus
18 May 2009
Fitzwilliam Quartet
27 May 2009

Artistic Director:
Peter Fribbins
President:
Leven Chilingirian OBE

6.30pm every Sunday
September to May
at Kings Place, Mark Way,
Kings Cross

www.londonchambermusic.org.uk - www.kingsplace.co.uk