



Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise

Tipping is a taxing business

A few of you out there may distantly recall my lorry-load of restaurant reviews in this newspaper, that particular juggernaut shuddering to a halt last summer. But, as I am sure you have heard tell, old habits die hard – and so I find myself still ploughing this particular foodie furrow (it does become a little addictive) though now my little squibs are appearing in the *Daily Telegraph*.

And it's still true what they say – London has the most marvellous restaurants... I would say in the world, but I don't honestly know very much about the world, shy and retiring homebody that I am: a recent review entailed my going to Oxford, and I must say the journey did feel quite daring.

I see that the question of tipping has once more been exhumed – it seems to exercise people rather: does the service charge actually go to the waiters and waitresses, or is it there merely to swell the profits of rapacious restaurateurs? Well... it depends.

One way to be sure is to offer your waiter the tip in cash: if he weeps with embarrassing gratitude, falls upon your neck and covers you in kisses, then you may be sure that the establishment operates no tronc system (whereby all gratuities are pooled and shared between the staff). If he affects a rather superior indifference, then the restaurant is properly and fairly run.

I don't think that restaurateurs actually are greedy fellows: the



■ Cheers! We have the most marvellous restaurants, but does the service charge go to the person you intended?

costs involved in simply opening the doors are prodigious, you simply have no idea – so much so that I am frequently amazed that restaurants aren't even more expensive than they are.

So... I continue to eat in decent restaurants and – as ever – some less so. One very 'cool' and curious place I did recently is called *Sexy Fish* (I know) which is an amazingly blingy and pricey place in Berkeley Square – though for me, no nightingale sang. This is owned by Richard Caring of Ivy fame, and despite my poor notice (because whoever listened to me?) the place is a huge success with the beautiful people (one or two of

them Russian and Chinese) and is booked up solidly for months. During the course of my review I noted that they 'didn't do bread'. I further noted that they 'didn't do cheese' – adding on cheekily that if it's a ploughman's you're after, forget it matey. A few days later Mr Caring personally saw to it that I received a large wicker hamper containing an enormous wheel of (very good) Swiss cheese, and the largest loaf you have ever seen: equally cheeky, I thought, and rather witty too.

■ This is the raw and ghastly time of year when self-employed people have to fork out the first instalment

of their income tax. Accountants will have told them to set aside in advance the approximate sum due, to which self-employed people will have said ho ho ho, matey – sod that for a game of soldiers. But here's a question: do you object to a third of your hard-earned money being removed? You do, don't you? But if you won £33m on the lottery, as happened the other week, how much would you weep if you were to receive only £22m? And yet all gambling winnings are free of tax. Etrange, non ...?

■ Joseph Connolly's *The A-Z of Eating Out* is published by Thames & Hudson

Studios need breathing space

What is it about Camden and planning permissions?

Why are they even entertaining the threat to Air Studios on Rosslyn Hill? You can't really blame the owner of the fine listed house alongside for seeking permission to delve into Hampstead's bowels in order to furnish himself with all the ludicrous subterranean impedimenta that such people these days feel they require (however did any one of us cope before we all had our own private cinemas and gymnasia?). No? Well okay, we can blame him actually.

But Air Studios is one of the most important in the world, so why is this potentially disastrous threat to its very future even being debated? The answer should be no.



Fab sounds from the vaults

And talk of the recording studio reminds me of the time I went there on behalf of *The Times* to interview Sir George Martin (who has just turned 90).

I am a huge Beatles fan, and so to talk to this great producer, arranger and composer I saw to be a privilege. He was the epitome of politeness and style – and at the close of the interview I asked him whether we might ever possibly look forward to any little overlooked gems from the Beatles recording sessions? He looked at me sincerely, and lowered his voice into intimacy. If only, he sighed. Believe me, was his gist: I have trawled the vaults, and if there was anything worthy of release, no one would be more happy than I.

So that's what I wrote in *The Times*, the newspaper of record. And, soon after, the first of three double 'Anthology' albums hit the world like a thunderbolt. So I was rather miffed... but ultimately just thrilled with the new material.

Because The Beatles – I'm not sure whether anyone has ever noted this before – are fab.



■ Property prices can make you splutter...

Reserved for modern-day cherry pickers?

I always rather enjoy the property magazine that comes with this paper, while the estate agents' ads continue to engage and infuriate me. It's not just the prices that make you splutter in awe and disbelief – it's not even their invention of the occasional 'village', where before was just some overlooked slum on a crossroads.

No, it is more the fact that they don't seem to know about architecture – and this strikes me as odd, because buildings are their bread and butter (not to say a whole load of jam). Anything with 12-pane windows is 'Georgian'. Terraced houses that are clearly mid-Victorian with the 1960s addition of an off-the-shelf bow window... well they're 'Georgian' too.

Most houses are 'deceptively spacious', whatever that means. And still they imagine that it is correct to say that a house 'comprises of four bedrooms'.

A studio flat is a sofabed stuck in a kitchen, while all flats are now 'apartments'. Lawns...? Manicured, always. Ah, but do we ever hear about mown fingernails...? I think not.

The most amusing ad recently was for a tiny cottage in Willow Road – one of a row, we are helpfully told, which was built originally to house watercress pickers. Well I'm going to stick my neck out and opine that there are maybe not too many of those left in NW3... I mean to say, we're up to our neck in parsley pickers, that goes without saying... but watercress pickers have become noticeably thin on the ground – as, no doubt, has the watercress.

It's warming to know that the unskilled labourer was decently accommodated, then as now, and the cottage is currently available to any passing parsley picker for one-and-a-half million pounds.

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