

FOOD & DRINK

Take a tip from our trip advisor

Joseph Connolly is struck by the food, and floored by the doorstep, at Sticky Walnut, Chester

I've just had lunch at Sticky Chestnut, in Chester. No, hang on, that's not right... I've just had lunch at Sticky Walnut in Chester: yes, that's it. I'm just so jangled, you see - hours on the train to get there, even longer on the way back. Opposite me was a couple shouting at each other in Japanese while laughing their damn heads off for the entire two hours and 13 minutes of the journey, while two young unaffiliated children alongside were throatily shrieking as if they had been bribed to do so with limitless sugary highs. Travel may or may not broaden the mind, but it sure as hell inclines me towards murder.

I have never been to Chester before - Chester to me meant only Marshal Dillon's limpy sidekick from *Gun Law*, but you'll have to be pretty old to know what that can be all about. But I have heard nothing but good of the medieval and Georgian loveliness of this city, despite occasional suggestions of a tendency to vulgarity in the denizens of Cheshire in general.

I saw no evidence of this, though I did hear a tale about a local self-made man who was privately offered one of the finest 16th-century half-timbered buildings in the county, only to turn it down flat: "If it's not whole-timbered," he

said, "I'll not have anything to do with it." Sticky Walnut isn't within the old city walls, which is where all the tourists go - so nowhere near the Grosvenor Hotel, with its Michelin-starred restaurant, or to Hanky Panky's Pancakes (it is a city for all seasons). Sticky Walnut is more than a mile away, in a modest street that is clearly recently fashionable. Opposite is another restaurant with a wacky name - At the Hollows - as well as something called Men's Hair Shop. I didn't buy any.

I would kick off by describing the décor to you, but there isn't any. Pale grey frontage (it is now a law of the land that all cool restaurants shall be pale grey) and, inside, a step covered in yellow tape that of course I tripped over. Also a floor, tables and chairs made of wood. The mandatory ironic chandelier and, elsewhere, bare light bulbs. Not the hip industrial jobs with signature zigzag filaments; just bare 60-watt light bulbs. And that's it. Except for proudly displayed glittering prizes: there are shelves of right-on foodie books and a Catey award, as well as the 2014-15 AA English Restaurant of the Year. The staff are young, formal in their informality, all clad in white T-shirts, jeans and striped butchers' aprons. Water comes in a bottle rammed with mint leaves, for no very discernible reason, and tastes rather swimming-pooly.

No starters and mains, but the much cooler "smaller



THREE OF A KIND NUTTY

Red 'n' Hot, Manchester
Gong bao chicken with peanuts is a signature dish at this flavour-packed Sichuanese restaurant. 0161 236 2650; rednhotgroup.com

Copita, London W1
The superb *gjo blanco* (garlic and almond soup) here is served with beetroot. 020 7287 7797; copita.co.uk

Old Hall, Dorrington, Shropshire
"Shropshire's finest Persian restaurant" uses peanuts instead of the traditional walnuts in its succulent *fesengan*, a rich traditional stew. 01743 719100; oldhallpersian.co.uk

plates" (six of them) and "larger plates" (seven).

My guest was going with oven-roast baby beets, spicy pumpkin seeds, goat's curd and... ooh, look, sticky walnuts! I was having chicken liver paté with apple and vanilla chutney and toasted focaccia. Both of these appetisers were a spanking delight - the paté an unctuously smooth little slab, the toast actually hot, and the chutney (tasting rather peachy, for apple) cutting it all nicely. Beautifully presented beets, some burgundy, others that were practically black... excellent. But what about the sticky walnuts? "They taste," said my guest, "of sticky walnuts. Lovely with the goat cheese." Then we ordered grilled lamb rump, *fregola* (Sardinian pasta granules - like couscous, but bigger and better), pickled courgette and lamb crumb with courgette and basil purée. I thought a Puglian negroamaro would be decent with that - and equally decent with my crispy chicken thigh and paprika couscous

OUR RATING
8/10

I would describe the décor to you - but there isn't any



11 Charles Street, Hoole Chester CH2 3AZ: 01244 400400; stickywalnut.net
A good lunch or a modest dinner about £40 per head.

with pomegranate and green charmoula (a Moroccan marinade).

To go with these, the only two sides on offer: hand-cut truffle and Parmesan chips and honey-glazed carrots. Nothing green, alas. The chips might have been crisper and there was nowhere near enough Parmesan to qualify as a listed ingredient. Carrots were as described, but hardly luscious.

The lamb was, though - three generous chunks, properly pink and tender, if the crumb topping was oversalted. The *fregola* (I had assumed they meant *fregole*, and they weren't going to serve me just a single grain) consisted of pleasingly explosive little granules, and creamy peas, unadvertised on the menu, a special pleasure.

My chicken was a true let-down, however: not at all crispy, and just the one rather dry thigh, split lengthways - pretty mean. The charmoula was nice, though, helped along immeasurably by winking pomegranate seeds, doing their ruby thing.

Puddings were sublime, as puddings really ought to be - or else, what's the point? A damson and almond tart was elegant and dense in a good way, in fine pastry - the ice cream a little melty. My chocolate ganache was gorgeous: like the yielding and creamy centre of your favourite expensive choux. Cassis sorbet had deep flavour, and wasn't just watery colour. Disappointing, though, were the accompanying poached cherries: not at all yielding, and fridge-cold.

A super lunch, though - and I left the restaurant feeling happily satisfied, my head held high. A shame, then, that I had to go and trip over that bloody step again.

Joseph Connolly's *A-Z of Eating Out* (Thames & Hudson) is available from books.telegraph.co.uk



Pint to pint

Our guide to the best British pubs. This week: *The Windsor Castle*, London SW1

It is boom-time for the "handcrafted" products of breweries seemingly set up the day before yesterday. Yet there are still likely to be regulars in Yorkshire pubs proclaiming through froth-coated lips: "I don't care what tha' says; there's nowt better than Sam's."

Samuel Smith started brewing in Tadcaster in 1758 and, despite spawning what would become a much bigger neighbour, John Smith's, the company is going strong. It's still run by the Smith family; still brewing with water from the original well; still using wooden barrels; still opening pubs.

Those in London prove one thing for sure: there's nowt cheaper than Sam's. At the Windsor Castle, the Old Brewery Bitter is £2.90 a pint. Good head on it, too, and very malty in the aftertaste.

Tucked away behind Westminster Cathedral, the pub used to be known as The Cardinal. After the Tadcaster takeover some four years ago, the change came. "They found a fire insurance document in the cellar dating to the mid-1800s, showing that it was originally called the Windsor Castle," says manager Mark Brecknock.

Having reinstated the name, the building was then restored to its Victorian prime. From the moulded ceiling dangle lamps that look as though they've only recently been converted to electricity. Etched glass panelling abounds, dividing the downstairs into a series of snugs and lounges, one of which harbours a log fire.

Furniture is weighty and discreetly decorative - dark wood chairs with high backs and scrolled arms look as though they might accommodate a conclave of cardinals. Dog-collars are not unknown in here after Sunday Mass, apparently. And the local congregation have evidently forgiven the brewery for the name change. Well, I can think of worse places to refresh the palate after cleansing the soul.

Those seeking the Guinness of old Ireland might be disappointed. Prices are kept low in Smith's pubs on the understanding that you can have any beer you like as long as it's Sam's. The same goes for lagers, ciders and stouts.



At £3.40 a pint, the Extra Stout is 50p more than the bitter but a damn sight cheaper than most Guinness in central London. Good clean taste, too, and dry yet creamy. It competes well with my formidable steak pie from a no-nonsense menu, give or take the occasional "hand-pressed" burger. The pie comes with chips or mash, cabbage or French beans, and a jug of onion gravy that softens the pastry. The meat is tender and flavoursome, enriched by having been cooked in ale. You know full well which one.

Chris Arnot

The Windsor Castle, 23 Francis Street, London SW1P 1DN: 0207 834 7260

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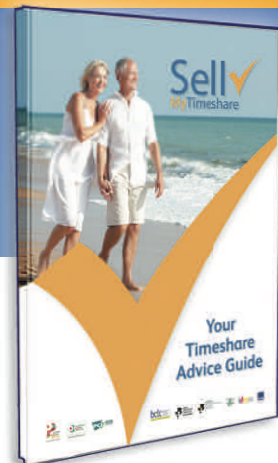
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