

FOOD & DRINK

Decent food, shame about the trumpet

This week: *Joseph Connolly* takes a butcher's at Piquet, London W1

Do you actually dare to eat any more? Because, as you know, in some very murky subterranean laboratory at a secret location, a team of blankly po-faced and Frankly Sadistic B----- is beavering away, trying to prove that each and every one of our favourite foods is out to kill us.

There cannot be a single thing left which everyone agrees is not terminally injurious. Except maybe apples... though Cox's Disease or the Curse of Granny Smith can hardly be far away. Meat is the latest - not just processed, any sort really. Which reminds me that a restaurant in Watford was recently prosecuted because the diners were outraged to discover that the zebra on the menu was actually horse: did they imagine that there would be goodness in the stripes?

Anyway, in defiance of all this nonsense, I tootled along to a recently opened restaurant that is proud of its butchery. Piquet is the first solo venture of chef-patron Allan Pickett. Which is why it's called Piquet, apparently. (Am I the only one who is reminded of Hyacinth Bucket - pronounced, as she would ripplingly remind us, Bouquet?)

Allan has rather luscious provenance: Le Gavroche,

Ortery, L'Escargot, Chez Nico, head chef at Galvin Bistrot de Luxe. But now he finds himself, his website proclaims, "in the heart of Fitzrovia" - to which I can only reply with cynical guffaw - for Piquet is actually at the rather ratty Oxford Street end of Newman Street, hard by the vast excavations at Tottenham Court Road, which they tell us are for Crossrail, but will in fact form a backup subterranean laboratory for the League of Frankly Sadistic B-----.

The exterior is pleasing: dark varnished wood, café curtains, a smart black and silver glass sign and the menu in a brass box. So, traditional French bistro is the look, while, inside, we have vaguely Tudor panelling and tightly packed tables fronting a bar.

This is the no-bookings, come-as-you-are-you-cutely-gorgeous-groovy-little-thing area, the restaurant proper being down the stairs. Basement claustrophobia is averted by a ceiling of edge-lit glass panels, and a sea of shiny cream tables and Fifties chairs. Lots of chefs being sweaty in the open steel kitchen: but no Mr Pickett. There is canned music. Oh, yes, there is. The sort of sleazy, drunken jazz that is solely enjoyed by the criminals responsible. Before even glancing at the menu, I had violent thoughts concerning the trumpet, and knew that



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I would have to remain on the *qui vive* for further ooziings of saxophone.

The very French head waiter trundled over at the helm of a grand mahogany trolley surmounted by a massive silver dome, beneath which there covered, in understandable embarrassment, a very small leg of Herdwick lamb. "Pot roast", according to the menu. I asked him how that worked and he said, "We put in pot and put in oven" - so that cleared that up.

There are two and three-course set lunches (£16.50, £19.50), but the choice is minuscule, so we went for the carte. By this time I badly wanted to ram the trumpeter's trumpet quite a long way down his throat.

Our starters were actually the main event, as things turned out: for my guest, pressed suckling pig, prunes, black pudding and cauliflower purée. Good use of animal parts, you see - not quite the nose-to-tail concept, though, because who, please tell me, would actually glory in a plate of simmering nostril? The fatty, crisped slice of

92-94 Newman Street, London W1T 3EZ: 020 3826 4500; piquet-restaurant.co.uk
Three courses à la carte with wine around £60 per person

pork was as beautiful as gateau, the black pudding "moist, intense and almost chocolatey", I was told.

My pithivier of Littlebourne snails in Madeira jus was even prettier: a golden striated mound of lightest pastry, with the chewy little critters lurking within. Snails are having something of a moment: some unchained lunatic in Sicily is producing "snail caviar" and says it tastes of earth.

I thought I ought to try the lamb: a generous serving, which tasted less roasted than boiled: rather tedious, actually - though the gravy was good. Boulangère potatoes can be a joy - but not today: the thinly sliced potato and onion had coagulated into a flat, compressed mass.

Something similar was going on with my guest's loin of venison: despite the pinkness, a jus, and a very good quince purée with chestnuts, it was all a bit dry - unyielding, too. And potato dauphinoise was just lamentable: no gorgeous creaminess - just a set slab.

A nice chocolate and passion fruit custard saw us off - with a beautifully gossamer and crispy tuile. But despite some good cooking and the Frenchness of the waiter, repeatedly indicating our food with his pinky while telling us what we had ordered, overall I felt that we had partaken more of an all-right British Sunday lunch. And, weaving my way to the "rest room", I found myself thinking two things: first, it's a shame they didn't go the whole hog and call it a "bathroom" because I could have done with a good long soak... and, second, that French and English cuisine are really best left to themselves: mingle the two and you can find yourself on something of a sticky wicket.

Joseph Connolly's *A-Z of Eating Out* (Thames & Hudson) is available from Telegraph Books.

OUR RATING
6/10

French and English cuisine are best left to themselves



Pint to pint

Our guide to the best British pubs. This week: *The Old Inn*, Carlost, Skye

It is a long and winding road that leads to the Old Inn - but my goodness, it's a glorious one.

Should you take the A82 and the A87 up from Glasgow, you'll pass through Glencoe, by both the Two and the Five Sisters Munro ranges, and across the Skye Bridge. The ferry will bring you from Mallaig, but you'll join the same road as it takes in the majestic Cuillin mountains.

Only then will you join the road to Carlost, which leads to the door - just across from the Talisker Distillery - of the Old Inn. From without it looks like an ordinary island house. A sign boasts that it is "probably the best pub in Carlost". Sure it is - it's the only pub in Carlost. But it might be the best pub on Skye.

Step inside and you'll find a traditional old inn with a modern vibe. That's not to say the fixtures and fittings are too "voguey", there's just a lovely vintage feel to the place, as if the idea of "shabby chic" has been scattered with a pinch of salt. Thus the old Artex is still on the walls, but they're hung with reclaimed wood, hammered with strips of blackboard on which are chalked the beers, the food specials and details of the music nights: "every Fri - jam session" and "every Weds - trad session". There's bunting and fairy lights, and a sweet little dining room with red walls, red vinyl-upholstered seats and junk shop finds.

Out the back is a pool table and a darts board in a lean-to, and there are games inside by the fire. But in summer the most glorious thing about the Old Inn (if the Scottish weather is your friend and

the midgies are holding their tiny biting selves at bay) is the garden, with a view across Loch Harport and the Cuillins beyond.

Alas from the Isle of Skye and Cuillin breweries are regulars on the pump - taste small samples of perhaps Skye Hebridean Gold or Skye Black (my father's favourite) with a malt-mixed-with-heather-honey finish, all made with hand-milled grain. On our visit the other two taps were Cuillin's Captains Stout and Red Ness. Guest ales are from the mainland, mostly Scottish - Brewdog's 5am Saint (ultra-hoppy with citrus and berry flavours). And, of course, given its neighbour being Talisker,



there's a fine selection of malts should you prefer a wee half and half.

There's food on offer (oysters and beer-battered cod for example) but a climb up the hill behind the distillery brings you to the idiosyncratic Oyster Shed, where £8.50 will buy a platter of oysters, crab, mussels, lobster, pickled herring and bread. Lobster and chips is just £12. And since you're welcome to take your own bottle, you'll no doubt be welcome to borrow a pint glass and take your ale.

There's a bunkhouse, should you be unable to drive. The long and winding road will still be there tomorrow.

Audrey Gillan

The Old Inn, Carlost, Isle of Skye, IV47 8SR (01478 640205)

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