

Hill is alive with sound of eating

Joseph Connolly is taken by the latest Welsh genius

WHEN I was a lad I lived just minutes away from Primrose Hill, and although we ran to a garden with all the things that gardens just simply had to have in those days – disintegrating greenhouse, rockery devoid of alpines, rusty and deadweight lawnmower that ensured the preservation of daisy and dandelion – still there was always something special about going to “The Hill”.

I would roll down from that summit like a delirious tree trunk with no particular plan for the day – or else sledge down it in winter on a tin tray (which didn't of course work, or anything).

Then those peerless firework displays – very recently “temporarily suspended” (ho, ho) because some mythically inept and gaga person might slip on the wet grass (that this caring and of course now permanent precaution saves Camden thousands quite naturally having no bearing on the matter). And while the kiddies would queue at the ice-cream van down by the red telephone boxes, so the adults might just slip into the Queen's for a very fast one.

I hadn't been in there for ages: it's changed, of course. The Victorian wallpaper and prints have gone, the dark and rich mahogany woodwork is now all pale green paint – probably Farrow & Ball, and probably in a shade called About To Be Sick. Ah well.

It wasn't the Queen's that had drawn me there, though, but Odette's. It was a typical winter's day in May – winds that would make off with a man's fedora, rain that is hurled into your face with all the scorn of a woman convinced that you done her wrong. I had to shelter in one of the rather quaint and comforting shops they still have there, slotted in between the designery places and optimistic galleries.

Some child was pestering his mother to buy him a potato gun: I had no idea people still hunted potatoes.

It looks very pretty from the outside, Odette's, and is made more attractive by having a book shop and a pet shop as neighbours (they maybe all three have an annual knees-up, do you think? The Cook, the Bookmen and the Pet Shop Boys?). I was there with my Plutocrat chum who remembered it from the days when the interior was dark, despite being covered in a motley of mirrors, and heavily swagged with curtains. Now we have a very airy room with this strangely disturbing grey and white bedroom wallpaper in a



Novelist Joseph Connolly.

stylised floral alleviated by flashes of buttercup yellow, though no pictures whatever.

Carpet, though – and I do like carpet. It's quite a warren – there's a further room to the rear and an interesting little alcove, almost unseen, which could serve one well for a spontaneous orgy.

Odette's has had many owners and cooks in its 30-year history, but in the present chef patron, Bryn Williams, I think we strike gold. The credentials of this young Welshman (whose other half, and I have no idea why I'm telling you this, is Sharleen Spiteri) are very impressive: he won one of those BBC Great British Menu things, as a result of which he got to cook fish for the Queen (and how many of us can say the same?).

Then he worked for Marco at The Criterion (beautiful room, though never any good) before spending three years at Le Gavroche, four more in Conran's The Ortery and then a stint in Galvin's at Windows – the top of the Hilton – all of which are excellent.

My chum, whom we shall call Pluto for short, went for the bargain set lunch (£12 for two courses, £16 for three). So a sardine tarte to kick off with – one large fresh and flavoursome sardine on a millefeuille base: vanished in a trice. I was going a la carte: quail eggs, English asparagus, potatoes and cress salad.

This was tip-top, though not what I expected it to be. There were three halves of egg (odd in both senses), one single asparagus tip sliced longitudinally into four, and tiny discs of soft potato piled with the cress salad. Also – unbilled – little French toast

sandwiches of something else eggy in a mayonnaise. It maybe doesn't sound too much, but it was very expertly done, and I loved it.

The menu has daring combinations – a good thing when there's a decent chef about: scallops... with braised chicken wings. Turbot... with braised oxtail. All the diners in the fullish main room were going for the set lunch choices, though. Here is clearly a cherished secret among locals not too concerned by the recession, in that none of them was noticeably in the red and silently screaming (Oh! Debts!).

While waiting for the mains, Pluto and I both enjoyed a Mommesson beaujolais villages 2007 – pricy at £30 (all the wines are expensive) but it's a goody, this – grown on old vines and full of the almost jammy fruit with which the best of nouveau used once to be brimful. Tried to ignore the music: some Moaning Minnie of a Country & Western singer soon segued into Francoise Hardy who then gave way to a yodelling lunatic.

I had asked about the “assiette” of pork: turned out to be belly, cheeks and head. You wonder what happens to the normal bits of the animal, sometimes. Went for roast loin of Welsh lamb, which was superb: two thick and perfect lozenges of loin on a bed of braised and shredded shoulder – this having the most intense and succulent flavour in its properly sticky jus. There was an aubergine puree, which was OK, and lovely chopped up mushrooms, so juicy and good, and all very beautifully plated.

But as Pluto's pan-fried sea bream arrived, we both thought we'd like something green to accompany all of this. The one

FACTFILE

- **Odette's**, 130 Regent's Park Road, NW1.
- Telephone: 020-7586 8569
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Closed on Mondays. Open Tuesdays to Saturdays noon to 2.30pm, 6.30 to 10.30 pm. Bar open late. Sundays noon to 3.30pm.
- Cost: Set lunch £12 to £16, though typically about £90 for two with wine.

big downer about French cuisine, of course, is that its practitioners seem to regard vegetables as no more than a garnish. The Gallic waiter offered peas, which came quickly and lightly minted in two very dinky little copper saucepans – and, rather stylishly, these did not appear on the bill.

I mentioned “potato” as well but drew a blank: this word seemed to be a new one on him (he should maybe cross the road, get a gun, and hunt some down). The bream, I am informed by the man who wolfed it, was utterly fresh and excellent, and he also enjoyed the baby artichoke, in a sauce Barigoule (traditional Provençal, this – basically braising; this chef is very big on braising).

Pluto loves Eton Mess – strawberries, meringue and cream – and so when he saw it, he pounced. “This is the best,” he announced, while greedily enjoying it so very bloody much that I just had to order one too (and so that was another fine mess he'd gotten me into). Some of the pudding prices are steep, though: chocolate fondant and tarragon ice cream at £12.95 is really pushing it, as is cheese at the same price.

With the coffee came a bowl of ethereally floating marshmallows, dusted with coconut: these were first rate if you like coconut, which I don't. But never mind all that – look, look! It's Bryn. Le chef patron est ici! He strode around in his whites and butcher's apron glad-handing the faithful and ignoring me completely.

The two women opposite were in heaven. “You look so much more handsome than on television,” one of them crooned. Well he looks fine – though rather spookily like all the up-and-coming cooks on the box (could they be copying him?): stubby beard, red face and hands and stocky (more beef stocky than chicken stocky, if you know what I mean). And because he's so talented a chef, it won't be long, I think, before he develops into a Michelin Man.

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

A little taste of my life on the wine trail

WINE tastings are always challenging – I mean the professional ones, not those lazy, sociable encounters of wine, food and good company.

But why? Sometimes it's the sheer scale – the 300-plus open bottles of a Waitrose press showing, for example, or the table after table of individual producers from every corner of a busy wine nation at a generic event.

On other occasions, the numbers of bottles may be smaller, but the challenge remains – because of the quality on offer and the reward of considering every wine very carefully indeed.

That has been true recently of the selections offered by two excellent independent merchants who import from much of the wine world but are especially strong on France. Both are highly individual, are run by people with admirable palates and offer exceptional wines at tempting prices (cutting out middlemen's profit helps that a lot).

First up was Les Caves de Pyrene, a charismatic, individual source of wines predominantly of organic or biodynamic origin. It showcased many of its French and Italian wines, often with the growers themselves there to explain their wares.

Wine after wine was hugely impressive in its stylishness and character. How to describe the evolving levels of flavour, the lingering lengths? Even a wine writer runs out of vocabulary too quickly. Some words, though, appeared time and again in my notes: purity, expressiveness, complexity. These are wines to savour slowly, to enjoy with like-minded friends.

Les Caves' website (www.lescaves.co.uk) is as quirky as its wines, and doesn't offer retail prices – best to phone, 01483 554 750. But there's a wealth of wonderful information – and what comes up now is an

invitation to its bin-end sale, on June 26-27. It would be very well worth the trip to just beyond Guildford to enjoy food, music and a petanque tournament (Saturday only) plus tastings on both days and the chance to buy remarkable wines at reduced prices. Call the same number to learn more.

There were far too many wines I enjoyed at the tasting to list here, but these were among the highlights. Dry whites: Clos Lapeyre Jurancon Vitatge Vielh (£13.75), Domaine Olivier Pithon Cotes du Roussillon La D18 (£29.50), Domaine Henri Pelle Menetou Salon Morogues Clos des Blanchais (£15.75); reds: Domaine des Roches-Neuves Saumur-Champigny (£10.85), Pierre Breton Chinon Beaumont (£13.80), Clos du Graviilles Minervois Sous Les Cailloux des Grillons (£10.50) and Rendez-vous du Soleil (£14), Domaine d'Aupihac Montpeyroux Les Truffieres (£11.30).

Second came Stone, Vine and Sun, which strongs on a tempting range of wines “with a sense of place” with prices starting at very affordable levels indeed. Its most recent tasting emphasised the strength of the southern French choice – Simon Taylor and his colleagues can give you chapter and verse on the producers, their terror and their (often very minimal) approach to wine-making. The website (www.stonevine.co.uk) is happily consumer-friendly, too, or you can take a trip into the Hampshire countryside to buy from the shop.

Below are some of my “must-drink” wines from the selection, but do try more – there's a wide-ranging tasting of 50 SVS wines in central London on June 23 (full information on the website, £15 ticket price refunded against any case purchase that evening).

Dry whites: Belles Pierres Les Clauzes de Jo (£9.50), Mas du Soleilla Reserve (£14.25), Domaine du Tragner Collioure (£20); rose: Chateau La Grave Minervois Expression (£7); reds: Thierry Navarre St Chinian Le Laouzil (£10); Mas du Soleilla Les Chaillies (£12), Aurelie Trebuchon Les Hauts de Median (£7), Meteore Les Orionides (£9.50); sweet: Tragner Banyuls Grand Cru (£23.75, 50cl).

LIZ SAGUES

