

FOOD & DRINK

Babycham Bolsheviks of all lands: have a sausage

This week: *Joseph Connolly* samples Alsatian delights at Bellanger, London N1



Ah, yes, Islington: the one and true fountain-head of Champagne Socialism. Bollinger for the well-heeled lefties in the fabulous Georgian terraces and squares, and something maybe lesser for all the lefties elsewhere (I'm told they'd love a Babycham). For make no mistake – there are more lefties here than you could shake a stick at (which you'd maybe rather like to do). In every election since 1983, this borough of north London has returned no fewer than two Labour MPs – one of whom has always been somebody called Jeremy Corbyn.

But much further back than that, in 1959, when Islington was uncool, cheap and iffy (while these days it is cool, violently expensive and only iffy-ish) – there landed in Camden Passage something of a restaurant revolution: Carrier's.



OUR RATING
9/10

59 Islington Green, London N1
2XH: 020 7226 2555; bellanger.co.uk
Three courses with wine about £70 per head

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Plumbs

This wonderful place – ridiculously ahead of its time – was a true oasis, run by a rather flamboyant young fellow called Robert Carrier. The chichi crowd went crazy for the restaurant, as well as his writings in Vogue, the wipe-clean “cookery cards” and then, in 1963, the very first doorstopper of food porn, Great Dishes of the World. This was priced at three and a half of our English pounds (50 years ago, a fortune) and everyone pronounced his name Carry-ay. Though, in fact, he was American, so actually it was Carrier as in bag.

Shoot forward to the here and now, and what do we have? In Islington's main drag, Upper Street, we have what is effectively the longest restaurant in the world: every other door is the entrance to some sort of eating place – I once counted up to 80 before I got bored. Among them is the rather preposterous Ottolenghi's, where you can't book and there is a very smug and pious “concept” going on – and also the Almeida, opposite the theatre. Until now, the latter was probably the best of the bunch.

I say “until now” because just look what has come to Islington Green: Bellanger – the latest offshoot in the restaurant empire of Corbin & King (they of the Wolseley, Zédel, Fischer's et al). As we have come to expect, the interior is pleasingly gorgeous – and there is a theme to it. Not, please note, a concept but simply the gentlest thematic nudge. Here, it's Alsatian brasserie: rustic comfort food viewed through a metropolitan telescope (the archetypes are Bofinger and Terminus Nord in Paris). So amid a large and welcoming realm of deep mahogany panelling and lots of mirrors, light, and a long and beautiful zinc-topped bar, one sees on the table those weird little throwback wine glasses with ribbed green stems, into which Robert Carrier might well have served Blue Nun (because during that age, German wine was in – we were Hot for Hock).

There are tartes flambées – not tarts, but quickly crisped bread, unleavened and wafer-thin, with various moreish toppings (ours was goat cheese, honey and thyme). All good for snacking – for here is an all-day operation: a passing Corbinista can slope in with his Guardian, swallow maybe just a croque-monsieur, then nip home for some Babycham.

But I, naturally, was going through the card: a starter of

quiche Lorraine – well, if there's an Alsace thing going on, you've just got to, no? And I was hungry as a dog. Probably, thinking about it, an Alsatian.

Anyhoo – this was just... wonderful: the warmest, creamiest most bacony and thrilling delight, in perfect pastry. What's that you say? Real critics don't eat quiche? Pshaw! I do – and I'm as macho as they come. My guest had (get this): beer soup. I know.

You see, this menu is jammed with “I-shouldn't-but-I-will” food. It's big. It's hearty. It's exactly what you want to eat – and so although you feel you shouldn't, you do. As to mains, well, you're spoilt for choice: sausages various, schnitzels ditto, a mighty choucroute garnie as at Brasserie Zédel... but I was seduced by the lure of coq au riesling, one of the “pots” on offer.

Half a chicken, jointed in a traditional cocotte, and as fine as could be: elegant and creamy sauce with weeny onions, fine-chopped mushroom; the chicken so delicate and fragrant, rather



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reminiscent of the chicken pie in yet another Corbin & King gaff, the Colony at the Beaumont Hotel.

My guest had chargrilled pork T-bone. Shouldn't, but did. Here, assuming Cow Pie was off the menu, is what Desperate Dan would happily fall upon: vast, mildly pink, and properly piggy.

This was topped with a punchy parsley and garlic sauce (plus the one off-note of sour and bitter walnut) – and we shared pommes algot (mash made sinful with cheese – shouldn't-but-will, if ever there was). Time to sip an excellent Vacqueyras and gaze about me: I was the only person wearing a tie – apart from the waitresses, of course.

A Belle Helène could have had more poached pear and less ice cream, but still was gooiily good. Gooier still was a petit pot au chocolat – molten choc poured atop the set stuff: Lordy.

Long experience in the howlingly unpredictable world of restaurants tells me I really shouldn't stick my neck out and say that very soon Bellanger will be seen to be the best and coolest restaurant in Islington. But I will.

THREE OF A KIND REGIONAL FRENCH

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020 7600 6144;
clubgascon.com

Brasserie Vacherin, Sutton, Surrey
A perennial local favourite serving the eponymous Jura cheese baked with truffle
020 8722 0180;
brasserievacherinsutton.co.uk

La Garrigue, Edinburgh
Southern specialities including stuffed red mullet with Camargue rice
0131 557 3032; lagarrigue.co.uk

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