

STEAK House. Just been there. So very subtle, with its pastel washes, perfectly set in Old Hampstead tranquility – only the murmur of remembered poetry susurrating as a ghost amidst so pregnant a hush. Oh God no – sorry: got the letters scrambled – Keats House, that's what I meant to write, yes yes (all this restaurant business, it adds the brain). Rather lovely since its latest much-touted renovation.

The combined pungent odours of new paint and carpets could practically fell you, but still. Tasteful souvenirs, if you gloss over the little teddy in a T-shirt saying 'I am the Keats House Bear'. Mm ... and just possibly the John Keats Colouring Book. Here was a day in early August, and a couple of actors were re-enacting the wooing and spooning between Keats and Fanny Brawne in the very garden where it actually happened. A couple of dozen people sat around on rugs and benches, seemingly rapt, while from a discreet distance the eminent Ham&High photographer Nigel Sutton was intent upon capturing the scene.

What made this summer idyll so utterly perfect, of course, was the fact that the bloody rain was hammering down in rods, while no one affected to notice. 'Happy is England! I could be content to see no other verdure than its own' (Keats, you know). I myself could have been rather more content as a 'close bosom friend of the maturing son' (Keats, you know) but glancing at the galvanized sky, there seemed to be little chance of that.

Oh God – don't get me on to the weather and those lying bastards who always fool us into believing their predictions. In late July, when they decided that the 'barbecue summer' forecast of above average temperature and sunshine should now read as above average rainfall and rather coolish, they termed this a 'revision'. Heavens – they ought to be spokespersons for the Exchequer, really. They tell us that forecasting is 'tricky', as if everyone else's job is a complete and utter pushover. It's not just their uselessness that gets me, but this wide-eyed and relentless

Gastropub food is far from poetry in motion

Novelist Joseph Connolly dashes into the Freemasons Arms for a bite to eat and to shelter from the pouring rain after a day out at Keats House

Blue Peter chirpiness. "One or two spits and spots," they twitter, "so don't forget your broly!" – addressing the nation daily and nightly as if it were a collective of retarded five year-olds. Enough.

There actually was, though, a restaurant called Keats, as some of you will remember. Set at the top of Downshire Hill (we're talking 1970s) it was the nearest Hampstead has ever got to a 'destination restaurant'. Its light then faded and it became the very so-so Byron. Crumbs, I thought – what next? Pam Ayres? No no – nothing so silly. It is now called The Bombay Bicycle Club – the sort of devastatingly witty name that invariably has me contorted by mirth, so much so that I need to lie down.

Didn't go there. Went down the road to The Freemasons Arms (where is the apostrophe? You might well ask). I've always thought that this rather magnificent and beautifully positioned building was woefully underused. It would make the most marvellous arts club, something that Hampstead has always lacked. In line with the great Chelsea Arts Club (of which I am proud to be a member) there could be a



Picture by Charles Connolly

billiards room, bedrooms and much overindulgence in not just word and deed, but also alcohol – while the garden, of course, is a godsend. Didn't venture there, though (the bloody rain was hammering down in rods). But the dining part is pleasant enough, in the usual gastropub manner: plain and sturdy oak tables, white walls – and in this case a lavender ceiling, from which are suspended rather curious pendants a bit like tea trays deftly welded on to the headlamps of a vintage Morris. There are framed blow-ups of Mouton-Rothschild's famous artists' labels, and flanking the

handsome mantel is a pair of lidded urns – 'O Attic shape! Fair attitude' (Keats, you know). Napkins are the cheapest and nastiest white paper variety, cannily designed so that if you dribble your booze or slop your soup, all such spillage is guaranteed to go right through them like a dose of salts.

And talking of soup ... my wife went for that day's special (tomato, basil and rocket) while my son wanted roast mushrooms in cream and garlic. I tasted both, and they struck me more as sauces than courses – the tomato thing a watered down Neapolitan, while the other might have just

about passed muster in a blanquette de veau. Mine was a prawn and crayfish cocktail with a 'bloody mary' sauce: a glass tumbler seven-eighths filled with shredded lettuce, a tiny amount of Atlantic prawns, two bits of crayfish and one large and first rate langouste – not great for just under a fiver – while 'bloody mary', I can only assume, is a brave translation of Marie Rose, because that assuredly is what we had here.

But to get these starters took three-quarters of an hour – even the opening round of drinks was a long time coming. I was desperate: 'O, for a draught of vintage!' (Keats, you know). I wanted a glass of Moët & Chandon – you don't often see it by the glass, and it didn't seem bad at £6.50. But, I was informed, they had run out of Moët – which was odd because I had been given a card offering me the chance to win a whole case of the stuff, if only I'd tell them what I thought of their pub. Anyway, the pink Prosecco was good. Pears, it tasted of (the fruit, not the soap). My son wanted a pint of Peroni, and my wife a half – so sensibly I asked for a pint and a half of Peroni. The waitress blinked. "One and a half pints ...? No. We do a pint and we do a half pint, but we don't do one and a half pints." "No – you see, we want a pint, and a half ...?" "No. I've told you – we don't do one and a half pints." Took an age. And so did the mains. 'O aching time! O moments big as years!' (Keats, you know).

My wife was sawing through chargrilled lamb rump – not pink, as requested: tough, and decidedly overwhelmed by the accompanying chorizo. Onions, peas and rosemary potatoes were good, though. The trencherman son was now getting himself

around a steak, ale and mushroom pie, which he rather enjoyed, though the peas were burnt – quite an achievement – while the chips, he said, were like 'manky cardboard' (Keats, you know ... no, just kidding). I can vouch for the mankiness of the chips though, because I had them with my beer battered haddock: old oil, I'm afraid. And the fish was glued to the batter, which just soggly collapsed – this haddock was far from gorgeously steaming within a crunchy cocoon, as you dream of, and nor, amazingly, had it been skinned.

And it took a further age to pay, so I had a fair few Proseccos to help fill in the time. 'A drowsy numbness pains my sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk' (Guess who). And hey – it's just occurred to me: now that I've told them what I think of their pub, they might at this very moment be sending me a whole case of Moët & Chandon! Might not.

Joseph Connolly's latest book is *Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design (Faber and Faber; £25)*. www.josephconnolly.co.uk

FACTFILE

- THE FREEMASONS ARMS, 32 Downshire Hill, NW3. Tel 020 7433 6811
- Mon – Fri 12 noon – 6pm (set price £6.95 menu). Sat 12 – 6pm a la carte only. Sunday lunch £10.95 for one without drink
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (it's caring and happy service, but God it's slow)
- Cost: anything between £20 for two with a drink to £70 for two with wine

Bring a touch of the Sicilian sun into your life

MORE than a decade has passed since I went to Sicily. I enjoyed it then and now, even more, I want to go back. Scenery, culture – all that's wonderful, but so is the wine.

That has just been emphasised in the very English location of Lords cricket group, home of the year's best showcase of Italian wine which is called – correctly – the Definitive Italian Tasting.

A single long table provided a tour of the whole country, as each participating company offered a wine from indigenous grape varieties.

It was there that the Sicilian sun shone, most of all from a white from the slopes of Mount Etna. Branco di Casale 2007, Azienda Benant (Les Caves de Pyrene, www.lescaves.co.uk, £13).

Italian grape varieties are extraordinary in their

proliferation and this one – carricante – is limited to Etna's volcanic slopes. The wine from it is far more than simply unusual – the Benant is wonderfully stylish, from its delicate nose through a palate of mineral-

rich yet restrained fruit to a long, perfumed finish. All that at just 12pc alcohol.

The reds on the table came mainly from nero d'avola and nerello mascalese, which have a wider spread through the island. Again it was intriguing to see that good wines from the far south of Europe aren't necessarily high in alcohol. Sicily's higher vineyards have a considerable difference between day and night

temperatures, which allows grapes to ripen fully without the excessive sugar levels which raise final alcohol levels.

Most of the reds were food wines – "adult bbq wine" was one of my comments – but

the most impressive was lighter, perfumed with red fruits from the frappato also included in the blend and, lightly cooled, would be an appealing aperitif. Cerasuolo di Vittoria 2007 (£13.50) is one of many fine wines from Planeta (main London stockists are Carluccio shops, but some of the range are also at Harvey Nichols, Harrods,

Handford Wines, Highbury Vintners and www.swig.co.uk).

Diego Planeta, private estate apart, is president of the massive Settesoli co-operative, the source of much good Sicilian wine in UK supermarkets. Inycon is its best-known brand – Morrisons, the Co-op and Tesco all have a good choice, at prices around £6-£8 – but if you look closely Settesoli will appear on a lot of own-brand labels.

But let's go back to the hills for some posher treats. Donnafugata has a long and distinguished history, but its wines – and their smart, stylish labels – are modern, delicious and different. Polena (£11) and Vigna di Gabri (£16, 100pc ansonica, yet another of those unique-to-Sicily grapes) are want-to-drink whites, while among the reds Sherazade (£11) is pure and light, while top of the range Mille e una Notte 2005 (£50) – a wonderful vintage – can

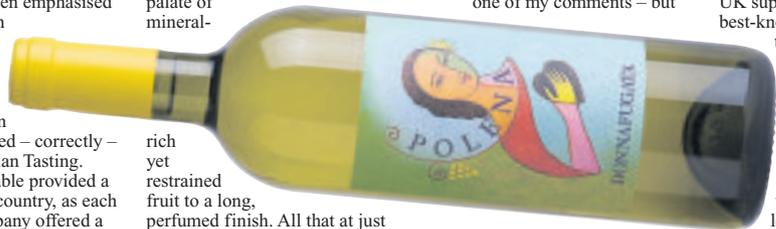
challenge the best from anywhere in the world.

Importer Liberty Wines also brings to the UK an attractive range of single varietals from Villa Tonino (£6.50 to £9). All are available direct from Liberty, www.libertywine.co.uk, and Highbury Vintners stocks a selection.

Another memory of my visit to Sicily was flooded Marsala. Pellegrino is a respected producer

of the town's famous fortified namesake, but its unfortified wines – fresh whites and perfumed reds – are well worth seeking out. Cavallina (£7.50) and Cent'Are (£8) are the names, all available through www.wineman.co.uk, or there is a selection at Cheers, W2 and Universal Liquor Mart, W6.

Enjoy your exploration of the island, if only through reflections in the glass.



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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

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