

MAYFAIR. My very first memory concerning this rarefied area, at around the age of 11, is of buying the whole of it for only £400, just prior to swiftly recouping fully half my outlay via the simple and inevitable expedient of passing Go. Park Lane was similarly acquired, and within a trice I was the proprietor of two red hotels (Claridge's and The Connaught, very probably). Blimey, I thought – if the building of a property portfolio is really this easy and so very economical, it's extraordinary that no-one has ever thought of it before.

The next time the word Mayfair reared up into my consciousness it had assumed the form of a glossy and high-end girlie magazine, while these days this elite London enclave has to bear the indignity of sharing its monicker with a plebeian cigarette. Oh well – the good news is that the actual area is thriving. Shepherd Market at lunchtime is alive with a jostle of pavement cafes and restaurants, all packed tight into a maze of buzzy alleyways – one would be thrilled to stumble across it in Paris or Bruges. There is also a famous Victorian pub called Ye Grapes. Ye Gods – I well remember the time when I was in there with Richard Littlejohn and the barman got all stropy and three days later when Richard's column appeared in the Daily Mail, he must oh-so have wished that he hadn't.

It is here too that the area's rather renowned ladies-of-the-night are said to gather to chat among themselves ("So then, darling – how's tricks?") and then linger on for one or two lady-of-the-nightcaps. They still do cluster, as certain corridors attest, and on the whole I was fairly disappointed not to be sidled up to and asked whether I was after a real good time.

The best of Old London is reflected in such Curzon Street establishments as Trumper (gentlemen's hairdresser By Appointment – though I confess I have yet to make one), Heywood Hill (a superb and classy independent bookshop) and Sangorski & Sutcliffe, bookbinder extraordinaire. I also spotted a lovely little shop called Tradition, its window lined with brigades of hand-painted lead soldiers, lurking among the higher ranking being Wellington and Hitler.

And so around the corner to Murano, the newest and easily the best of the Gordon Ramsay restaurants. The chef is Michelin-starred Angela Hartnett, late of The Connaught – and here's a newsflash: she cooks. Oh yes she does. Actually cooks – sleeves rolled up, wearing an apron, in the kitchen, on the premises. Once upon a time, of course, it

Ladies of the night? All I need is Angela

The girls haunting the corners of Mayfair may offer a good time but novelist **Joseph Connolly** doesn't need them – he's already found it at Gordon Ramsay restaurant Murano, in the arms of chef Angela Hartnett



Offering the very best value in town Joseph Connolly at Murano.

was what chefs did because it was all they were for, but these days, well, it's really something of a novelty (and with Ramsay himself, you do sometimes wonder if he could still remember how to turn the gas on).

This is at once a fine and expensive restaurant which offers the very best value in town. Here is no contradiction: Londoners, I think, have become rather lazy – quite as complacent as many of the gastropubs they habitually patronise: happy to drop £60 or £80 on mediocrity, though fearful of adding maybe £20 more and eating quite magnificently in a beautiful room, while being served by dedicated professionals.

And this is what Murano has to offer: a cool and delightful art deco space, a homage to the old Odeons or the much-missed Savoy, with walls of black smoked mirror alternating with pale and silvery swirls, and split by fluted pewter columns. Large round tables well apart from their neighbours, and damned comfortable chairs – ebony framed and upholstered in cream or eau-de-nil leather. Fine linen and stemware with the cheeky

glint and sparkle you thought only ever to encounter in an advert for Finish. A vast clear vase of pink hydrangeas (those who loathe Murano glass, as flogged relentlessly in Venice, will be delighted to know that the place isn't full of it) and on each table a single lotus in exactly the same shade; polished and dextrous waiters in waistcoats and bow ties.

Now look: we haven't even got on to the food yet, but ask yourself this: would you really prefer to be in one more bland and clattery place at a bare pine table, a green paper napkin swaddling your cutlery? I know what you're thinking: money. Well listen – it's £25 for the set three-course lunch. This is bargain enough – but there's so much more: the first thing to arrive unbidden at your table is a bowl of three deep fried balls of mushroom risotto. For each person. And when you have devoured them with gratitude, they are replaced by more.

Then comes the hors d'oeuvre you have ordered, right? No no: next there is another freebie – gorgeous breads (the tomato and olive is divine), a long glass platter of prosciutto and salami, and excellent olive oil for dipping. Yum yum. Only now comes the official starter – rabbit mosaic, in my case (I had no idea the little devils were quite so deft). This looked like the mottled granite worktop of a Magnet kitchen, though proved to be infinitely more yielding: good and nutty taste, and accompanied by fresh almonds, green beans and peaches: superb.

I was with my plutocrat chum, whom we fondly call Pluto: he discovered the place fairly early on, and now is a committed fan. He had one large and plump

ravioli of salt cod in a spiced tomato and basil sauce. When he truly enjoys something, he consumes it quickly and in silence: for about five seconds, you could have heard a pin drop. He was equally pleased with his Cornish plaice fillets on crushed new potatoes in a silky chicken veloute – as was I with a good and lean grilled sirloin made very fulfilling and special by an intense reduction, a gooey jus, with maybe the kick of oxtail. Here too were baby leeks, thickish parmesan shavings and dabs of pureed shallot: truly fine.

Pudding...? Not yet, not yet: what's the hurry? First, a silver tiered and frosted glass stand full of jewels from Tiffany's. Looked like that, anyway – another gift of perfect and globular sorbets and ice creams: eight very cold and zingy orbs, damn near forming a spectrum. Pluto then dived into a triangle of apricot crostata (essentially a very light and crunchy tart, not over-sweet, and singing of apricots) with vanilla ice cream and a dollop of Cornish clotted, while I meanwhile was spooning down a lasciviously creamy cylinder of buttermilk pannacotta with a big fat juicy comma of nearly jelly, full and rich with summer berries. And slivers of nutty biscotti. Joyous.

So we leave now, do we? No we don't: not quite yet. Murano has for you one last present – a dozen fresh morello cherries, and a further dozen small round chocolates. These explode in the mouth in a wet and chocolatey manner, and then you are smacked by the hit of fresh basil: sounds weird – works triumphantly. To sum up, then: you can spend £75 on a tasting menu here; you can spend £4,000 on a 1982 Chateau Latour. But you don't have to. We had a bottle



I was swooning down a lasciviously creamy pannacotta with a big fat juicy comma of nearly jelly, full and rich with summer berries

of Rosa de Frati, an Italian rose, at £31. And £50 more for what effectively was a first-class seven-course meal for two, in

peerless surroundings. This is real value: a very rare thing. And aglow with it all, I swung back happily through Shepherd Market, not remotely miffed this time that no-one was offering me a real good time: just had one, you see.

□ On Tuesday (September 15), Joseph Connolly will be appearing at the Hampstead and Highgate Literary Festival with Amanda Craig, chaired by Ham&High editor Geoff Martin. The subject is *The Hampstead Novel?* But will range over Hampstead more generally. And maybe even restaurants. Tickets are £5. For information, visit www.hamhighlitfest09.com. www.josephconnolly.co.uk

FACTFILE

- **Murano**
20 Queen Street, W1
Tel: 020-7592 1222
- Open Monday to Saturday, noon-2.30pm, 6.30pm-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: stick to the set lunch, be modest in your wine, steer clear of bottled water and champagne aperitifs, and you'll get away with £100 for two. Bargain.

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