

Top hats and tales

Joseph Connolly has always been a bit mad about hatters. But heading out to Franco's with the marketing manager from celebrated milliner's Lock & Co, he's not quite brimming over with compliments

I've always been nuts about hats. When I was growing up, of course, everyone was more or less utterly defined by the hat they wore, and I simply coveted the lot of them. The only dressing up outfits I was ever interested in – in common with the only professions that held for me the remotest intrigue – held at their pivotal centres the hat. Which is why I was never attracted to medicine, the law or clergy: no hats, you see (unless you get to be Pope, of course, in which case they can become quite nifty). By the same token I would happily have become a postman, policeman, fireman, bus conductor or soldier (and preferably the Coldstream Guards, for busy reasons). A cowboy and an Indian were also seen to be viable career opportunities, while the sole allure of the Groves of Academe was couched in a tassellated mortarboard. Then there was television, of course: Robin Hood's very jaunty number with a protruding feather, and Davy Crockett's deceased raccoon, replete with tail. Hancock's Homburg, Tommy Cooper's fez, Bud Flanagan's stoved-in straw – and don't even get me on to John Steed: those bowlers! The tight-rolled brims – so snappy, and not a bit like Laurel and Hardy's, though I loved them too. Sherlock Holmes, Andy Capp – and of course the great Fred Astaire, not to say my favourite person of all: Santa Claus – not the same without the hat.

The very first proper hat I ever wore was a grey felt topper – hired from Moss Bros for a wedding. They had only huge ones left so I had to ram the rim with a screwed-up Radio Times and still it settled sorely on the bridge of my nose. The morning coat too was cut for Pavarotti, and was bristling with pins to take it in; I spent the whole of the service trying hard not to shriek (they said the happy couple were very well suited, but they never said the same about me).

In the light of this, then – you can imagine my emotions when first, so very many years ago, I

entered the hallowed portals of Lock & Co, since 1676 the finest and most respected hatter in the world. This venerable pile in St James's Street – hard by the equally esteemed bootmaker John Lobb and the wine merchant Berry Bros & Rudd – has sloping floors, wonky doors and a creaking staircase and is therefore quite utterly bloody perfect. The company has been wisely retained by the family (not mad hatters, then) and holds Royal warrants from both the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales: down all the centuries they have supplied the very best headgear to everyone from Nelson to Churchill. And me. So it was a pleasure to be escorting Janet Taylor, Lock & Co's unflappable and endlessly knowledgeable marketing and press manager to a spot of lunch around the corner in Jermyn Street (where, it must also be mentioned, you will also find another much respected hatter, Bates).

Franco's is a rather swish and endlessly popular restaurant, and I'd never been there. Not in its current incarnation, anyway: it used to be a shabby old breakfast place with a hissing Gaggia and incredibly cheap fodder, given the area. Not now. Smartly suited and affable chaps usher you to a crisply tricked out table while brandishing menus the size of an atlas. Behind the reception desk is the most curious painting: a very large landscape format nude, resignedly flat on her back on a table and surrounded by butterflies. What with her fleshy pinkness, and the napkin draped across her eyes, I was irretrievably reminded of a certain sort of occasionally fashionable smorgasbord where all the more luscious tidbits had



Not quite a feather in his cap ... Joseph Connolly outside Franco's.

already been scooped or licked away, leaving only the supine and compliant platter.

Janet and I were nibbling the tangy and olive cruspelli, slim grisini and very good warm bread while scanning the surprisingly few options on the set lunch – only two choices per course, though with four courses on offer (£20 for the two, five quid more for each of the others). Some of the a la carte mains sounded very enticing – black taglioni with crab and courgette, say, or venison ravioli in a rosemary sauce – but they're expensive at around the £20 mark. I decided to stick with the menu du jour: sauteed mussels and prawns in a light tomato sauce, and then a chicken breast fillet stuffed with ricotta and spinach, with thin sliced roast potatoes. At first sight the starter looked extremely generous ... but the big round and sauce-soaked mound at its centre turned out to be just bread. Four mussels, four smallish prawns – but with the smooth and

FACTFILE

- ❑ **FRANCO'S**
61 Jermyn Street, SW1
Tel: 020-7499 2211
- ❑ Open all day for breakfast, morning coffee, tea, pre-theatre dinner, dinner and cocktails
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆
- ❑ Cost: About £80 for a two-course set lunch for two, with wine

tangy tomato, the taste was all right. Janet's starter, from the a la carte menu, was baby artichokes with more tomato – she enjoyed it, but Lord it was mean: one little baby, I'd say, chopped into four, and not good value at £8.95. This was also true of her main: monkfish and samphire with – guess what? – even more tomato, and a caper and oregano sauce. Light and fresh, she said – delicate, but nothing more than that. Four tiny slices of fish, though, and £19.50. Hmm. My chicken breast was good enough, though the ricotta was clothy and dull, the so-called roast potatoes as thin as crisps, though in texture more like soft and just-singed cardboard, and quite without flavour. Janet's new potatoes, by contrast, were excellent – cooked just so, salted and minted with care. The steamed green beans were also cooked correctly and actually did taste of green beans. While a reasonably priced (£23) Barbera d'Asti eased it all down.

Quite by chance, that very morning the latest edition of Lock's catalogue had arrived in the post (although these days it's quite by chance, of course, that anything at all arrives in the post). It's gorgeously filled with

tribbles, fedoras, caps and toppers – very lush and elegant ladies' hats as well. My favourite is the Voyager – the lightest, softest fur felt that you can roll up and stuff in a pocket, and it always comes back again, smiling (got a blue one – want a brown one next). As Janet sipped her espresso – which took a perfect age in arriving – she told me that she spends a fair bit of time in her home town of Eastbourne. Hard to catch what she was saying, actually, because I suddenly realised that this is a very loud restaurant indeed: you really have to shout, and Janet is far too well-mannered for that, so it all was a little bit of a strain. Anyway, in Eastbourne the seafront and pier are currently transformed because they are filming a remake of ... well what do you think they might be remaking in Eastbourne? Yes, that's right – Brighton Rock. I know. And set in the 1960s. Actually, Graham Greene was a customer of Lock's and lived right next door to the place during that very decade: small world, eh? Janet further told me that eating out in the middle of the day was by no means usual, the customary thing being for the staff, most of whom have been there for decades, to congregate in what is known with affection as Nellie's Room – this in honour of a lady who joined the company as a sewer when a teenager and now, aged 94, still pops back to say hello. Well goodness: I raise my glass to her. Yes – and also my hat.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary (Faber and Faber; £8.99). All past restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Have your cake and eat it at Claridge's

DON'T do tea – the drink or the meal – but just last week I did, my God I did. I'm actually still rather full, you know. It's a lovely tradition though, isn't it? English afternoon tea: foreigners can't get enough of it. And in one of London's grand hotels it's always something of a memorable event – but for the month of December only, Claridge's have rather upped the ante by offering not just afternoon tea but festive afternoon tea. Yes – but don't worry – no balloons, ratty kids or drunken uncles: all festivity is confined to the menu, and the rather pretty tinkle of seasonal ditties from the pianist and violinist in the corner.

The room itself is a pastel confection with well spaced and beautifully set tables, each with a silver lamp, one white rose, individual silver strainers and what looks like a (silver again) cigar box but turns out to contain white and brown sugar cubes (with tongs, but of course) and also – for people who don't think like I do – sachets of Splenda. The crockery is mint green and white striped – a little bit Regency, a little bit deco, though somehow still very modern and freshly inviting.

The £45 feast kicks off with a glass of Piereur rose champagne (festive, see) – poured with expertise and a degree of theatre by the wholly attentive waiter – and then the very welcome onslaught of



wonderfully fattening treats and dainties swings into gear. Perfectly cut little sandwiches of smoked salmon, ham, cucumber, egg and tomato ... and turkey with cranberry (festive, see). And when my wife and I had made fairly swift work of them, we were offered more. Very amazingly, I declined – I still can't quite believe that I did, but I did (and it was just as well, as you will see). Then came crumbly and light freshly baked scones –

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- ❑ **CLARIDGE'S**
Brook Street, W1
Tel: 020-7409 6307

two with raisin, two with apple – and of course great pillows of clotted cream and very smart little jars of strawberry jam. Also something called Marco Polo jelly – a seductive flavour in which I detected rose and raspberry (my wife said she didn't get the rose, and she didn't get the raspberry, so what do I know?). Anyway, it's based on one of their teas. Which brings me to their teas: now look, in the capital's finest hotel, you'd expect a choice, wouldn't you? Of course you would. So how many teas do you think they have on offer? Five? Ten? No more than 10, surely? No no no – 33, that's how many, including – at a £5 supplement – some legendarily rare blends. One was called The Iron Goddess of Mercy, which I found just too perverse and frankly baffling to even think of ordering. Instead I had Chinese Earl Grey – stronger, more scented and silkier than the usual sort of Twinings thing. My wife swooned over L'Opera, a green tea "enhanced with the subtle essence of red berries" (it says here) – not to say

"precious spices". Crumbs. Which brings me to the cakes: these are alluringly laid out on rectangular platters – a little coffee éclair with a thin crisp sliver of chocolate atop it (sublime), a fruit tart with French cream, walnut and banana loaf, looking like a dinky little Hobbit, and some sort of alcoholic raspberry jelly and coulis affair. And after all that ... God I was full. Couldn't move. Didn't have to, as it turned out, because there was more to come: Stollen and Christmas cake (festive, see). These were excellent – the cake in particular, as rich as you could wish for. They also do an amazing Christmas pudding, and this year for the first time they are selling very beautifully boxed ones for you to

smuggle home and scoff in secret. And throughout the whole meal fresh plates and cups are brought to you in seamless succession ... and somehow two whole hours have drifted by in perfect bliss. I actually think that's bargain, you know. In the fabulous foyer they've got what purports to be a Christmas tree designed by John Galiano, Christian Dior's resident and excitable gnome. It's the whitened trunk and boughs of a regular tree with much pale blue and wispieness in evidence: looks rather more spring-like than Christmas to my eye, but what can I say? Unlike quite simply everything else here, it's not my cup of tea.

JOSEPH CONNOLLY



HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ Paint brush bristles often get out of shape. If you're painting something very precise, you don't want little streaks everywhere. To paint in straight lines, put a rubber band around the bristles of your brush. This keeps them together in a stiff shape making it easier to control where the paint will go.