

ARCHER Street is very much one of Soho's less rhapsodised thoroughfares, lacking as it does the tradition and gastronomy of either Frith or Greek, the cool and booziness of Dean, the bustle and porniness of Brewer. Not to say Old Compton's outright and purple homosexuality. It is little more than an alleyway, really – and one feels sure that at night-time it must always be redolent of urine, and strewn with shattered glass. For decades it has been known for just this one thing: The Windmill Theatre. Here it was during the war that comedians soon to be legends – Frankie Howerd and Tony Hancock among them – were at best very grudgingly tolerated or else openly jeered at by the all-male ticket-buying audience, all of whom were there to revel solely in the 'artistic tableaux'. These comprised a motley of females – all of whom must have seemed very nice girls – their nudity not at all obscured by the odd little wisp of chiffon as they stood there, quite unmoving, and doubtless bloody cold. Had they so much as flinched, you see, the Lord Chamberlain would have dubbed the result obscene, and closed down the whole shebang. And here was the point: the Windmill never did close down. Throughout the Blitz and for a long time after, this was their mantra and proudest claim: 'We Never Closed'.

Later, the theatre passed into the ownership of Paul Raymond – famous at the time for his 'girlie' magazines, as then they were quaintly called, and of course for the Raymond Revuebar, off Brewer Street. No one noticed that he was also quietly purchasing dozens of freeholds in the area at rock bottom prices, because nobody else was interested. These canny acquisitions soon grew into a property portfolio worth around three-quarters of a billion. And about 20 years ago, in his office above the Windmill, I interviewed him for *The Times*. I found him to be a compelling contradiction: he dressed in shiny and expensive Italian suits, his wrists and fingers were covered in gold, his hair a peculiar sort of intricate bouffant, somewhere

Winds of change blow through Archer Street

More associated with Soho's seedier side, it was The Windmill Theatre and its 'artistic tableaux' of girls that drew the crowds to this alleyway. Now it's Italian gastronomy, writes **Joseph Connolly**



Joining the cool crowd ... Joseph at Bocca Di Lupo.

between a scouring pad and highly-spun candyfloss in mourning. And yet his voice was low and calm and measured, his courtesy, hospitality and manners quite impeccable. On the wall behind his desk was a huge and brassy 'PR' monogram, this maybe not just to remind you who it was you were talking to, but also to underline his lack of any need for conventional PR, his inbuilt confidence and mastery when it came to dealing with the press. And whether coincidentally or not, Hugh Hefner and Peter Stringfellow are both possessed

of these identical qualities.

Anyway, Archer Street-wise, there's a new kid on the block: a much better reason to venture down this murky little byway – and that is Bocca Di Lupo. It's a highly successful and utterly on-trend set-up drawing upon all the styles of cooking from the whole of Italy, each dish either fashionably small or satisfyingly large: this, in my experience, is genuinely unique (and the head chef, Jacob Kennedy, sure knows what he's doing). The exterior is a welcome beacon of good and strong design amid a ribbon of

FACTFILE

- ❑ **BOCCA DI LUPO**
12 Archer Street, W1
Tel: 020-7734 2223
- ❑ Open Monday to Saturday
12.30pm-3pm, 5.30pm-midnight. Sunday noon-4pm.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Cost: ★★★★★★☆☆ for two courses for two with wine.

bleakness – and the bar inside is pleasantly breathtaking: seemingly as long as a runway, topped in four inch-thick white Carrara marble, covered by 20 vases of daffodils and, I suspect, the epicentre of all the very coolest get-togethers. For the clientele here is cool indeed, every other one with a vaguely recognisable face. The measure of its popularity is made clear by my inability (with three weeks' notice) to secure a lunch table for any time other than 1.45. At which appointed hour I rolled up to meet Jane Mays, the literary consultant of the *Daily Mail*, and of course said table wasn't ready. So we had the brief opportunity to have our own very coolest get-together at the bar – which is actually much too high: everyone looked as if they were praying, their arms stuck up in front of their faces. Thirty booster cushions should immediately be ordered.

Fifteen minutes later, the table was ready – so our proseccos and British Racing Green olives were carted across for us. The main menu is really rather exciting, and also damned confusing: it's not at all clear which dishes are antipasti, which starters, which

mains – and I know this may be part of the point, but still it's an exhausting business. When we were done with ordering, Jane and I both went Phew, in unison. We kicked off with two little plates to share: crudita de mare, a speciality from the Veneto, comprising raw sea bream, red prawn, langoustine and scallop with rosemary oil. This was glisteningly fresh, notably raw, and splendid if you really go in for that sort of thing. I was much happier with a spaghetti and parmesan frittata – Neapolitan, but not in the sense of its having a tomato sauce. It was genius, really – a lovely little circular cake, like a tortilla but formed not out of potato but artfully tortured and entwined skeins of spaghetti, its formation not at all unlike Mr Raymond's aforementioned hairstyle. The creaminess and parmesan flavour were exemplary. For a main, I nearly went wild and ordered the Sicilian Smooth-Hard Dogfish, but only because it sounded like a Mafia hitman who moonlighted playing the Blues. I actually had roast suckling pig and cicoria – a deeply green vegetable in longish strips with a taste and consistency somewhere between spinach and leek. The pork, slightly smoky and served on the rib, was as succulent and tongue-tingling as you want it to be, the crackling tip-top. As a side, I shared with Jane a plate of fresh tomato and onion, coated in very good olive oil.

It was her main, though, that was the star of the show: ravioli Genovese, filled with braised beef, borage and brains, served in the jus with pine nuts. Trying to forget the brains side of things, I swiped a forkful: it was quite

literally sensational, rudely arousing in me a herd of hitherto loafing and sluggardly taste buds. Too much food for her, though – and a waiter immediately offered to pack up what was left so that she could take it away. He also chattily filled us in on this rather great place's curious name, which literally translates as Mouth of the Wolf. "In Italy, if we say bocca di lupo, it's like when actors here say 'break a leg'". The correct rejoinder, he added, is 'Crepi lupo', which may be loosely rendered as 'Please go and slit your throat'. Which is nice. We couldn't go a pudding, although there are no fewer than 17 of the things on offer (including, should you want it, a little something from the Abruzzo: Sanguinaccio, a sweet pate of pig's blood and chocolate with sourdough bread). But the mouth of this particular wolf was already well satisfied – and it's a demanding mouth, I can promise you that (as well as, in common with the Windmill, never closed).

And mention of that reminds me of this: when, all those years ago, my interview with Paul Raymond was concluded, he said to me: "Would you care to have dinner with me at L'Escargot? And then we could walk over and watch the late show at the Revuebar, over a bottle of champagne. And after, you could talk to all the girls in their dressing rooms." Reader: I made no excuses, and went.

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

IS THERE any decent English wine? Still I'm asked that, and by people whose wine experience I thought was pretty broad. As English Wine Week looms, this is the time to argue that the answer is firmly yes.

For seven days from Saturday, there will be vineyard tours, dinners, lunches, promotions and tastings in shops and pubs, even an English chocolate and wine experience – see www.englishwineweek.co.uk for region-by-region details. London is ringed by a surprising number of vineyards, you'll find, so be prepared to travel, learn and enjoy.

The choice of English wine (the crucial word is English, not British – that's something quite different, and best avoided) is growing – there are decent reds and stickies now as well as whites – and the quality is rising. But what England does best is fizz.

For years, I've been a fan of RidgeView, one of the two English estates whose bottles regularly beat champagne in blind tastings. But until the other



Mike Roberts.

week, I had never been there. The 20 acres of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier grapes – the classic grapes of champagne – have one of the best views of vineyards anywhere, to the ridge of the South Downs where East and West Sussex meet.

Mike and Christine Roberts bought the land 17 years ago after they'd sold their computer

company for rather a lot of money (accepted fact: to make a small fortune in wine, you need a large one to start with). Champagne-challenging fizz was the aim from the very beginning.

"I don't understand why people didn't do it before Nyetimber [the other pioneer] and us," Mike Roberts told me. The decision makes a lot of sense given the similarities to the Champagne region, less than 100 miles away. "We have the same geology, the same soils, the same climate. To me, it was so logical."

In fact, Sussex has even more potential. Its longer growing season allows better ripeness in the grapes and thus more flavour in the wine, argues Roberts. Top blind wine-tasting competitions world-wide have proved the point, with RidgeView and Nyetimber carrying off an impressive haul of gold and silver medals.

Tastings nearer home have the

Computer pair are English fizz whizzes

same result. Many times Roberts has mixed champagne and new world fizz with his own wines for consumer events. Blind, the RidgeViews are the frequent favourites, though such is the power of the "c" word that, once the concealing wraps are removed, champagne's profile suddenly rises. Never mind...

The tasting experience is open to everyone, six days a week (see www.ridgeview.co.uk). But unlike a lot of English estates where tourism seems almost more important than wine-making, RidgeView is very much a working winery with a tasting room-with-a-view added on. Equipment and practice faithfully shadow those of the champagne houses, if perhaps on a smaller scale. Though thanks to partnerships with other grape growers, already some 200,000 bottles are filled each year, with 300,000 anticipated soon.

Also, again unusually for

England, RidgeView fizz is easy to buy. The delicate, aromatic, fresh, chardonnay-dominated Bloomsbury (£20) should be in every branch of Waitrose and many also stock the attractive strawberry-edged rose Fitzrovia (£21, also at The Wine Society). Oddbins has the classic three-grape blend Cavendish 2007 (£20) and for the delicate,

lingering blanc-de-blancs Grosvenor 2006 (£23.45) go to Berry Bros & Rudd. On-line, www.laithwaites.co.uk has its own blend, South Ridge (£20, rose £21). Other London stockists include Jeroboams, Harrods, Fortnum & Mason and The Sampler.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ If you are changing a lightbulb, always make sure you turn off the light switch at the wall and, also, when pulling a plug out of a socket, flick the switch on the faceplate into the off position first. This may seem obvious but this is a very common way of getting an electric shock and the NICEIC recommends it.

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