

SO MAX and I were sitting in the Roebuck in Pond Street and sinking a thoughtful Rioja, prior to toddling down the road to Ravel's Bistro, a restaurant he swears by. Max lives in Canada, he shivers to remember, but during his frequent hauntings of London, Belsize Park is his stamping ground. "Fine, imaginative food", is what he'd told me about this Fleet Road favourite. "Bistro," I said. "French then, is it?" His eyes were narrow as he sipped reflectively. "Not necessarily ..."

Max was already seated and gazing about the pub by the time I breezed in. He indicated a sign suspended above a flanking seating area: "Gentlemen & Disabled", it read. "I thought that might be the section for us – a place for well brought-up chaps of a certain age... but it turns out not to be." The real thrust of his chat, though, was that whenever I go to a restaurant in order to write it up for this column, I must surely always be recognised, no ...? And then I get all this special treatment, no ...? A lot of people say this to me, actually – so let's get it all out into the open, shall we? I agree that it does seem somewhat incredible, what with my picture stuck up here every week (and the fact that I book the table under my own name) that I am not always anticipated – or, at the very least, clocked when I walk through the door. But it simply never happens. Maybe just once or twice I've been aware that they've got an inkling – I do scribble furiously in a notebook – but never has there been an extra special welcome, a nudge and a wink, fine wines on the house, folded fifties tucked under the sideplate or even the offer of a virgin daughter. Damned annoying, but there it is. That was a joke, by the way. Joke. I never solicit or warn – I always pay the bill. And there are no virgins in Hampstead. But the simple truth is that most restaurateurs, very foolishly and idly, fail to acquaint themselves with the food pages of virtually all the papers and magazines, with the possible exceptions of The Sunday Times and Evening Standard – and once A.A. Gill and Fay Maschler have come and gone, they beam, sigh or curse them, I suppose. The restaurants I have written about seem only

Cover blown in tucked away Soviet block spot

How does a restaurant reviewer keep his identity under wrapped? **Joseph Connolly** is asked. Quite easily – until there you are, snuggled away in a cosy bistro, and your fellow diners let your secret out



Warm welcome ... Joseph at Ravel's Bistro.

aware of a review when, once it's in print, a customer tells them. Whereupon they beam, sigh or curse me, I suppose. So now you have it from the hungry horse's mouth: that's the way it is – and if this position ever alters, you will be the first to hear it. Trust me – I'm a critic.

So: Ravel's Bistro. It's a fairly grim walk, the length of Fleet Road – a little bit Coronation Street, a little bit Barbican, but not a lot of love. There's a dazzlingly bright sort of takeaway called Mams Grill (sic) and an Indian place and then another Indian place and after the dog-leg at the end you're in a starkly lit and snarly crossroads

with grey and Soviet blocks seemingly dropped down out of the sky to land where they will at angles, and randomly. So in the light of all that, it is not too hard to see how Ravel's has come to be locally cherished. It looks so very warm and welcoming, with its red and deep lilac exterior, soft and pinkish lighting within the curtain-swagged window, and the wink of candles. At the foremost table was a young couple who gave me pause – I thought at first he was administering to his charming companion the Heimlich Manoeuvre... but it turned out to be no more than a broad demonstration of fondness, just

FACTFILE

- ❑ **RAVEL'S BISTRO**
- 4 Fleet Road, NW3
- Tel: 020-7485 3615
- ❑ Open Monday to Saturday for dinner only 6pm-11pm. Sunday noon-4pm, 6pm-10.30pm
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: About £60 for two courses for two, with wine. Good value.

this side of fornication. It's so nice to see young people enjoying themselves.

Inside is very cosy indeed: red ceiling, rose walls, red tablecloths (PVC actually, but let it lie), a few black beams and suitably murmured music. We were attended to immediately by a very pleasant lady who read out to us the extensive blackboard offerings, all in addition to the already extensive menu. Which is sort of French (I saw then what Max was meaning) spiked by gutsy and pan-European undertones: red cabbage, peppers and general heartiness. So I had New Zealand mussels – which needn't, actually, come from New Zealand, but are extra delicious because of their size (like an oyster), sea flavour and chewiness (in the right way). There were seven in the half-shell with a creamy white wine, garlic, dill and Pernod sauce (didn't detect the Pernod, which may be a good thing) and into which I couldn't stop dipping the fresh and crunchy bread. Max was equally pleased with his chicken livers – surprisingly large, plentiful and properly pink. "When you are travelling all the

time," Max now was musing, "this is a great place to come home to. It's like family." He travels professionally, you see. "Is there anywhere you haven't been, Max?" He thought for a moment. "Ghana. I really want to go to Ghana. They make these wonderful coffins, you know – any shape you want. Bottle. Guitar. Piano. Only \$400. Think I'll get one." Oh dear Lord, the people I know...

The very pleasant lady had particularly recommended the sirloin – a special of the day – in a green peppercorn sauce. This was £14.80, while regular mains are £9.95, and starters around half that. This was a fine piece of meat indeed, and well trimmed – but alas: I had requested it medium, and here was rare at the ends, near raw in the centre. Apologies were made, and it was removed. I watched Max tuck into his seven large prawns (they do things in sevens, it seems: maybe it's lucky) and he was lip-smackingly enjoying them. I stole a bit, and yes – with the sticky rice accompaniment, they were good. At the next table was a party of four – regulars clearly, and equally clearly having a rather good time. I drummed my fingers, dreamed of sirloin, and sipped the Montepulciano – not too bad at £15.95. The tap water, though, tasted of swimming pool, so I ordered some fizzy instead. Then the steak came. The same piece. Oh dear. Regrilling had done it no favours – it had contracted shyly, its juices gone, the texture now bouncy. The big homemade chips were very good, and could have been extraordinary had they been crisped up a bit more. The gravy (not a sauce) was thinish, the vaulted green peppers barely

distinguishable.

And now to pud: the very pleasant lady said that if I was into chocolate, the fondant was spot-on. Well good. Except it wasn't. Nicely presented in dusted triangles, chocky criss-crosses and a pool of French cream ... but it wasn't a fondant at all and had a bland yet also cloying flavour, somehow. Pity. And now to the bombshell: the very pleasant lady told me that "she knew my little secret". I quickly sprinted through a cold and panicked inventory of all my secrets, little and large, before she continued to tell me that the four people alongside had earlier blown my cover. See what I told you? It's always the customers, never the professionals. And then she became a little flustered: "You would have to come on the very evening when our deputy chef is in the kitchen ... and normally we're full and everything is wonderful here ...!" I sought to calm her. I said that I really liked her restaurant – which I do. And that I can well believe that normally they're full (this was a wet Monday evening) and that the quality of ingredients and welcoming atmosphere are hardly to be sneezed at in the depths of Fleet Road. She didn't charge for the steak or the 'fondant'. Special treatment? I don't think so. This is a good and caring place: if something goes wrong, they will strive to make amends.

So the review is now published. And the very pleasant lady will beam, sigh or curse me, I suppose. And I rather suspect all three.

❑ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

THERE'S a lot of noise about organic viticulture, but in the case of one of France's major wine regions it's wildly disproportionate to the vineyard area. Of the Loire Valley's 68,000 hectares, just 3.5 per cent have formal organic certification.

But that figure is misleading. Time and again, as I talked to vigneronns during the region's 2010 wine fair, they said they followed organic practices but asking for formal acknowledgement was a step too far. Bad weather, pests and diseases always threatened: if there was a particularly bad year, they needed to resort to treatments forbidden under organic rules to save their crop.

Certainly, that displays less than total green commitment, but in business terms it's understandable.

There is one area along the Loire, however, where there is 100 per cent support for a green initiative. For the first time in any French appellation controlee area, every grower in Saumur-

French experiment in eco vineyards

Champigny is committed to a biodiversity programme, particularly aimed at eliminating vine pests by encouraging natural predators.

It's the beginning, says the syndicate of Saumur-Champigny producers, of a movement towards sustainable grape-growing "to preserve our terroir and to provide for our future generations of vigneronns".

And the syndicate has even employed a professional ecologist, Marie-Anne Simonneau, to oversee the project.

She reports substantial progress. Some 20km of new hedgerows have been planted to encourage the sought-after predators. A network of weather stations and traps is gathering information and feeding it to the 120 syndicate members so that,

rather than spraying randomly, they treat only when pest and fungal problems are likely.

Inventories of the plants growing between the rows of vines and of the insects present are building the biodiversity picture.

The approach is gentle, but comprehensive. "We need

everyone to make a very small effort," Simonneau told me. And she's cautious, insisting that the results need to be assessed carefully: "There could also be the risk of bringing in more pests..."

But so far all is going well and wine tourists can see the results on guided vineyard hikes (two are scheduled, for July 20 and August 5, from Dampierre-sur-Loire – tourist offices should have details).

But what of the wine, the purpose of all this effort? Saumur-Champigny's 1,500 hectares of vineyards

run inland from the southern bank of the river, in a triangle bounded by Saumur, Montsoreau and Saint-Cyr-en-Bourg. This is red wine country – from the cabernet franc grape, aromatic with red fruits, a leafy

blackcurrant character, a touch of flowers and spice.

While location and the grower's preferences determine whether the wine is light or more generous, fruit flavours should be rich and tannins silky. There can be greenness too, but that is reducing as more attention is paid to ripeness at harvest time. Saumur-Champigny can age gracefully, but at any age – served cool – is a perfect summer wine.

Recommendations include Domaine de Nerleux 2008 (£9.70, from RSJ on the South Bank, www.rsj.uk.com), Chateau de Targe 2007 (£10, buy two bottles save £2, Majestic), Domaine de la Croix de Chaintres 2008 (£10, Waitrose) and Chateau de Hureau Tuffe 2009 (£12.90, Haynes Hanson & Clarke in SW3, www.hhandc.co.uk).

