

Take two to Marylebone

FADE up. Longshot of woman passing through large glass doors of a swish and cutting-edge restaurant in fashionable Marylebone. Close-up. Uncertainty flickers. Smile. Her eyes light up in recognition. Cut to hairy old hack seated at a table at the very far end, scribbling in a notebook. Cut to woman. Camera pulls back to track her confident progress. Cut to two-shot of same very attractive woman – a ringer for Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music* – while hairy old hack rises to greet her.

My guest, Harriet Warner, is used to thinking in these terms. She is also used to eating, drinking and sleeping in these terms – because she is a writer for television, a job that never quite can bring itself to leave you alone. It whispers in your ear, it nudges you when your dedication threatens to stray – it shouts and bangs a gong if ever you sleep. I know just a little bit about this from my own attempts at the small screen. Rik Mayall had a special interest in *THIS IS IT*, my second novel, largely because in the opening pages the protagonist stamps out of a Hampstead house and slams right into a bus on Fitzjohn's Avenue. This causes him to spend the duration of the book becoming progressively deranged, while on crutches – this greatly appealing to Rik. So I wrote a commissioned script for Granada who loved everything about it and, predictably, wished me to write it again. Which. I did. This they loved even more – a third rewrite being hardly more than a convention. And then it all suddenly went cold, as these things frequently do. Everyone concerned is one minute consumed by a manic and goggle-eyed fervour, and then, overnight, a layer of dust settles over the entire world. Shame – because Rik would have been great. Some time later, Granada sold the idea of a six-part serial of another of mine, *SUMMER THINGS*, to the BBC. I had two episodes written and approved. Joanna Lumley had been cast, Jim Broadbent keen, and we had a very good director called Tim Whitby from the series *Colt Feet*. Then ... Greg Dyke appeared at the Beeb and, I was informed, decided that the whole thing was far too 'elitist' (i.e. it was all about white, middle class, articulate people) and canned it. Eventually it was made into a very chic French film with Charlotte Rampling and Carole Bouquet.

Harriet – although no stranger to rewrites (if anything comes with the territory, it's rewrites) – has had vastly more success in the field than I. She's done a few episodes of *Mistresses* (not

No stranger to film adaptations himself, novelist **Joseph Connolly** heads out to lunch at 108 Marylebone Lane with TV screenwriter Harriet Warner. So would this stylish place make the final cut?



Leading man ... Joseph Connolly at 108 Marylebone Lane.

from the current slated series, but the one before) as well as *Footballers' Wives* and *Waterloo Road*. Before the TV stuff, she used to write for *The Erotic Review*, so it's safe to say that relationships, in one guise or another, are perceived to be her bag. "That's why I'm so pleased to be writing a children's series – I'm doing *Sinbad for Sky*," she says enthusiastically, before dropping her voice. "Admittedly I seem to be doing all the 'relationship' episodes ... but still".

108 Marylebone Lane is a rather vast concern – a two-floored restaurant, massive and very comfortable bar with low-slung 1930s club armchairs around squat round tables, and all surmounted by a very stylish hotel. The whole caboodle takes up a complete block in a short and attractive dog-leg of a road

virtually given over to eating places – I think I've been to all of them, now. The size of the dining room was accentuated by its emptiness – spookily devoid of diners on a Tuesday lunchtime, though this gave me a decent chance to suck up the décor: parquet floor, Hoffmann chairs, ornament restricted to oversized lampshades and vibrant glass vases, both in bright red. The waitress was ultra-devoted, maybe as a consequence of having nothing much to do. I asked whether in addition to the carte there was a set lunch menu. She said there was, but as I'd booked through 'Top Table', the carte was available at half price. Which was news to me. 'Top Table' is an online booking set-up for any number of London places at a considerable saving, though I didn't bother saying I'd never

FACTFILE

- ❑ **108 MARYLEBONE LANE** W1
- Tel: 020-7969 3900
- ❑ Open Monday to Saturday noon-11pm (last orders), Sunday noon-10pm (last orders).
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: At half price, the food alone was £35. So booking the normal way, double that. And add booze. Probably, with coffee and service, about £110.

used it: half price was sounding good – and, as it turned out, something of a godsend. Without this huge concession, here is a rather expensive restaurant.

The menu is clever in covering all the bases. The mains are divided into Sea, Land and Field, and the kitchen is proud of its patronage of Marylebone suppliers – the renowned Ginger Pig butcher, Biggles Sausages, the first rate La Fromagerie and Rococo Chocolates. To kick off with, Harriet had pan-fried Scottish mackerel fillet and pickled beetroot with caper and shallot dressing. This was prettily presented and glistening, the fish surrounded by dabs of dressing. "It's lovely," she said. "The beetroot cuts the richness of the mackerel, and the capers give it lightness. The whole is rather unctuous". She delivered the line, I thought, rather better than some of the actors she's had to work with (or around). I had a pile of prosciutto – plentiful and good with a sort of celeriac and apple base and an oily drizzle that all went very well with it, rather to my surprise: normally, I don't like it messed with.

As we waited for mains, we sipped and then glugged a very moreish Gamay, and I asked her what would be her dream screenwriting job. She didn't hesitate – she smiled quite dazzlingly at the very thought (this showing off wonderfully the gap between her two front teeth – just like Jilly Cooper! Or Terry-Thomas! If you see what I mean ...). "Oh – without a doubt, *Mad Men*. It's just the very best. And romantic adventure, I love. *Indiana Jones*. That sort of stuff".

She had ordered guinea fowl with a mushroom risotto. This came in good

and golden chopped quarters with the risotto beneath it – all in a white porringer so very large (even by trendy restaurant standards) as to be nothing short of the sort of basin that used to sit on a washstand with a matching jug. She really did like this – the meat was moist, she said, the risotto properly creamy with a well judged hit of garlic. I had a chargrilled rare breed longhorn rib-eye steak, largely because it was the only thing on offer from the Ginger Pig. It had the genuine smack of well hung meat, though it might have been a thicker cut. I asked for a Bearnaise sauce. The extremely charming and helpful waitress had clearly not heard of this one, and said she would ask chef. She returned to say they didn't have it. Well I hadn't really expected them to 'have' it – though I did think, on request, that the chef, on a very quiet day, might have been moved to whip one up for me: apparently not. The steak came with one flat mushroom (could have done with more) and two breaded and crispy onion rings which I enjoyed inordinately. The side order of chips was very good – and I realised I should have ordered something green. In no time at all, a plate of French beans and sugar snaps was whisked to the table.

We thought we'd share a pudding. Champagne and strawberry jelly sounded rather appealing, but Harriet was all for the Rococo chocolate brownie – warm, with rum caramelised banana. This came on a slab of slate with an unadvertised scoop of ice cream and surrounded in sprinklings of white powder which looked like cocaine, but turned out not to be. I've had better brownies, I must say – and although the fried banana struck a note of novelty, the ice cream was marzipan, and I really hate marzipan. Harriet, however, thought the dessert quite perfect, which shows you how much I know.

Afterwards, I had a mosey upstairs to snoop around the hotel part. Very restful, and quietly luxurious. At the door of the Gents, I nearly collided with a young woman. "After you", she smiled politely. Which I thought odd. And then she followed me in. Which I thought odd. She was still there when I left. Close-up of hairy hack's initial consternation, and then a shrug of what the hell. Slow fade.

❑ *THIS IS IT* by Joseph Connolly (Faber and Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

and elegance in flourishing pinot noir

sub-regions within the five main growing areas represented, with prices ranging from £9 to £75.

Chile, it was agreed, offered probably the weakest selection and certainly the most varied – though it was also the cheapest. But it was the least experienced grower of pinot noir

represented. Even so, Anakena Ona 2009 (Oddbins, £11) and Vina Leyda Lot 21 2008 (www.greatwesternwine.co.uk, £19.75) had plenty of appeal.

Oregon had a problem in the contrasting vintages represented, but there were some attractive wines, characterised by pure

fruit, freshness and elegance. My favourite was Willamette Valley 2007 (The Wine Treasury – phone 020-7793 999 for stockists).

California was so easy to identify – still too many wines are high in alcohol and sweetness: I condemned several of the most

expensive as "nasty". Better to try Sebastiani 2007 (Berkmann, 020-7609 4711, £20) or La Crema 2008 (Fells, 01442 870900, £24).

The largest choice and, initially, the most difficult identity challenge came from Australia and New Zealand. But three or four wines into each line-up and New Zealand's aromatic purity stood out, with Australia much more quirky – everything from strongly eucalyptus-scented wines to others which appeared much older than their true vintage. I did rather like the £75 Bindi Block 5 2008 from Victoria (www.lescaves.co.uk), but I'd prefer to spend my money on three bottles of Mac Forbes Gruyere 2008 from the Yarra Valley (Clark Foyster, 020-8567 3731, £24).

And Kiwi favourites? Ara Composite 2008 (DGB Europe, 020-8877 4690, £13, or the 2006

from www.bbr.com) and Ata Rangi 2008 (Liberty Wines, 020-7720 5350, £35).

Altogether, it was a fascinating afternoon, though Basset's contention that pinot noir was a "cop out" for sommeliers was controversial. Do consumers – as he suggested – really know so much about the wines made from it that it is now a sommelier's role

to identify quite different grape varieties and wines to enliven diners' jaded palates?

I'm all for variety, and pinot does offer that – and my one regret on leaving the Pinot Puzzle tasting was that there weren't any classic burgundies there better to show the grape's world-wide role.

LIZ SAGUES



Showcase ... participants, including Liz Sagues, right, at the tasting.



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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ Our thanks go to Mr Clements, of NW3, for kindly letting us know that to keep your shower door free from water marks and for ease of upkeep, he has found it is best to fit a door or screen with obscured glass rather than plain glass.

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