

WHEN I get to describing the lush and very fabulous new Covent Garden brasserie I lunched at the other day, you might justifiably wonder why the picture accompanying this week's offering succeeds in portraying precisely none of it. This is because the photo of The Times restaurant critic Giles Coren and myself was not taken in Les Deux Salons, because I forgot. On occasion, the Ham&High sends along a professional to take care of this rather tedious side of things, and at other times I rely upon a dinky little red camera that I habitually have about my person. Normally, I place it quite prominently upon the table expressly in order to remind me about the picture, and I didn't. So I forgot. And as a result of this lapse into feeble-mindedness, you are stuck with this rather prosaic – though beaming and very well-intentioned, I hope you'll agree – double mugshot you see before you. It's not often, actually, that you see a pair of restaurant critics cosily rubbing shoulders – unless it's at some trade-driven jolly or a drunken awards thing. And on my way to the restaurant, I set to mulling how I might coin an acceptable collective noun for this generally maverick and hungrily roaming tribe. Initially I came up with a 'greed' – how does that strike you? Like it? A greed of restaurant critics. Or how about this? A 'sneer'. Any good? A 'paunch' I rather like, though it's hardly fair on the slim young bucks such as Giles, and nor, of course, the ladies. I also thought 'scoff' was all right, though in the end – having squandered much valuable time that could have been more profitably spent on just about anything under the sun, up to and including the long delayed sorting out of that pesky little sock drawer – I am settling for 'gob'. A gob of restaurant critics: I think it deserves to catch on.

I got there slightly ahead of time and mercifully remembered that Giles had booked this table under one of his sheaf of pseudonyms. But then, of course, he's eminent. Me, I never have to trouble with any of that: I book under my own name, and no one bats an eyelid. I waltz into a restaurant under my own face, and no one bats an eyelid. It's only if during the course of the subsequent review I drive a train right through the place that eyelids can start to bat like unshackled shutters gone wild in the teeth of a tempest.

There had been a little bit of debate about where we were going to go. At one point it was looking like a recently opened and upmarket vegetarian set-up – and this had initially struck me as an amusing idea, if only for the fact that it's in Smithfield (bleeding heart of flesh central) – though then it struck me as not so much amusing as laughable. Giles and I both being rather aggressively carnivorous. And as soon as I swung through the tall glass doors of Les Deux Salons, I was very pleased we had eschewed the opportunity to do away with chewing altogether, in favour of this grand, cool and yet somehow rather pleasingly opulent very zingy big space. It really does look like the best of Parisian brasseries that has been there for a hundred years, but the truth is that up until a few months ago it was just one more Pitcher & Piano (which seem to be dropping like flies all over the place) ... and now it is very heaven: a splendid grey and

Now this is The Good Life for Giles and Joe

Just where would satisfy a couple of restaurant critics with their exacting standards and discerning palates? Les Deux Salons, the latest offering from the creators of Arbutus and Wild Honey, **Joseph Connolly** discovers



FACTFILE

- ❑ **LES DEUX SALONS**
40 William IV Street, WC2
Tel: 020-7420 2050
- ❑ Open Monday to Thursday noon-3pm, 5pm-11pm. Friday to Saturday noon-3pm, 5pm-11.30pm. Sunday noon-3pm, 5pm-10.30pm
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Cost: Bargain pre-theatre supper 5pm-6.30pm: three courses for £11.50. Otherwise, about £110 for three courses for two with wine.

Joseph and Giles ... out on the tiles.

white mosaic floor, deep green leather and mahogany banquettes, offering many gloriously secret corners in which to plot and nosh. The ceiling is a mile above you and suspended with generously curvaceous brass-armed chandeliers with white glass globular shades. Up on the gallery is yet another great seating area – Salon Deux, I suppose. The designer of this considerable miracle is a chap called Martin Brudnizki, who usually casts his spell for Richard Caring (he did Scott's and the very impressive Cote chain, the Highgate branch of which I recently reviewed). But here, for once, is nothing to do with Caring, but the healthy burping baby offspring of Anthony Demetre and Will Smith who have scored very highly in recent years with Arbutus in Soho and Mayfair's Wild Honey, and now are clearly set to do so again. And here's a bonus: apart from good coarse linen napery – they've got sideplates! In a brasserie! Deep joy.

Giles is having quite a busy year, what with getting married in the summer (the Galvin boys did the catering, Angela Hartnett of Murano baked the cake), writing the columns for The Times, managing his anger, and filming the series so recently on our TV screens: The Good Life, in which he and his telly partner Sue Perkins busy themselves with getting down and dirty (though purely in a loamy way). Next year he will become a father for the first time, so for Giles, you could say it's all happening. But what was happening right

at this minute was lunch, and not a second too soon. I'd been scanning the menu and had now managed to whittle down my choices to just fourteen. At first glance it's all straightforward brasserie, but there are some very clever twists. Twists, I know, are usually there to lower the spirits

and be steered well clear of, but here – and in these hands – they are very welcome indeed.

For instance: my starter – Hereford snail and bacon pie. God that sounds good, I thought – but so does autumn wild mushrooms and Clarence Court poached egg on toast.

No, I haven't the slightest idea why it's called that. Clarence Court sounds like somewhere old and ratty people live in St John's Wood – though maybe it's a health farm for very classy chickens, who can say? But I went with the pie, and it was sublime: a perfect crown of golden pastry that broke just so to reveal a very yummy and savoury goo, though with just the right bite and flavour. Giles said it looked like a miniature of Desperate Dan's Cow Pie, and would be complete with not protruding horns, but antennae. His own starter was quirky too: it was billed as ravioli of rose veal with fried goat's curd, but the twist was that the nicely pink and thinly sliced veal formed the ravioli itself, the softened curd peeping coyly from within.

Wine is not just from France – nor even Italy, Spain and Chile, but weirder spots like Hungary (not Tokay – a dry one), Austria and even dear old Blighty. It all comes by the bottle or the third of a bottle, which is a reasonable weeze. We dabbled with a weeny carafe of white with the starters and sensibly ordered another, because it really was extremely weeny. Our mains were to be tough-guy grub, however – and a good St Emilion was recommended by Will Smith, half of the dynamic duo that owns the place, and a very affable chap indeed (who knew exactly who Giles was, of course, pseudonym or no). Each day there is a special, and this Friday it was bouillabaisse 'Marseille style', which tempted both of us.

"And they've got andouillette," Giles said. "I don't actually like andouillette, but I always order it whenever I see it". But he didn't – he went for the previous day's special: an exemplary cassoulet in the Toulouse manner, with duck as well as sausage and pork. This was perfectly moist and mouth-filling, the haricot beans indecently plump (I know this because I had a bit). My bavette steak was described as grilled, which is odd for a bavette, which more usually is slow-cooked or stewed. Even odder when it was served in a frying pan, perfectly medium rare, perfectly lean, thick, tender and a meat-eater's delight, in all its succulent juices and a shallot sauce. Chips had been done in either duck or goose fat, and by God they were good.

We toyed with the idea of cheese, or one of the very seductive puddings. But eventually we trotted around the corner to the Garrick Club and went up on to the roof terrace for a deeply pleasing and fat Partagas cigar, avec digestif – and it was then I remembered I'd forgotten the picture ... and so this what we have here: Giles and I, on the tiles – quite happily full, suitably mellow, and ready for home. We had met as just a couple of critics, though we departed as a gob.

❑ Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY* (Faber and Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

