

Verdict is out on Langan's

IT'S a rather curious thing: you never any more hear anyone talking about the small but perfectly formed Langan's chain of restaurants, and it is very rarely you see them reviewed or featured in the press. And yet whenever I visit, at whatever time of year, they are invariably packed to bursting with happy chomping people, all of them clearly having a very merry time. It is rare for once so utterly tooth-hurtingly cool and trendy restaurants to even carry on hanging by a thread, let alone bustle. But this lot seems to have successfully transcended the inanity of fashion: no longer on the map of Must-Be-Seen-In, while very much continuing to be Want-To-Go-To (which, if you are sane, is surely the point). There are five in the group – all now owned by Peter Langan's erstwhile partner Richard Shepherd. Hence the eponymous Shepherd's, hard by the Palace of Westminster: this rather pricey restaurant is greatly loved by MPs and other well-upholstered gents who aren't actually paying, and isn't terribly good. Langan's Brasserie in Piccadilly is still the most famous – the first of the easy-going but quality and groovy brasseries that now London is awash with. I very much like this old warhorse – which is more than good, and surely does continue to pack them in (the myth persisting that it is social death to be seated upstairs – true once, though I can't think that these days anyone frankly could give two hoots). There's another set-up called Langan's Coq d'Or in Knightsbridge, which I haven't been to, and then closer to home in Marylebone is Odin's – which I reviewed reasonably favourably last year – and right next door to it, this week's port of call: Langan's Bistro.

This is a much smaller and more intimate room than Odin's – its bright Chinese yellow façade glowing like radioactive custard – though the décor continues to plough a warmly familiar Langan furrow: close carpeting, comfortable velvet chairs and walls rather joyously crammed with edge-to-edge paintings, prints and mirrors. The ceiling here is alive with dozens of open and inverted cream-coloured parasols against a black background, which sounds rather nuts – and is, of course: works well, though. And as usual, by 1.15 the place was

Joseph Connolly rules overwhelmingly in favour of the bistro on a lunch date with barrister Joseph Harper. Their dishes were great – only let down by a chocolate pudding found guilty of crimes against cooking



Brief encounter ... Joseph with QC Joseph Harper.

full – and a motley crew we had here: one birthday lunch for six, a sprinkling of office workers, a table of women who had spent the morning in Marylebone High Street buying a lot of shoes and now were stowing away a bit of protein and a lot of Sancerre so as to be fit and ready to buy a whole lot more throughout the course of the afternoon. A few businessmen, a pair of ill-matched lovers (although maybe she was his niece, what do you think?) and a couple of crepe-paper-thin old ladies whom I suspect might be found there every other day. And then there was myself and my guest – a QC named Joseph Harper, who is very well versed in eating out, which he does quite a lot. His favourite is Galvin, in nearby Baker Street, closely followed by Les Deux Salons near Trafalgar Square (which I reviewed here a couple of months ago, and was pleased to recommend to him) and Fino, the much-admired Spanish set-up off Charlotte Street.

Common to all the restaurants in the Langan group is a very decent and gluggable house red by Georges Duboeuf, at an

equally palatable £18.50. So following Joe's customary pre-prandial gin and tonic, we got ourselves into a bottle of that. The menu is a large cartridge sheet which still bears Hockney's pastel drawings of the founder of the feast, Peter Langan. He is staring at you, pie-eyed, his fists beneath his chin (as if he is full-length on the floor, a place he often found himself). Dear old Peter Langan – drunk, abusive, much-loved and then much less so. Set fire to himself in the end: there are, I'm sure, worse ways for a restaurateur to go (actually, there maybe aren't). And even as we were ordering, couples were being regretfully turned away from this chocka little bistro: in February, and in an area jammed with good places, this is no mean accolade. The menu is pretty long, and full of bistro classics: £24.50 for two courses, £27.50 for three (so not on the face of it cheap). Joe went for chicken liver salad with crispy bacon, to be followed by crispy duck leg (clearly he was in a crispy frame of mind). I ordered moules marinières, and then braised lamb shank. "Very good!" exclaimed the waiter. "We shall

see ..." I responded (narrow-eyed, and no doubt highly irritably).

For a barrister, Joe's background was hardly typical.

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FACTFILE

LANGAN'S BISTRO

26 Devonshire Street, W1

Tel: 020-7935 4531

Open Monday to Friday

noon-2.30pm, 6.30pm-11pm.

Saturday 6.30pm-11pm.

Food: ★★★★★☆☆

Service: ★★★★★☆☆

The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

Cost: Lunch and dinner,

two courses for £24.50, three

courses £27.50 (very generous

portions). Wine from £18.50 to

really quite posh.

One of five children, his father was a Scots Presbyterian cobbler. "There was very little money, but he and my mother were the best parents anyone could wish for", he says. Joe won a scholarship to Charterhouse, then studied at the Guildhall School of Music before taking a law degree at the LSE – and in order to help with sending his younger brother to medical school, he was simultaneously lecturing in law and playing trumpet in a jazz band. Gosh, I thought – he's just like Satchmo! Only paler.

The starters took half an hour to arrive, and I was pretty starving. The moules, when they came, were very good – plump, the sauce creamy with a fair slug of wine. Joe said his chicken livers were "very tasty indeed – bacon properly crisped, the dressing immaculate". Well good. He seemed even more impressed by the duck leg – which to me appeared to be fully half the quacker. Really generous, the skin very crunchy and copper-golden. He thought the accompanying stir-fried pak choi spot-on, and evidently relished the thick plum sauce. But next to this lamb shank of mine, the duck was suddenly looking positively mingy: for here was surely the legendary hind leg of a donkey, talked off recently by some unstoppable gabbler. Grand and juicy and lean and glutinous and glutinous and steaming hot and with creamy, very creamy celeriac mash and a gorgeously glossy and flavoursome reduced rosemary jus: tremendous, actually.

Until very recently, Joe played French horn in various orchestras, and I know he's a great collector of books and paintings. And because so often such artistic compulsions go hand in hand with cooking, I was wondering ... does he? "A little. Not nearly as much as when the children were at home – but I do do a great pheasant casserole. With Madeira". He's a huge fan of the Waitrose fresh meat counter and also a butcher called Theobald's quite near where he lives, around the corner from the British Museum: "their sausages and game are second to none". And then rather childishly (because I can never resist this with barristers) I asked him what he thought of the mighty Rumpole of The Bailey...? "Excellent. I knew John Mortimer very well – we lunched at El Vino's. He is actually one of my three favourite and most missed dead members". He is referring here to our mutual club, The Garrick (the two others, by the bye, being Sir Kingsley Amis and Sir Robin Day). "We all enjoyed Rumpole and John was more loved at the Bar than anyone I have ever known". And as Joe has been a barrister for 40 years (taking silk in 1992) that is saying quite a lot.

So a good and jolly lunch, then. I was far too full to even glance at desserts, having just eaten most of a donkey ... but then I saw "Mrs Langan's Chocolate Pudding". Was she his mum, do you suppose. Or his missus? Who knew? Whichever, though, she really needn't have bothered: an oval slice of chocolate sponge stuffed with solid cream and in a pool of cold and indifferent chocolate sauce: a kiddy would have loved it – intensely sweet, and not unlike a melted Mars bar. So apart from such misguided input from She Who Must Be Obeyed, Langan's emerges pretty triumphant. "Oh yes – it's very good here," my guest agreed. "Commendable". So there you have it: sound counsel from m'learned friend.

□ **JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY** is a novel by Joseph Connolly (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

winemaker is on a winning streak

finish," said the judges.

Try it and see – it's currently on offer at £9 rather than the usual £11 (apologies to readers who thought they'd find it at that price two weeks ago: I got the start date of the promotion wrong).

If you agree with the bigot, you'd better stop reading now. But if not, here are a few more supermarket bottles which should inspire rather than destroy interest in French wines.

Bertrand wines are in M&S and Tesco as well as Waitrose,

with M&S offering the serious Domaine des Garennes Minervoise 2008 (£10.50) with deep flavoured fruit and subtle spice, and a mature, brambly



Corbieres, Domaine des Fontesque 2006 (£8 until April 3) as well as simpler styles.

Tesco Finest Tautavel 2006 is a rich expression of Roussillon's stony slopes (£8.06 at www.tesco.com).

Beyond Bertrand, some more ideas: among whites at M&S Jacky Marteau Touraine sauvignon 2009 (£8) and Cornet et Cie Collioure 2008 (£11) are stars. And a bargain-basement red, juicy and enjoyable, is Ardeche gamay 2009 (£4.30). All M&S wines are discounted by 10 per cent throughout March if you buy at

least three bottles.

Back at Waitrose, there are a lot more French temptations, starting as low as £4.30 with Cuvee Pecheur 2009, a crisp, aromatic Gascon white. The other whites from the same region are great, too, or head south to Languedoc for citrusy, nutty, seafood-friendly Domaine Felines Picpoul de Pinet 2009 (£7.70). A perfumed, characterful red is Fontaine du Roy Costieres de



Nimes 2009 (£6.50), Perrin & Fils Vinsobres 2009 (£10) is a dark, smart Rhone blend, and for fresh, crunchy red fruit buy Les Nivieres

Saumur 2009 (£7.50).

Sainsbury's has a good Cotes du Rhone-Villages 2009 (£6.15) in its Taste the Difference

range, and some tempting Loire whites and reds – of the latter, do try Domaine du Colombier Chinon 2008 (£6.15); and at Morrisons Le Petitole Costieres de Nimes (£10) is dark and richly fruited. Even in unexpected places, there are pleasures. One very decent offering is Aldi's Philippe Michel Cremant de Jura bottle-fermented sparkling chardonnay (£7).

There are plenty more, I'm sure, that I simply haven't tasted – and these recommendations miss out most classic appellations, where supermarkets can also choose wisely.