

King Heston in all his madness courts the favour of Londoners

Joseph Connolly is in awe as he enjoys a feast for the senses

I had lunch at Dinner. It's a fair old wheeze from the glistening-domed, spookily-spectacled and idiotically famous culinary alchemist whom now we all just call Heston. You name a restaurant Dinner, it's going to get bags of publicity because of all the whimsy little jokes you can make about it, and bore people into a coma: on the lines of 'I had lunch at Dinner', for instance. So terribly amusing, non? Mind you, Heston could have opened a restaurant called Anthrax and still it would have the punters flocking. If you phone them right this minute, you will hear a polite though faintly superior recorded voice informing you that they are fully booked until the end of July. The end of July! Two bleeding months – in a city so utterly jam-packed with good places to eat that we're all just demented by choice. Now I know that the Mandarin Oriental hotel opposite Harvey Nichols is not exactly our beat – it's not quite what you'd call slap bang on our north west London doorstep – but look: it's Heston, right? And it's the hottest place in town. It would have been a dereliction of my duty to ignore it. So I didn't.

I'd actually just been with my wife and son to the Cult of Beauty exhibition at the V&A. This really is a splendid show devoted to aestheticism – Pre-Raphaelites, William Morris, Oscar Wilde: all that glorious sort of thing. You come out bloated and slightly dizzied by the gorgeous generosity of it all ... but you see, you can be distended by art and still harbour a void, an aching vacancy for more tangible input. And the knowledge on this warm and sunny day that oodles of tip-top grub were a mere hop, skip and a jump away added a certain spring to the step.

Cool and classy

The hotel is a very traditional marbled and opulent affair, though Dinner is a much more modern thing altogether. A broad and tall room with great big windows looking out on to Hyde Park. You wander in through a glass wine cellar with artfully backlit bottles. The kitchen is visible to all, as are occasional fairly worrying great explosions of flame. Tables are chunky dark walnut, chairs brown leather, the lighting in the form of a Titan's wagon wheels suspended from the ceiling, while auxiliary lit-up opalescent Limoges porcelain jelly moulds are flung around the walls: cool and pretty classy, though not in any sense a grand dining room. Now as to the food, this being a Heston enterprise, you don't expect normal, and nor do you get it. This isn't Fat Duck Mark II, however – you can ditch all the gags about snail porridge and bacon and egg ice cream, though many other quirks, vis-



■ Joseph Connolly at Dinner by Heston Blumenthal

The Meat Fruit looks like a mandarin with pockmarked rind ... But guess what? It's actually a perfect chicken liver

ual deceptions and sleights of hand are properly in abundance. Most notably the Meat Fruit. This starter – which my wife immediately ordered – is already of legendary status: it looks like a textbook mandarin, complete with pockmarked rind, stalk and sweet green leaf. But guess what? It isn't at all ...! No no – it's actually a perfect, but perfect, chicken liver parfait in spraucy Belisha disguise. The Pre-Raphaelites, I am sure, would have loved it – though maybe not so much as the Surrealists: it would sit very well with one of Magritte's gravity-defying apples.

The leitmotif here is that all the dishes are thoroughly Eng-

lish and ancient, each one roughly dated (echoes of Marcus Wareing's Gilbert Scott) – so this Meat Fruit comes in as c.1500. Good, eh? My son was having Salamagundy (c.1720): chicken oysters (those delectable little nuggets – but do not think Chicken Nuggets – a pair of which nestle beneath the bird: lovely). With bone marrow and horseradish cream – a little too much of the horseradish cream, my son thought, but absolutely excellent. And I had Rice and Flesh (c.1390). The head waiter – sounding like a very fair simulacrum of Alf Doolittle – said that most of the starters could be served in a vegetarian version. "So with mine, then – you'd what? Dump the Flesh?" He grinned. "Pretty much – yeh!" I'm very glad he didn't: what we had here was a perfect circle of creamy rice made bright yellow with saffron and studded with five little islands of calf tail in red wine sauce: so intensely flavourful, my taste buds still are singing (while wanting more and more and more). I needed wine, fairly naturally, and Doolittle said he'd fetch the Smellier. Wine is expensive. Well look – let's be plain: leaving aside the weekday only set three course lunch at £28, this is a very expensive restaurant all round, though I quite see why it has to be. The service is just about impeccable, the at-

tention to detail total, the ingredients and artistry truly first class.

And so to the main event: my wife wanted roast turbot with leaf chicory and the intriguing-sounding cockle ketchup. There was another ketchup – mushroom, this time – with my sirloin of Black Angus in red wine juice and triple cooked chips. Both these dishes are dated c.1830, which does seem odd for just a lump of fish and a lump of meat, but never mind. The son was having spiced pigeon (c.1780) with ale and artichokes. Which maybe, I don't know, was the star of the show: beautifully pink and tender. "It's so rich, quite gamey," he said. "And the artichoke – very intense. It's like artichoke stock!" My wife, meanwhile, was adoring the turbot and was quite knocked out by the cockle ketchup. "Taste it!" she urged. "It tastes of Brighton!" She was right: a real hit of ozone, like the finest oyster. "And the perfume!" she babbled on – pretty unstopably now – "just like when the sea rushes over the shingle". Well blimey. My steak was clearly aged, and perfectly cooked: as deeply beefy as you could wish for, the mushroom ketchup dark and strong, the chips exemplary.

Lemon suet pudding

I wanted the splendid selection of British cheeses: too full, couldn't. I wanted every single pudding on the menu: couldn't, too full. So I had instead the merest taster of my wife's baked lemon suet pudding (c.1630) with lemon caramel and jersey cream (no capital letter on jersey, so while you think it might contain pullovers, it turns out not to). Sublime ... if lemon may be said to be sublime. My son's dessert was called simply Chocolate Bar (c.1730), and looked like a patent leather Mars: biscuity base and this glossy chocolate casing yielding up a gooey ganache and passion fruit jam. He debated (with passion) whether passion fruit was a suitable match for chocolate, though soon came out in favour. There was also a quenelle of ginger ice cream. "I don't like ginger," he said. "This is really, really good ..."

So Heston comes up trumps again. Or at least Ashley Palmer-Watts does: he's the very brilliant head chef here, having held the same role at the Fat Duck. And like said fat duck, I waddled away, thinking only of how I might open this piece in so rib-tickling a manner as to have you rolling in the aisles. And then – the Eureka moment! 'I had lunch at Dinner ...' (c.2011).

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

Heath foraging with Matilda Moreton



■ The hallmark of the yarrow plant is its many leaves

The tea that can bring relief to hunters and gatherers alike

Yarrow (*achillea millefolium*) is found growing in many places in the summer, including Hampstead Heath. It has survived our dry April well – it tolerates drought as well as a wide range of soils.

The hallmark of the yarrow plant is its leaves, which are narrow and feathery – hence the Latin name "millefolium". "Thousand leaf" and "thousand weed" are among its common names.

The tiny whitish flowers are apparently gathered into a flat head like cow parsley (*umbelliferae*) but, in fact, it belongs to the daisy family (*asteraceae*) and is closely related to camomile.

Treat wounds

Yarrow's other Latin name "achillea" comes from Greek mythology. Apparently, Achilles saved the lives of his warriors by using yarrow leaves to treat their war wounds. It is worth remembering this story in an emergency – the crushed leaves are, indeed, used to stop bleeding. The herb's other nicknames, include "carpenter's weed", "sanguinary", "staunch weed", "soldier's woundwort", "knight's milfoil". This ancient usage is still frequently seen today, especially in Chinese medicine.

While being used to staunch the wounds of fighting men, yarrow is one of the "women's herbs" and the medieval name of "supercilium veneris" or "Venus's eyebrow", acknowledges this. Yarrow was traditionally used as a tea to stop internal bleeding and to ease a heavy menstrual flow and menstrual pain. Note: pregnant or nursing women should avoid yarrow tea.

Yarrow was also used as a form of snuff – leaves were stuffed up the nose to precipitate violent sneezing, which resulted in a nosebleed, effective in clearing migraines. "Nosebleed" is another common name.

Its most common use nowadays, as tea, is to treat colds and fevers. It can break a fever as it promotes sweating.

Yarrow tea

Add two or three dried yarrow leaves to a cup (10z dried herb to one pint) of boiling water and steep for five to 10 minutes.

Add honey and lemon, mix with peppermint leaves or elderflower.

Side effects: Only drink yarrow leaf tea in moderation as overuse may lead to increased light sensitivity. Some people report this after drinking only a few cups. Its power to alter visual perception earned yarrow the name of "devil's plaything" or

"devil's nettle". Beware.

Lastly, an ounce of yarrow placed under the pillow before sleep should bring a vision of the future spouse. First repeat this verse, from Halliwell's Popular Rhymes of 1849:

"Thou pretty herb of Venus' tree,
Thy true name it is Yarrow;

Now who my bosom friend must be,
Pray tell thou me to-morrow."

This one is quite safe and can be tried at home. Sweet dreams.