

» Food & Drink

I've found happiness again after a fond reunion with an old squeeze

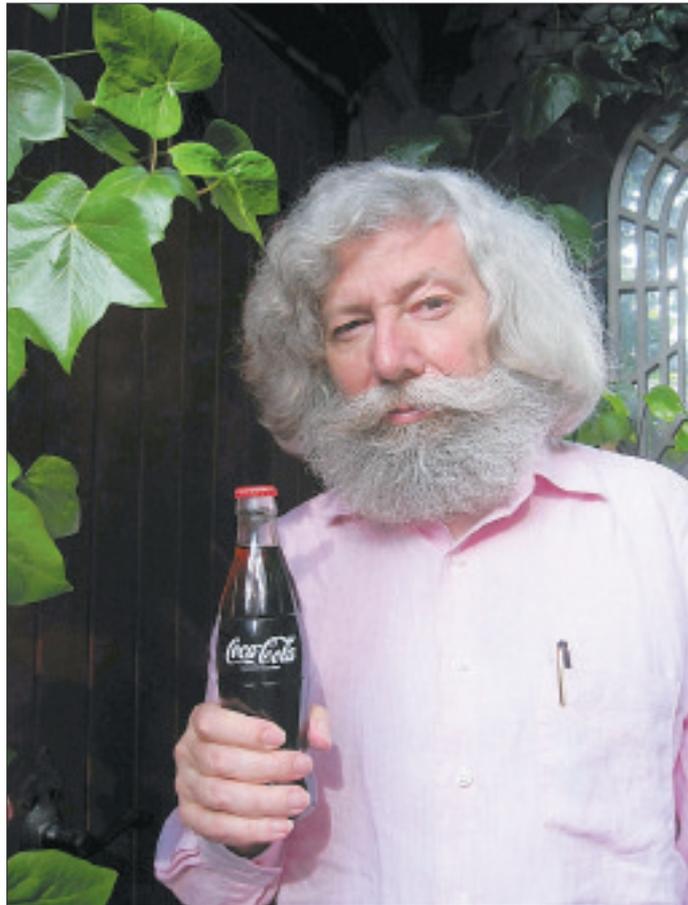
Hamburger place conjures up Wimpy memories for Joseph Connolly

» Wimpy and chips. For more years than is decent, this for me was the single most alluring phrase in the English language. It spoke of poetry and lust in equal measure, of greed and gratification – it conjured up visions of eternal paradise on earth (well in Golders Green, actually). Then there was the dinky little stand-up menu with a red roof on top, just like Snoopy's kennel, and of course those bright red squeeze plastic tomatoes, brimming with the wateriest ketchup imaginable, which would seep right through the titchy paper napkins at the very first and inevitable drip. Oh yes, my very first Wimpy and chips was truly a magic moment during my formative years – this giving you fair insight into the pitiable rarity of any magic moments, while also hinting very strongly at the paucity of their nature. The chain was named in honour of J. Wellington Wimpy, the cadging layabout in the Popeye cartoons who was forever munching on his snack of choice, and always on the look-out for more: "I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today ...!". J. Lyons & Co bought the British franchise from the original Chicago company, and London's first Wimpy Bar was unveiled at the Lyons Corner House on Coventry Street in 1954: the very first magic moment! They ought to have declared a Bank Holiday.

Genghis Khan

Then, twenty years later, there came McDonald's. A Big Mac, believe it or not, was originally marketed in this country as the authentic American deal, and I suppose that all of us who had yet to visit the United States happily swallowed the idea whole (if not the Big Mac). As a parent, I was certainly in McDonald's far more often than ever I was in a Wimpy Bar as a child. I hated McDonald's – everything about it: décor, lighting, and obviously the food. I hated too that you had to queue up to place your order, and then cart all these vile little polystyrene cartons over to your Formica table, attempt to eat the whole mess with your fingers and then be expected to deposit the unspeakable residue in 'the bins provided'. And all the while one's ankles were being swabbed by a wet and very sizeable mop, forever and robotically slid up and down by a pimply lad who knew in his heart he would be better off dead. As my children played with the toy in the Happy Meal, I used to sit there malevolently, sucking through a straw at what was billed as Coca-Cola – choked with ice, and even more watery than the Wimpy's ketchup. Ah – happy, golden days!

I used to wonder why the hamburger was called a hamburger. I think I simply assumed that a meat patty was a burger, and that they were made of ham – this belief no doubt reinforced when Bird's Eye came out with 'beefburgers'. But of course the reference is to the city Hamburg, where the idea originated – though some go so far as to credit the invention of the concept to that noted epicurean, Genghis Khan: apparently his hordes, when out for a bit a maraud, would keep a dollop of minced beef, yak or goat beneath



■ It's the real thing! Joseph delights in finding a Coca-Cola in its original glass bottle

The chairs are a mix of smart grey and bright red plywood ... the red being a perfect match for guess what? Squeeze plastic tomatoes! Yay!

their saddles in order to tenderise it. And during a lull in the rape, or if they ever grew weary of pillage, out it would come and they'd bolt it down raw. Which is nice.

And so, class, we whizz very rapidly forward to the present day, when the once humble hamburger – in common with everything else for the spoiled and demanding pigs we have become – is elevated to little less than an art form, its worship-

pers bandying recipes and techniques with all the zeal of the no less messianic aficionados of the dry martini. GBK – which does not stand for George Bernard Kaw, as you easily might have imagined, but Gourmet Burger Kitchen – is one of the largest and best known chains to offer what might be termed the designer-burger, and until last week I had never been to one. I had been wandering like a poor lost soul around Belsize Park, and I just saw the restaurant and thought Mmm ... magic moment: Wimpy and chips: I'll go in. So I did. And I know you'll think I'm just horsing around when I tell you this, but as I took my seat in the broad and spacious light-filled room, the song on the sound system was Perry Como's Magic Moments. Spooky, no? And it's true, whatever you think.

So yes – nice room, but all these places in Belsize Park benefit so hugely from the wide open patio doors, the outside eating areas (this

one edged by rectangular troughs packed with geraniums) and the tall leafy trees. The inside space is largely made up of blond wood planking – walls, floor, tables – while the chairs are a mix of smart grey and bright red plywood ... the red being a perfect match for guess what? Squeeze plastic tomatoes! Yay! There is also a green tiled floor area just as you enter, this very cleverly concealing the one step down into the restaurant proper, and over which I nearly bloody killed myself, but never mind.

I don't suppose it's still there now, but in addition to the regular menu, there lingered a Royal Wedding Menu, though this event was already no more than a memory. So I could have had a Will, which was 100% Aberdeen Angus (as is all the beef here, actually) with blue cheese and bacon. Or a Kate, which was smaller, and with aged Cheddar. This was subtitled the Princess Burger, which, I don't know ... did make me feel rather queasy. Now GBK is famous for cooking everything fresh to order, and having a reputation for adaptability. So I requested a Will, but with Kate's Cheddar, see? No dice. The Prince Burger was inviolate, apparently: to tamper, maybe, would be seen to be lese majeste. But, the very friendly and helpful waitress explained, I could order a regular burger with bacon and aged Cheddar. Which is exactly what I had requested, of course. "I know," she said. "I've only been here two weeks and it's really confusing". Well I'd only just fallen through the door, and was quite completely baffled. A further puzzle was just around the corner: although the waitress and I had worked out what to order, I could not formally ask her to get it for me, no no no. I had to go up to the counter and ask someone else entirely. But, she added – seeing as she was here, she'd do it for me. My head was properly spinning, I can tell you that.

Nicely charred

I got a Coca-Cola. I did. In the real original bottle. I poured it into a glass, though: with a straw, only the tongue-tip gets the sweet and prickly hit. With a glass, you can flood your whole mouth with all that fizzy and sugary goodness. First Coke I've had in about ten years – and I loved it. The burger was six inches tall, though half that was down to fairly lacklustre lettuce. But the meat was very fine – cooked medium as requested, nicely charred, juicy, cheese gooly melted, bacon not fatty, and a good big slice of beef tomato. The chips were beautifully golden, correctly crunchy, and I dunked them into thick and Heinzey ketchup, courtesy of good old Mr Squeezey. All in all, this was forming itself nicely into something of a magic moment. And soon I was replete – filled with American abundance. As President Kennedy so very nearly said: Ich bin ein Hamburger.

■ **LOVE IS STRANGE (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly set largely in the 1950s. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.**

Small bites

Howzat for cream tea at the green



■ The Long Room at Lord's

Cream teas at Lord's Cricket Ground have met with such demand that the iconic venue is now arranging sittings on a monthly basis.

Staff at the spiritual home of cricket were inundated with enquiries after announcing two Summer Afternoon Tea dates last month.

With the July 10 event sold out, fans of cake and scones now have another chance to enjoy afternoon tea in Lord's famous Long Room on July 9.

Sittings have also been announced in the Grade II*-listed Pavilion for October 16, November 6 and December 4, with further dates expected to be announced into 2012. Scones with homemade jam and Cornish clotted cream, finger sandwiches, cakes and dainties from Lord's resident pâtissier Thierry Besselievre are on the menu, as is a tour of the Lord's museum displaying 400 years of cricketing history, from bats and kit donated by great players of the past to the fabled Ashes urn.

■ **Bookings on 020-7616 8501 or book online at www.lords.org/lords-afternoon-tea,1463,AR.html.**

A warm welcome to Michelin chef

The former Michael Moore restaurant in Blandford Street, Marylebone, has been taken over by Cumbria-based restaurateur Simon Rogan.

Rogan's restaurant L'Enclume in the village of Cartmel has earned a Michelin star as well as five rosettes from the AA restaurant guide. It features organic, local and foraged food, including produce from Rogan's own farm growing veg, fruit and herbs.

The 25-seat Roganic will boast a 10-course menu at lunch and dinner at £80 per person and a five-course lunch at £40 a head, featuring ultra-seasonal ingredients cooked by Rogan or his head chef Ben Spalding.

It will open for two years only after which the site will be redeveloped.

■ **Bookings on 020-7486 0380 or at www.organic.co.uk.**

FACT FILE

■ GOURMET BURGER KITCHEN

200 Haverstock Hill, NW3

Tel: 020-7443 5335

■ Open Mon-Fri 12 noon-11pm. Sat

11am-11pm. Sun 11am-10pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: About £15 for one – more with pud and booze.