

Food&Drink

A spanner in Engineer's works

The prices are just a little bit too high, finds Joseph Connolly

» The engineer: who is the engineer? Is he Isambard Kingdom Brunel, famed creator of timeless magnificence seamlessly blending the realms of invention, expedience and eternal beauty? Or is he the pimply lout with piercings, a gelled-up Tintin haircut and a fizzing iPod who tells you that the electro-carbon double-core one-way baffle flange on the conduit filter transformer is totally buggered, yeh, and you can't get the part no more, son – yeh and basically, at the end of the day, the whole boiler's well shot. Yes ... a tricky word to pin down these days, engineer – but certainly it fails to trail in its wake brightly gaudy pennants and streamers screaming of jollity, imagination and artistic recklessness. Did you hear about the engineer who had a wife and a mistress, and made quite sure that both were thoroughly aware of the situation? This way, when he was away at night, one would always assume he was with the other, this enabling him to finally get some work done.

Olivier's daughter

And lo, in a tranquil corner of Primrose Hill, we have a very famous pub called The Engineer, which is peopled not by dull and jumped-up mechanics but every sort of local celebrity you can shake a stick at: you saw a formidable array of them on the front page of this paper three weeks back – among them, Laurence Olivier's daughter (the joint landlady), fine actors such as Jonathan Pryce and Robert Powell, the girly-looking one from The Mighty Boosh, and the pulchritudinous Lisa Snowdon (who co-presents 'Capital Breakfast', whatever more than usually appalling thing 'Capital Breakfast' might be). Also another pair of characters – Christopher Biggins and John McCririck – whom obviously, given the guarantee that they were holding forth on any given pub, you would unhesitatingly battle your way through desert, tornado and bushfire to be sure of reaching in time.

The reason the pub garnered so much publicity is that Tamsin Olivier and Abigail Osborne have evidently very ably run the place for the past seventeen years, and now the owners, Mitchells & Butler, are refusing to renew their tenure, while vowing that under new management the pub will not alter a jot (whereupon we're all meant to keep a straight face). They are very big players, and therefore probably will get their way: apart from chain brands such as Harvester, Toby Carvery, O'Neill's and All Bar One, they also own a string of local pubs, most notably the Bull & Bush, Hampstead's Freemasons Arms and Garden Gate, and the Washington in England's Lane. Anyway – as I seemed to be alone in never having been to The Engineer, my wife and I toddled down there just last week, on a warm and sunny day. Which is how



■ Glasses galore ... Joseph at The Engineer

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we came to discover the delightful surprise of the garden to the rear of what is a smallish pub, its original oak fittings limed to within an inch of their existence. A feeling of airiness is cheered along by a series of Kartell pendants in see-through pink, blue and green Perspex, while a blackboard lists more wines available by the glass than I have ever seen anywhere.

The open kitchen has been built as an extension – as, I imagine, has the very large dining room: empty on this gorgeous day, while the garden was packed – all regulars, including quite a few mums with prams. It's a pleasant walled enclosure with climbers, col-

ourful planting in raised brick beds, a Victorian lamp post and damned uncomfortable chairs. The wine list is a pretty serious affair, despite the fact that it is jocularly glued into a series of old children's annuals (ours was *Pokemon* 2009). The charming, helpful and efficient waitress – we had two, the other being none of these things – told us that kiddies and adults both loved the idea, “so it's a win-win situation”. It strikes me as a little more than wilfully bizarre, but let it lie.

There are dozens of good things on the list, though – all available not just by the glass and bottle, but in 25cl and 50cl pots: you could get dreamily potted on all these little pots during the course of an afternoon, the apex of bliss attributable to climactically falling off your damned uncomfortable chair. The food is all very responsibly (and, as is the way now, rather piously) sourced, as well as pretty expensive. Sausage and mash at £15? It's too much. I had a chargrilled rib of British beef, peppercorn sauce and chips at £25: too much, too much. The steak was good quality, but only a thinnish rib-eye on the bone, the chips unpeeled and lacking crispiness. Prior to that I had the small portion of linguini with Dorset crab (£9 – too much). The pasta was very

good, the crab quite annihilated by the overpowering chilli – it caught your throat, it made you cry – and the whole inexplicably awash in a deep pool of clarified butter. My wife did rather better with roasted red peppers, anchovy, far too many capers and egg mimosa: this was a pretty Mediterranean dish scattered with toasted breadcrumbs, the peppers quite luscious.

We sipped a lovely Malbec rose, which blended beautifully with the amethyst water tumblers that made it look like you were in tandem downing half pints of meths. And we sniggered at the business talk at the adjacent table: blueprints of interiors were spread across it and a young couple were poring over their decorator's amendments. “I won't have my dressing room made any smaller,” the woman said quite hotly. “And no I don't think we've got too many chandeliers ...”

Eliteness

I've already told you about the steak – it was first put in front of my wife who said “I'm the spring chicken!”, while I, quite pointedly, said nothing at all. She loved the dish, though – a honey-glazed spatchcocked poussin with figs, pine nuts and spring greens: she yum-yummed every mouthful, and didn't leave a scrap. I asked a waitress for a glass of the Italian house red, and nothing happened at all. After more than ten minutes I asked the other waitress – the charming, helpful and efficient one – and it arrived within seconds. It is maybe with the post-dinner menu that we can properly get to grips with the essential eliteness of the clientele: loads of pudding wines – including Tokay and two red ones. All sorts of malts, cognacs and armagnacs – not to say three “sipping rums”; coffee roasted in Exmouth Market, tea from The Rare Tea Company – and Neal's Yard cheese, but of course. My wife wanted the passion fruit jelly, yoghurt and lime ice cream ... but there was a problem with that, we were told: the jelly hadn't set. Okay, then – chocolate pecan brownie, pistachio ice cream and cherry compote: rather leaden over-nutted brownie, very good ice cream, the cherry thing very surprisingly cloyingly sweet.

We had a good time here, and it's a well run place that deserves the loyalty of its patrons, though the food isn't as fine as I think they imagine – and my bill was £100: too much, I'm afraid. Shall we close on another wholly gratuitous engineer gag ...? Engineers, a surgeon says, are the people upon whom he feels most comfortable operating because they are always so very understanding if at the end there are one or two bits left over.

■ **SUMMER THINGS** (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

» Wine with Liz Sagues



Napa Valley is climbing back up from disaster

Phylloxera, that nasty little sap-sucking bug which destroys vines, is largely seen as a European problem – it ravaged vast areas of the continent's vineyards at the end of the 19th century. And anyone who has studied wine history knows that the eventual solution was to replant with vines grafted on to American rootstocks.

That's an irony in itself, as the pest originated in the United States, imported to Europe on the very same vine plants which resisted its attacks. But the situation turned full circle a century later, when some of California's best vineyards succumbed to attack by a new strain of phylloxera. Again, grafting on to resistant rootstocks was the answer.

Now, those replanted vineyards are reaching full maturity and the benefits to emerge from what so easily could have been a disaster are becoming obvious.

In London earlier this month, Bruce Cakebread, head of one of the Napa Valley's signature estates, outlined some of them: being able to choose the best clones of favoured varieties, planting at optimum density for quality grapes, the expertise of a new generation of technically-trained growers who have built their experience in the region, exploitation of new ideas and new knowledge.

“This mix makes Napa Valley one of the most exciting wine regions to be in right now,” he told members of the Circle of Wine Writers. “We have the potential to make the best wines ever in Napa Valley and we haven't peaked yet: we are going to get better.”

Special occasions

The bottles which he and fellow grower Doug Shafer opened showed that the results are already very fine. They came from four estates: Cakebread Cellars, Corison Winery, Heitz Wine Cellars and Shafer Vineyards, each in a different district within the Napa Valley. All were cabernet sauvignon, blended with a small proportion of other varieties in the case of Cakebread, and they spanned four vintages, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2008, every one different in character and with the effect of those different growing conditions showing in the wines.

My own favourites came from Corison, where Cathy Corison picks early for elegance and slightly lower alcohol level, a style more European than the rest. But it's invidious to make choices, as all were very fine, big but beautiful and even when the alcohol approached 15 per cent still balanced and very drinkable. Among the compliments I paid them were “lovely polished fruit, elegant and well structured” (Corison 2001); “so smooth, spicy edge to big ripe fruit” (Cakebread Dancing Bear Ranch 2004); “big tannins and spice, restrained oak, developing very well in glass” (Shafer Hillside Select 2006); “smooth, almost oily, but good fruit and tannins on finish” (Heitz Martha's Vineyard 2004); “lovely ripeness, balanced, great perfumed length” (Corison 2006).

There's no question that they are wines for special occasions. Corison's were the lowest-priced – the currently available 2007 is £43.40 a bottle (www.bibendum.co.uk) – while top-priced Shafer Hillside Select 2006, currently available only in bond (the importer is Thorman-Hunt), will exceed £200 once duty and VAT is paid. Cakebread Cellars' importer is Corney & Barrow, Heitz's is Justerini & Brooks.

Top-flight wines such as these truly show what California can do. My regret is that so much else which reaches UK shelves shows the opposite side of the region – sickly-sweet and generally unpalatable, even when you move up a bit from rock-bottom prices. I've had so many unhappy experiences that now, generally, I tend to avoid Californian wine at the press tastings of high street stores. Unfair, perhaps, but wine is a personal choice.



■ Bruce Cakebread at the Circle of Wine Writers' London tasting.

FACT FILE

■ THE ENGINEER

65 Gloucester Avenue, NW1
Tel: 020-7722 0950

■ Open for breakfast Monday to Friday 9am-11.30am, Saturday and Sunday 9am-noon. Lunch Monday to Friday noon-3pm, Saturday and Sunday 12.30am-4pm. Dinner Monday to Saturday 6.30pm-10.30pm, Sunday 6.30pm-9pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆ (on average; depends on the waitress)

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Cost: About £100 for three course meal for two with wine: too much.