

» Restaurant review

A Primrose Hill garden of earthly delights

It's difficult to find a good restaurant with a decent garden in London – but one has sprouted up, discovers Joseph Connolly, and the food, particularly dessert, is superb

It's the season when I am asked continually if I know of any decent local restaurants with a pretty little garden to the side: the dream is of long and leisurely booze-soaked lunches, the sunshine through branches of willow and vine gently dappling a virgin tablecloth and turning the wine into liquid rubies, this preferably with a view to rival that of Capri or Portofino. In London though it is much more likely to be a couple of tiny tables rammed on to the pavement, the paper cloth coated in grime from the ceaseless traffic and a series of oafs bustling past you and roaring into their mobiles, the outsized It-bags of the women constantly knocking askew your grisini. For smokers, of course, the quest for an outside space is not exclusive to summer, and many places have grown wise to the demand – most good hotels now actively catering to the alfresco diner and smoker alike. I have never puffed cigarettes, but I do enjoy an occasional Havana – and the other week I attended a wonderful 'cigar garden party' at The Langham in Portland Place. This was laid on by

Hunters & Frankau, the famed importers, in what is called the 'Middleton Garden' – though it was called that even before a certain family of the same name came to so dominate our lives that these days I approach the papers with extreme trepidation for fear of yet another picture of one of them doing something sensationally newsworthy such as wearing sunglasses, standing about, or possessing a bottom.

Hotels generally have the space, but the trick elsewhere is to find a pleasant outdoor eating area that isn't wholly given over to addicts of the weed. In Hampstead, the Freemasons Arms garden is good, but the food isn't. At the Garden Gate, the grub is pretty okay, but the garden is choked with smokers, and choked is soon what you will be too. But last week I found a good one: La Collina (which means the hill – and it's near The Hill, geddit?) with its rather smart black frontage in the hush of Princess Road. On the pavement is an A-board with photographs of the garden to the rear – a clever move. You do have to negotiate an extremely nar-



■ Joseph Connolly at La Collina in Princess Road

row spiral staircase in order to get there though: someone of ample proportions could be jammed in the middle of it till the fire brigade arrives.

This Italian restaurant has been here for about five years, and under new management for the past four months – which might explain the rawness of the little garden. The brick walls are newly whitewashed, but it sorely needs trellis, planting and ornament – it is still rather back-yardy. But there are huge square umbrellas that cover the sensibly spaced tables – with proper cloths and napkins – and a most attentive Italian waiter. Who said that they were very busy in the evenings and at weekends, but the weekday lunch-time was very quiet. It was

indeed: just one other table taken in the garden, and none at all in the restaurant proper. The set lunch is £17.50 for two courses, £21.50 for three – which isn't that cheap, and the a la carte is pretty pricey too. So I said to my wife: does anything in particular sing out to you? Actually, what was singing out to us was Tina bloody Turner. I think it was her greatest hits on a loop, though all you got was the same big noise of her slapping her alarming thighs and shouting at you quite hatefully (because look – what's love got to do with it?).

While grazing on huge green olives and very good bread, we ordered Burrato cheese with grilled vegetables, and for me, bresaola

FACTFILE

LA COLLINA
 17 Princess Road, NW1
 Tel: 020-7483 0192
 Open every day noon-3pm,
 6.30pm-11pm
 Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
 Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
 The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
 Cost: Set lunch £17.50 for two
 courses, £21.50 for three.
 Otherwise about £90 for three
 courses for two with wine.

with leaves and parmesan. This was fine: bone dry and lean bresaola (because like smoked salmon, it can be so clammy and veined with fat) with subtly dressed leaves and generous parmesan shavings. The cheese thing came as a great white puff of chilly creaminess, flanked by warm red and yellow grilled peppers. Well the wife, she just went nuts over this: "Wonderful – so light, tremendous flavour: much better than mozzarella". The waiter overheard this and said "it is very good – but you should taste it in Puglia!". Which was a bit of a bummer because we had been perfectly happy in Primrose Hill, but now we both wanted to be in Puglia.

My main was home made ravioli filled with scamorza cheese and served with sundried tomatoes – which, as sun-dried things go, were pretty wet, but the pasta was very good indeed. Rather mean, though: £12 for just six ravioli. "It look small," said the waiter, "but it fill you up". Well it didn't really – but this was okay because my wife's paillard di pollo alla griglia with salad and roast potatoes was absolutely enormous. The chicken breast had somehow been hammered into a very thin and circular sheet the size of a Tina Turner LP, and this was grilled and rolled like a wrap. The potatoes were the usual yummy Italian things: cubic, and heady with rosemary. But it was all a bit dry: no sauce at

all. So as I was scoffing her spuds and bits of chicken, she was spooning up my excessive sweet and pulpy tomato stuff. Here, I think, we had the Big Society in action: by the pooling of our resources, two contented people had come into flower.

Puddings? Magnificent. Truly. Magnificent. I had the best chocolate fondant ever – warm little mound of sponge pudding, and then a splurge of warm and indecent chocolatey goo from within: lust-worthy. And my wife's home made and very zingy lemon tart with 'crashed', according to the menu, amaretti, was exemplary: crisp base, soft lemon, and the essence of freshness. And then we were given Limoncello on the house, I know not why: maybe the Italian waiter was bored. Maybe, by then, he had spotted the notebook. It's a strange thing, this Italian liqueur: it tastes at first of sherbert lemons and Rowntree's Fruit Pastilles, and then of the god of hellfire.

As we were saying goodbye to the waiter (and good riddance to Tina bloody Turner) I asked him what was and wasn't permitted in the garden. "We love children and dogs," he said (but then in Italy, if you don't love children, they confiscate your passport and toss you into the Mediterranean). "But we only," he qualified, "take dogs we know". So there – in Primrose Hill, your dog will require a proposer and a second. Smoking...? "Oh yes," he said happily. And what about a Havana? "I think not," he said with regret. So there we have it: in all, this is a very good place – not stunningly so, but still very good. Close, then – but no cigar.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

There are huge umbrellas that cover the sensibly spaced tables – with proper cloths and napkins – and a most attentive Italian waiter

» Out and about Rhiannon Edwards

Odette's and Bibendum serve up a wine tasting event that's perfect for the beginner

I realised I knew absolutely nothing about wine when I first met my boyfriend's dad. He, being a wine fan, offered me a glass on our first meeting. No sooner had I took a sip was he questioning me on my opinion. Suddenly I needed to be able to comment on the bouquet and the taste and say whether I thought it needed airing or not (tip: if in doubt, say it needs airing).

So when I was invited to a wine tasting event at Odette's in Primrose Hill, I thought it might be a nice way to gain a bit more knowledge about the stuff. I thought it would also be a good test for them – to teach someone who knows



■ Chef Bryn Williams' Odette's in Primrose Hill

very little about wine. I arrived a little late (!) for the introductory talk on American wines, which was the topic for the evening. Still, the host, an incredibly knowledgeable woman from Bibendum, the Regent's Park-based wine seller, greeted me encouragingly and my friend and I were invited to sit at the table in the back of the restaurant already populated by quite a diverse bunch of people.

Bibendum are pretty special when it comes to wine so all of the seven wines on offer were pretty special too. The first of the three whites was tricky – even with a big introduction about how to describe the tastes, I felt pretty nervous when the host asked what we thought it tasted of. "Lemons" ventured one, seemingly experi-

enced woman. "Yes, exactly, lots of citrus in this one," said the host. At this stage, I became worried, I hadn't tasted lemons at all.

Taste of lemons

The second wine arrived with a smoked salmon platter. I swirled it around and sniffed. "Oak!" I thought. I tasted it and, just as the woman then said, it was a delicious creamy, oaky taste. At that, I went back to wine one and, joy, I tasted lemons too! (I told you airing was the best policy).

From there, it was easy and, as the wine flowed, the conversation did too. I met a

young couple who both lived in the area. She worked in the city and he was training to be a chef and we chatted away about wine, life and the food which kept arriving on our table (a nice charcuterie and cheese board). All the while being served some very expensive wines from En Primeur providers like Charles Smith (he's good, apparently) and learning just how Americans can grow wines like Reisling, which are unusual for their climate. It's all to do with the mountain ranges in Washington trapping cold air, just in case you wondered. You can either drink

or spit out the wines. I chose the former and so, by the end, I was a little heavy headed. I couldn't tell whether I was drunk or it was everything I had learned about wine that was making my head whirr (it's not so often that contrast appears in life). Still, I was happy. I had a nice evening and I had formed some great opinions on wine to discuss with my boyfriend's dad.

■ Bibendum wine tasting evenings at Odette's cost £50 per head. For more information, visit www.odettesprimrosehill.com.