

Restaurant review

I go into battle in a very civil American war

Joseph Connolly confronts the manager of a New York joint after a shot is fired from the kitchen – an undercooked signature burger served with a ghastly slab of liver pate

I have reviewed restaurants whose names begin with every single letter of the alphabet ... bar one. I have actually reviewed twenty that begin with S: that's the record. But until this day, I had never done a U. The other tricky ones – V, X, Y and Z were taken care of by Verru, X.O, York & Albany and Zeen ... but hitherto a U has eluded me. But now we are replete: I've got my A-Z. And yes you well might say I ought to get out more ... but as you know, I actually get out quite a bit.

Union Café is yet another restaurant set into that gem of a little road, Marylebone Lane, which is just jammed with them. And at the risk of appearing to be a list-obsessive, I might say that I've reviewed the lot, bar two – an Indian I don't much like the look of, and the classic 1930s Golden Hind, which I'm saving up for when I just must simply have, and right at this minute, one of the best fish and chips in London (for such is its reputation). Anyway – Union Café. Why have they called it Union Café? Could it



■ Joseph Connolly

be in homage to the TUC, whose members so tirelessly strive to make everyday life in Britain just that much brighter, and a whole lot more fun for us all? Will it be hung with Jarrow banners and glorious full colour pin-ups of such as Arthur Scargill and the genial Bob Crow? Well no – it turns out to be Union as in the US of A: for here is yet another stab at nailing New York cool.

Outside, with its vintage ceramic tiling and nicely etched glass it looks more Paris brasserie – but once you elbow your way in through the eager throng and see the old floorboards, pale grey walls, dim lighting, bare tables, wide open stainless steel kitchen emitting periodic sheets of orange and worrying flame ... once your eye drifts upwards to all the exposed aircon and ducts and silvered piping, as might be seen to grace the underground lair of a cut-price Dr No ... then indeed you know that here is a cool place where cool types – mostly Americans – are going to be seen to be hanging and cool, necking cool beers and rapping coolly about all the cool crap they do whenever you see their tanned and polar-teethed doppelgangers in impossibly scripted romcoms. I often wonder why Americans bother watching their home-grown television and movies: give or take the odd massacre or apocalypse, it must be like gazing into a mirror (pronounced meer). Sometimes it's cool, the way they talk –



■ The Union Café in Marylebone Lane

cleverly appearing to have a sinus problem and be chewing gum when this isn't the case at all – but when they call their buddies not Bob and Peter but Bab and Peeder, it can begin to get to me. Anyway ... my wife and I had just come hotfoot from a private view in Mayfair. Good pictures – and good champagne too, before it very quickly ran out. And despite the promise to the contrary on the invitation ... no grub whatever. Nada. Not so much as a stray Cheese Wotsit. So by the time our confederacy of two pitched up at the Union, we were ready to eat a horse. Trigger, conceivably.

Brilliant wine list

Attractively printed long card menus were promptly brought – the staff, male and female, are uniformly black-clad and good looking, which is no bad thing. The wine list is quite brilliant – not a dud on it, and at very easy mark-ups. We had a Julienas 09 – superior Beaujolais – at just £18.50, which you don't really expect. I kicked off with Cornish potted crab with avocado puree. This was a pleasant

enough pot, but with too much brown meat in the mix, the guacamole forming its base – so you had to eat the two in turn, whether you liked it or not: certainly potted crab is no improvement upon shrimps. My wife fared very much better with an extremely good saffron risotto with prawns, petits pois, lemon zest and basil. This was well presented in a very wide-brimmed porringer not at all dissimilar to an inverted version of the ten-gallon hat so memorably worn by Hoss Cartwright in Bonanza. The risotto was creamy and fine, the hit of prawn and lemon pitch perfect.

Still starving, of course (could eat a Hoss) ... but from here on, things took a dive: more than half an hour wait for the next bit, and I'd only ordered a burger: the Union burger Rossini, in fact – billed as coming with foie gras, chips and salad. This would be based upon the famous Tournedos Rossini, which is a filet mignon overlaid by a thinnish slice of melting Strasbourg goose foie gras: heart attack on a plate, yeah sure – but what a

way to go! My burger, when eventually it came – was redly rare, not pinkly medium rare as requested, totally unjuicy and rather small. Atop it was a thick slab of solid and lowly supermarket liver pate which was actively repellent, and hurriedly scraped away. The chips were an utter disgrace – bought-in sticklets, pale and flabby: this, may I remind you, is their signature dish. But I was so hungry, and it had taken so bloody long to arrive, I did eat a good deal of it, though with no joy whatever.

My wife had ordered a breaded veal escalope which came with mash – oddly, I thought – green beans and roasted cherry tomatoes. The meat was goodish, but utterly dry – texture of a Scotch egg, really – the mash not helping. There was no sort of moisture or cohesion – the beans were probably the best bit. And this was the moment when the manager came calling: was everything all right ...? Well – he did ask, didn't he? So I let him have it – told him everything I've just told you. He was a nice chap – probably still is – and ap-

peared to be genuinely distressed. He pushed off and then came back to say that he and chef had examined the dregs of my burger and chips and both agreed that they were pitifully under par – so no charge for that, and please accept free puds. Well, nice enough, I suppose – but how did the signature dish in such a condition ever come to leave the pass? That is the question they ought to address. I then asked him to recommend puddings, whereupon he went white with terror – eventually plumping for crème brulee and toffee cake with vanilla ice cream: so I ordered one of each. Well Eureka ...! The crème brulee was just about spot-on. The toffee cake, though, was very suety and surrounded by a pool of molten caramel: it was not quite as nice as a melted Mars bar floating in lard.

On parting, the manager ... he did look woebegone. As, I imagine, did I. And so I am sorry to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that this is the state of the Union.

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

FACTFILE

- **UNION CAFÉ**
96 Marylebone Lane, W1
Tel: 020-7486 4860
- Open Monday to Friday, Lunch noon-3.30pm, Dinner 6pm-10.30pm. Saturday, Brunch 11am-4pm, Dinner 6.30pm-11pm. Sunday closed.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: About £90 for a three course meal for two, with wine.

Heath foraging Matilda Moreton



Conker contest will root out cheats – even those brave enough to try the pig method

The Horse Chestnut (*aesculus hippocastanum*) is one of Britain's favourite trees. It is prized for its abundant decorative white (or sometimes red) flower-spikes or "candles" and, as every schoolboy knows, for its conkers.

The game of conkers probably evolved from an 18th century game called Conquerors, originally played with snail shells, later with hazelnuts, on strings. By the 20th century, these games were being played using horse chestnuts.

Each player has their own conker on its knotted string. Whoever wins the toss of the coin can decide whether to hang their conker up or to take first strike. Players take turns at hitting their opponent's conker until one of them breaks.

If you are the one whose conker is to be hit first, let it hang down from the string, which is wrapped round your hand, about 10in (25cm). You must hold it at the height your opponent chooses and you must hold it perfectly still.

Your opponent, the striker, wraps their conker string around his hand, takes the conker in the other hand and draws it back for the strike. He swings it down or sideways by the string held in the other hand and tries to hit your conker with it. If he misses, he is allowed up to two further goes. After that, it's his turn to hang up his conker and let you have a bash.

There have been many traditional ways of hardening conkers before battling. These include soaking or

boiling the conkers in vinegar or brine, soaking in paraffin, baking them in the oven, varnishing them, filling them with glue or simply storing them in the dark for a year.

The most heroic, however, is that advocated by twice World Conker Champion Charlie Bray, who says: "There are many underhanded ways of making your conker harder. The best is to pass it through a pig. The conker will harden by soaking in its stomach juices."

The Heath Heritage Festival and Conkers Championship takes place on Sunday October 9 at the Parliament Hill Bandstand from 11am to 4pm.

Other activities during the event include welly wanging, felt making, archery, meet a sheep, pole

lathe, bush-craft and beekeeper demonstrations, Morris Dancing and Victorian games.

World record attempt

The highlight of the day will be at 3pm – when there will be an attempt to beat the current Guinness World Record by assembling more than 300 conker players.

The conker-meister will lead participants through their paces. There will be knock-out rounds for five categories – under-fives, five to seven years, eight to 13 years, 14 to 18 years and adults. The winner of each final will receive a trophy to keep.

Just as at the World Conker Championship in Ashton, Northamptonshire, on the same day, conkers will be supplied ready drilled and



■ Andrew and Atyeo, still good friends after their game of conkers

laced, for fear of those boiled in vinegar or passed through a pig having an unfair advantage. My own feeling is that anyone brave enough to sift through pig poo deserves at least to have a crack at becoming the reigning cham-

pion. It's free and conkers will be provided. Remember: You will not be allowed to bring your own conkers... or pig.

■ For enquiries, call Hampstead Heath Education Centre on 020-7482 7073.