

▶ Restaurant review

It's crunch time for vegetables at Manna

With World Vegan Day this week, Joseph Connolly makes a timely visit to the Primrose Hill institution to see if a meal that eschews all meat and fish can still be enjoyable

Vega is the second brightest star in the northern celestial hemisphere, twice as large as the Sun, twenty-five light years from Earth – and I had always assumed that this is where vegans come from. But it turns out that I was quite wrong about that: in fact they are actually human beings from this very planet, except that they have decided to eschew (as opposed merely to chew) all manner of meat, poultry and fish, along with every derivative such as fat, milk, cheese, butter, eggs, chocolate ... or as cooks and gourmets choose to refer to them: ingredients. And one of the most popular and enduring places in London where they elect to reject the very finest foods the world has to offer and chow down on whatever might remain, is Manna in Primrose Hill. Forty-five years old is this venerable shrine to all things bloodless, and I thought that merited a visit – for then could I sample all that is most enjoyed by vegans (among whose ranks, as by now you doubtless realise, I do not number).

Deliberately I did not take along a vegan as my guide –

The two pale sausages that arrived were freezing cold with slivers of icy vegetables

largely because I don't have Stella McCartney on speed-dial and know of no others – but also so that the food might speak for itself. For I came not to bury Manna, but to praise it: very eager for my fleshly prejudices to be incinerated – to have all my weedy jokes about nut cutlets and rabbits' lettuces wither on my lips, even as they were savouring new and unimagined flavours. Must a meal contain meat or fish to make it a meal? Tell me it ain't necess-celery so...?

You enter Manna by way of a pretty white painted box-like foyer on the pavement: the interior is reasonably spacious, and very clattery and booming: unadorned wooden floor, tables and chairs: no cloths or upholstery here – and save for a vase of roses on the serving counter, no flowers or candles either. There is no practical reason why a vegan restaurant shouldn't be warmly lit, thickly carpeted and swagged with velvet soft furnishings in deep, rich colours ... but you just know it's not going to happen. What we have here is beige wallpaper with a pattern of dead tree branches upon which birdies perch; the ceiling lights have a pattern of dead tree branches upon which birdies fail to perch. (I got to wondering if vegan homes are equally bland: white walls, hard floors and ecru calico beanbags, if only so that they know that a snack is always handy). My wife and I were served by a charming and happy American lady who turned out to be one of the owners. In addition to the standard dinner menu (they don't open for lunch on weekdays – maybe vegans eat only



■ Joseph at the 45-year-old restaurant in Erskine Road

when they absolutely have to) she reeled off a few specials, though the only words I caught were tomato, stoo, gluten-free and wheat-free.

Unchewable

On a Friday night, the place was full of pale tall thin people who didn't drink wine – I can't think why, as there are no animals in it, or anything. They clearly loved the place, though – trusting the kitchen to respect the fact that their body is a temple: mine is more of a garden shed, to be frank with you: regularly stacked with all manner of just about everything. And the menu threw me, of course: each thing looked like a side order (though manfully I resisted shouting out "But where's the beef ...?"). "Well," said my wife – who actually rather likes all this sort of thing – "just have whatever you fancy". So I said okay – I'll just pop round the corner to Odette's and meet you back here later on, then. She said I had to enter into the spirit of the thing, and so I did: I got

serious and ordered summer rolls: shitake mushrooms, carrots, mangetout, Chinese leaves and red pepper. The two pale 'sausages' that arrived were freezing cold, and basically slivers of fresh, crunchy and icy vegetables (though I could not find the mushroom) loosely wrapped in what appeared to be a section of anaemic skin from the recently deceased. My wife ate up eagerly all that I had left, as well as her yellow courgette and cherry tomato tart: this was warm and pretty good – save for the pastry, which was as the most unyielding pizza crust: unchewable. Having had what she assumed would be a light pastry starter, she had opted to follow with 'crisped' ravioli: attractive, in the form of shells – but almost identical in texture to the bloody tart base: more like dough or gnocchi than any sort of pasta. (When I said bloody just then, I didn't mean bloody as in bloody, of course – no no: this must be wholly understood). The filling of wild mushroom and

walnut pate was decent enough, as was the fennel cream sauce, though the accompanying rocket leaves were extremely bitter.

And I went for organic spaghetti in a tomato sauce ... with eat balls. Yes, you read that right, I'm afraid – a little pun, you see: eat balls. Now I ask you: eat balls ... could ever there appear upon a menu a less alluring invitation ...? Dear oh me. I asked what they might comprise, and the lady said a lot of words, but the one that struck me was millet. As nibbled by budgies, then. They looked suitably brown and round, and tasted of absolutely nothing save for an undertone of digestive biscuit. This is the restaurant's signature dish – though all we have here is spaghetti Napolitan, heavy on pulpy tomato, over-sweet due to the carrots, and £12 a go: no Parmesan, of course, to help it along. So I ordered a bottle of Montepulciano to ease the passage – though the lady queried this: "A whole bottle ...?" Yes indeed, I assured her: need it. And on the

bill it appeared as 'Full Monte'.

Puddings at first sight looked like being real puddings ... but then you see the telltale prefix 'v' to remind you that all is not as it seems – one rather comic juxtaposition reading as 'vice cream'. Anyway – my wife had a small ramekin of apple and pear crumble (at £8!) with a separate, and therefore not at all convenient, bowl of 'custard'. The lady said that this was made with something called no-egg, which also puts in an appearance in vegan chocolate and vegan cheesecake: who knew? The crumble was fine, but I burned my tongue on the 'custard', which was actually scalding no-milk.

And so I left: unhungry, though not remotely gastronomically satisfied, and wondering quite what is the point of ignoring fabulous ingredients and then trying to reinvent their look and taste with pastes and curds and mashes and grindings. Look – this just ain't my manna, guv'nor – though my wife did sort of like it, while not being in too much of a panic to return. But Manna is a prime port of call for the converted – and so if you are of their persuasion, it's probably worth a butcher's.

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

FACTFILE

- **MANNA**
4 Erskine Road, NW3
Tel: 020-7722 8028
- Open for dinner Tuesday to Sunday 6.30pm-10.30pm. Lunch Saturday and Sunday noon-3pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Pretty steep, for what it is: about £90 for three course meal for two with wine.

a lot more to Portugal's Douro Valley than just port

time is halved.

São Luiz, part of the large port-oriented Burmester group, is increasingly making unfortified white wines, sold under two labels, Burmester and Kopke. All those I tasted had excellent minerality and elegantly balanced crisp, concentrated fruit, with discreet use of oak.

Little over 10 kilometres away as the buzzard flies, but an hour by car along the narrow tightly-twisting roads, is the tiny winery of Jorge Seródio Borges, with a frontage barely wide enough for his van and 4x4 (no Chelsea tractor indulgence here: a 4x4 is the only way to and

through the vineyards).

Borges, with his wife Sandra Tavares da Silva, makes wines under the Wine & Soul title – the white Guru, complex and serious, stands comparison with fine white burgundy – and is also winemaker at neighbouring Quinta do Passadouro, where there are more examples of how the Douro's white treasure trove can blend into impressive, delicious wines.

There is one rather more familiar grape occasionally included in Douro whites: moscatel (muscat). Quinta do Noval makes a lovely deep rose-pink fortified sweet wine from it but also uses it

to add fragrance to unoaked dry whites, aged on their lees for extra texture and character. And there are fine whites too from the last stop on my visit – the ever-innovative port house of Ramos Pinto.

Hard to find

The choice is splendid but the difficulty is that these white wines are often hard to find here. But try these sources: Buy Passadouro 2009 (£13) and Crasto (£9) from the Wine Society, which will have more temptations in its Portugal offer later this month. Altano (from Symington, £9) and Guru

(£26) are at Handford Wines. Two Quinta do Portal whites (£8, £12) are stocked by Cambridge Wine Merchants. Ramos Pintos Duas Quintas (£12.25) is on Slurp's good Douro list. And a big choice, at very reasonable prices – though as the delivery is direct from Portugal carriage is higher than usual, around £19 for a 12-bottle case – is offered by Wine from Portugal, including two Burmester whites (£6.33, £11.67)

■ www.thewinesociety.com, www.handford.net, www.cambridgewine.com, www.slurp.co.uk, www.winefromportugal.com.



■ Jose Manso in the São Luiz vineyard