

» Restaurant review

Glutton gets his just desserts at gastropub

Failing to pay heed to a Christmas card inscribed with the word gluttony, **Joseph Connolly** lives to regret over-ordering

Gluttony. That's what it said, in brightly coloured overlapping lettering, right the way across the front of the Michael Craig-Martin designed Christmas card I received from the Groucho Club. Ho ho, I thought – how very merrily amusing. And then I got to thinking ... maybe they had cards printed up with each of the Seven Deadly Sins, who knows, and mine just happened to be Gluttony. And then I got to thinking further: what if they did indeed have all seven sins laid out before them, and then they selected with care exactly whom to send what ...? And if so, is that truly my image then, within the nucleus of the places I choose to swill and sluice? Conceivably. Oh well: there are worse sins. Aren't there? Well actually, at this raw time of year, you could rather wonder. How many times lately have you heard the dread words 'diet' and 'abstinence' recklessly banded? It's a curiously British thing, this: it's not to do with slimming and sobriety, but everything to do with chastisement. You had the nerve and temerity to enjoy a damn good blow-out over the festive season, and so now you must be seen to prostrate yourself before the twin altars of expiation and punishment – for yay, verily, thou art a sinner. And thy sin is Gluttony.

Yes well – needless to say, I don't give two hoots for any

of this sort of thing. Once the Christmas feasting was done, I just went to a restaurant. And then I sloped off to another. And this might be not too bad a moment to remind you that it is still not too late to apply to accompany me on one of these jaunts of mine, as outlined in the last column of last year (accessible on both the Ham&High website and my own): email me, tell me why you'd like to do this thing, and where you'd like to do it. Many of you have already done so, but I reckon there's no great rush: let's hear from more of you, and then soonish I'll announce the extraordinarily blessed winner. So ... where have I been to lunch in the meantime? Well initially the idea was to incorporate the first of them into a bracing walk across the Heath (my token nod to the scourge of guilt) and so I was thinking Highgate, possibly ... or maybe Dartmouth Park. Trouble was, when it came to it it was raining, so my wife and I took a taxi instead: Gluttony had prevailed, as I knew it would, and my pathetic good intention was rent unto ribbons.

The Vine is a positively cavernous mock Tudor pile in Highgate Road, a fair stroll down from Parliament Hill and the great Bull & Last. The bit that is rather more Kentish Town than Highgate, then – as evidenced by the very drab surrounding buildings and



■ No dieting resolution here ... Joseph at The Vine in Highgate Road

places such as Costcutters. Also, rather bizarrely, a clutch of shops selling what look to be rather good handmade Turkish rugs in reds and pinks and blues at impossibly low prices (there – a little bit of local colour for you). This gastro is one of the more recent revamps by a company called Realpubs: they tend to take over large and traditional old boozers with proper bars and fittings and so on, the laudable idea being to preserve and enhance all that sort of loveliness while getting serious about the food side of things. So at the back there is a large and pleasant eating space with a pitched glass roof (it used to be the garden – though there is still a decent space at the front for smokers and people who like to inhale the traffic as well). The décor is a prime example of the current and ubiquitous cool and casual look: some exposed brickwork, a mishmash of 1940s sturdy tables and chairs encircled

by buttoned leather banquettes, industrial white tiling and pendants as well as drippy crystal chandeliers and Oxfam-chic bedside lamps with pleated silk shades: here is intended to be the civilising and feminine element, and just as ironic as you want it to be.

Charming

Service is charming and efficient, the open stainless steel kitchen exuding a comforting air of professionalism. The menu is curious: most of the starters and puddings are Italian in one way or another, while the mains are largely British. My wife ordered zucchini fritti (deep fried courgettes) with a garlic dip as a starter, and I wondered at the wisdom of this: it's a good flavour and a nice crunch, but a whole bowl of it can get a bit boring (and so it proved). I won hands down: a starter portion (though still very generous, as are all the dishes here) of a quite superb pork

the brightest green, and the little potato dumplings quite pleasing and very cosy. "Excellent," she said. "Nice reduction, deseeded plum tomatoes, fresh herbs ... very very good."

And then we were full: I swear it was the food that did it – aided along its way by a more than decent Montepulciano at £18.50, which was perfectly fair enough. So we ordered puddings. I know. And, alas, at this point the quality wavered quite badly. My wife's pear and ginger crumble with vanilla custard was terribly sweet, and yet had no discernible flavour of pear (and certainly none of ginger) while the custard was watery and actually quite actively unpleasant. I had ordered chocolate brownie with clotted cream ice cream, though what arrived was an enormous slab of chocolate sponge – but not very chocolatey, and a bit indigestible; the ice cream tasted only of cold. Oh dear: they lost a star over this – if only for all our sakes we hadn't ordered puddings! And why, you might demand with justification, if we were so damn full, did we even contemplate so foolish a thing as puddings? Well duh! Why on earth do you think ...? Gluttony.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk and contact may be made if you want to come and have lunch ...

FACTFILE

■ THE VINE

86 Highgate Road, NW5
Tel: 020-7209 0038

■ Food served every day from noon-4pm, 6pm-10.30pm. Cichetti (little plates) noon-10.30pm

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

■ Cost: Posh gastro prices: about £80 for three-course meal for two with wine.

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found in biodynamic vintages really enhances the flavour

complicated to attempt to explain here) and reasonable in what reaction he expects from wine drinkers.

"What is minerality for most people? It's not fruity or floral. It doesn't smell. But it will taste and modify wine," he said. And that's where salinity came in, as he instanced how salt in caramel or butter emphasised flavour. In wine, too, it could play a flavour-enhancing role – but with restraint.

(A strange co-incidence now, as I write. I've just been poured a glass of rather good soave, which seems to have a

salty edge. Thought association?)

The result, added Humbrecht, is a wine "you want to drink another glass of – to finish up the bottle".

Fragrant

That was my reaction to almost every one of the eight wines at the tasting, presented by their enthusiastic yet seemingly sensible growers. There was certainly some salinity but much more as well – some great, fragrant aromas, splendidly pure fruit, concentrated lingering length. When I ran

out of reasoned notes, the words wow and yum appeared. Case made.

Too many of the wines poured on that occasion aren't yet available in the UK. So where to find "salty" wines? Berry Bros & Rudd and The Wine Society both have a good range from Zind-Humbrecht and the fine southern Rhone wines of Montirius are also at BBR.

Otherwise, Les Caves de Pyrene – that extraordinarily rich source of organic, natural and sometimes way-out quirky wines – is one of the best places. You don't

need to go to the shop on the outskirts of Guildford, simply download the list (www.lescaves.co.uk) then phone 01483 554750 for prices and delivery. The choice of wines is huge so here are just three recommended names to look out for: Olivier Pithon (Rousillon), Roches Neuves (Loire) and Saint Nicolas (Vendée).

■ After I'd completed this column, BBR issued its summary of sales in 2011. Sadly, and strangely, biodynamic (and organic) wines dived.



■ Biodynamic wine in the making

Picture: Biodyvin