

▶ Restaurant review Joseph Connolly

Does one really need a choice of 32 burgers?

Once you brave the colourful streets of Camden to reach it, Hâché has plenty to offer, including disappointingly soggy chips

As I was rather early for my lunch in Inverness Street, I thought I'd wander through the psychedelic souk that long ago used to be plain old Camden Town. I can well understand how all these little shoplets must gladden the eye, if not nostril, of the flocks of largely prepubescent tourists who still and daily swarm there in order to marvel. Apart from "food to go" – the successive conflicting wafts of which rendered me queasy, then practically insensible – the main stuff on sale is clothing: the ubiquitous T-shirt with blurred motif and witless caption, very long and skinny stiff black leather coats (to transform the wearer into a vampire, or else the tube of licorice you used to suck on with a sherbet dip) and a quite extraordinary array of hats. Thousands of them – everything from a Biggles flying helmet to a fuchsia pink topper by way of tartan trilbys, berets, beanies and a very depressing mountain of baseball caps with exaggeratedly curved peaks. Though get this: I was the only person within the milling throng who was actually wearing a hat (though acquired from Bates in Jermyn Street, rather than touts in Camden Town). But presumably they must sell ... By the time I turned into Inverness Street, I had also passed no fewer than four pale and stultified youths just about holding up advertising boards. In the

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West End, these tend to be for a "Golf Sale" or "Cheap Tickets"; in Camden they are for "Tattoos" and "Piercing".

Hâché, my destination, is renowned for superior burgers – and I am always on the lookout for a decent example. I had tried to eat here about a year ago, but a waitress on the door told me that they unexpectedly had to close. "What's wrong?" I asked her. "Kitchen blown up?" "Yes," she said. Well all now seemed serene. The interior is deliberately plain and wooden, though enlivened by quirkiness such as crystal chandeliers (becoming something of a cliché in the more utilitarian eating places, I'm finding) and the doors of the Ladies and Gents covered in pink and mauve glitter, while adorned with great gold letters.

Guest

My guest was the renowned political commentator and expert Peter Riddell – recently retired from The Times after 20 years, and now the newly installed director of the Institute for Government, a role he took over from Lord Adonis. In common with lots of people I know who officially "retired" he now takes on more work than ever: he has recently published a book washily entitled *In Defence of Politicians, In Spite Of Themselves* and is a governor of his old school Dulwich College – whose most famous



■ Joseph Connolly with Peter Riddell

alumnus was P G Wodehouse. "I discovered his books in the library when I was 11," Peter recalls very lovingly. "I still consume them." This alone shows you what an utterly good egg he is: beware the man who doesn't adore Wodehouse (women are different: they tend to think him flippant. They're quite wrong, of course). I actually remember attending the opening of the Wodehouse corner at Dulwich – his desk, typewriter, spectacles, pipes – where I discovered that his tobacco pouch still was filled with a mixture of Virginia and broken up cigars.

Peter, though used to rather more glamorous restaurants (I did feel rather guilty about dragging him here) settled in very happily to Hâché – as did I, despite our being the oldest people in the room by about 100 years. But this is a very easily casual and friendly place, with tip-top smiley and energetic service. There are 16 variations of beef burger, as well as chicken, fish, lamb and even crispy duck: four more

for veggies. Does one really require a choice of 32 burgers...? Not really: most, I suspect, would plump for a cheeseburger – as, wisely, did Peter (Stilton, this one) ... and I almost managed it myself, but I just had to be tricky, didn't I, and go for something called a "Sicilian": not horse's head, no no, but beef topped with mozzarella and Parma ham. Didn't work: the decently juicy burger overwhelmed the ham, while the mozzarella had solidified into a paley loitering frisbee. Peter's looked much better and he did enjoy it. The burgers come in either ciabatta (Peter's choice, and the right one) or a non-sweet brioche (my choice: rigid, yet airy): clearly I'm just no good at this restaurant lark. Frites come in at £2.95 extra, and are served in dinky little miniature deep-fat fryers – though if only they had spent rather longer in the real thing! They were primrose and lethargic – each swooning one of them very evidently bored to the point of death.

As we sipped a very decent Vin de Pays d'Oc at just £14.95, I was eager to pump Peter about his peerless experience at The Times: so who were the best prime ministers, then ...? "Without doubt the two who made the most impact were Thatcher, obviously ... and Blair, for other reasons". He was closest to Thatcher, always part of the elite press corps for major events: when she was with Reagan in the White House, so was Peter. The Kremlin with Gorby ...? Peter was there too. "Great fun," he says. "Upmarket voyeurism, really". Did he ever consider becoming an MP himself? Or even a PM? "I think you have to be a journo or a politico: I knew I was a journo". He was indeed: straight to the FT after Cambridge, and then The Times. "The greatest thing I learned was always to bag a seat at the back next to Denis Thatcher: his muttered running commentary told you all you needed to know". Peter lives in Kentish Town with his wife Avril and daughter. Avril was Olympic

British women's luge champion, and is very into running marathons. "And you, Peter – do you run marathons...?" He looked at me. "I am very supportive," he said.

For pudding we had "Hâché brownies" (which is probably a joke, who can tell?) – home made on the premises and billed as "heavenly temptation". Well they were huge – and really rather good, if not of the finest: the vanilla ice cream was better than average. Now on the menu it says this: "We're very good listeners and welcome any ideas which would help continually to improve the Hâché experience". This may be ungrammatical, but it does seem heartfelt. So okay Hâché – be a good listener and listen to this: never, ever serve flaccid chips. Include really good ones in the price of the burger. And if you must have paper napkins, then make them larger and more substantial than an itchy bitsy Kleenex.

Peter had to shoot off to an important meeting ... and I, predictably, didn't. So first I bought a baseball cap and then I had a Beckhamesque tattoo done, as well as an intimate piercing. Oh dear ... I don't know why I tell you all these lies: maybe I am limbering up to become an MP. Or even a PM.

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

FACTFILE

- **HÂCHÉ**
24 Inverness Street, NW1
Tel: 020-7485 9100
- Open Monday to Wednesday noon-10.30pm. Thursday-Saturday 10.30am-11pm. Sunday noon-10pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: In line with this sort of thing. Average burger (with frites) about £12. Drink reasonable.

good glass of wine and loving and safeguarding your liver from disease

see their GPs for liver function tests as a precautionary measure. "There were a lot of the worried well," said Sarah Wise, communications manager for the trust and instigator of Love Your Liver Month, who was delighted with the success of the day – participants came from as far away as Kent and Southampton. "People were aware of their drinking and the effect on their liver."

Those in other cities, notably Glasgow and Liverpool, were less well informed and overall almost a

quarter of the 300 people scanned were referred to their GPs.

Wise emphasises that 95 per cent of all liver disease is preventable, with the right approach to alcohol, healthy eating and exercise, which is the core message of the Love Your Liver campaign. One Brent Cross participant echoed that, warning of the importance of stopping people "sleep walking into liver disease".

With major liver centres at the Royal Free Hospital and Imperial/St Mary's, people round here have de-

cent access to NHS investigations if need be, but that's not true country-wide. Having a FibroScan privately costs around £250; with specialist consultation and more tests the figure can reach £1,000. So all credit to the trust for running the roadshow and to alcohol-free wine company Eisberg for supporting it. More are planned, once enough sponsor support is found.

Sensible

How can you combine enjoying wine with avoiding liver damage? The obvious

answer is never drink to excess and certainly not to binge. Also, the recently-stressed advice to have at least one or two alcohol-free days a week is sensible. But it's a complicated subject and each individual is different, though young women are particularly at risk, as are some ethnic groups. Government advice remains at a maximum of two to three units a day for women, three to four for men (a 13.5% bottle of wine contains 10 units).

There is a growing choice of very low or no alcohol

wines around, but unfortunately most I've tasted haven't appealed – I'd rather go without completely and drink decent fruit juice. But if you want something which looks the part in the glass, Eisberg comes in four styles, costing around £3.60 (biggest choice at Morrisons, riesling and cabernet sauvignon at Waitrose, chardonnay at Tesco).

This far from the end of the wine and health debate. For more useful information, visit www.britisHLiverTrust.org.uk and www.drinkingandyou.com.



■ One of Eisberg's alcohol-free wines