

Restaurant review Joseph Connolly

The vending machine would be a safer bet

With half-frozen prawns, pate reminiscent of Shippam's Paste and an egg resembling bath grouting, this is officially our worst restaurant

Are you one of those readers who like nothing better than getting stuck into the nitty gritty of a really bad review...? All the write-offs? The slatings? If so – hoo boy, are you in for a field day, matey ...!

The quest for lunch had begun quite innocently enough, with my wife and myself strolling around Hampstead Village with no plan at all, idly looking for somewhere new. And on a sunny Tuesday, I was surprised by the number of places that were closed: the choice seemed to come down to vegetarian Indian (oh please!) or Café Rouge (oh pleeeeeease ...!). We wandered down to South End Green, and here was a similar story. So we wheeled on up past the Royal Free Hospital – stunned, as ever, by its picture-perfect chocolate box prettiness – and into Belsize Park. And there before us stood the hulk of the Premier Inn, and at once I was flooded by a warped sort of nostalgia. For here, in the form of Brasserie Gerard, was the site of my very first review – which, wholly coincidentally, appeared in this newspaper precisely three years ago this very week. It had proved to be the worst restaurant imaginable, and consequently received a perfectly damning review. But

■ Joseph next to the vending machine



now it has been transformed into something brand new called Thyme – one of Premier Inn's recent in-house chain of eating places, all tricked out in fresh apple greens, the opalescent glass of the frontage exhorting the hungry, thirsty and weary passers-by (i.e us) to "eat, drink, relax". What could be nicer ...? Well as it turned out, a rodent kebab during the darkest days of the French Revolution would have been a great deal nicer, as would roadkill, gruel and grazing from a carthorse's nosebag.

The décor is innocuous enough, in a 1970 Wimpy/Golden Egg sort of a way, despite the flooring being made up of apparently filthy paving slabs. It was empty save for a brace of shirtsleeved reps, poor sods, chewing a steak on expenses and seemingly rapt at their respective screens, brimming with spreadsheet and pie chart. We were greeted by a friendly waitress called Greta, who commanded a good few words of English. The menu too is very Wimpy/Golden Egg, being littered with coloured pictures and wonkily printed words such as 'succulent', 'tempting' and 'delicious'. On the front is the news that the food is "freshly prepared for you". Well all right, then. The only fizz



■ Thyme at Premier Inn on Haverstock Hill

Picture: Polly Hancock

available not by the bottle is Jacob's Creek pink, which after fifteen bleeding minutes was brought in airline-style mini bottles, together with two huge and grubby goblets. Greta was dispatched with instructions to locate a couple of flutes, preferably clean. We waited, trying not to listen to the tinny tinkle of Windmills Of Your Mind. On offer was the single most loathsome sounding starter I have ever encountered: a whole (!) baked Camembert ... which, the menu warned, would incur a wait of fifteen minutes. Which turned out to be exactly half as long as we had to wait for a slice of chicken liver pate and a prawn cocktail. The pate was deeply reminiscent of Shippam's Paste of hellish 1950s memory, and accompanied by four one inch-thick great triangles of bread and a shrivelled bit of lettuce. The cocktail was served in a deep glass bowl filled to the very brim with yet more shrivelled lettuce, with a very few small prawns polluting the surface. These had been bought in in vast frozen sackfuls, my pitiful few only semi-defrosted, and covered in in-

dustrial slime. The taste was at first of water, this quickly reinforced by revulsion. So we left all of that.

Horror

Poor Greta: she looked quite frightened as she took it all away. I was pleased to see that they had Chianti by the glass, so I ordered one of those. But it took ten more minutes for her to discover that they didn't, as it happened, have any Chianti ... but they did have Rioja ...! Winter turned to spring as we awaited our mains. My wife had ordered a burger with 'New Yorker Topping' as an extra. How to convey to you the full awful horror of this thing ...? The burger was of that curious felted fibre that bears no resemblance to actual meat, and renders Iceland's frozen multi-packs akin to wagyu fillet. The 'New Yorker Topping' – which no New Yorker would recognise, let alone eat – was billed as two rashers of back bacon and grated cheddar cheese, but turned out to be one lump of bacon, sweetly topped with a melted ping pong ball. And now I must turn my attention to the mixed grill that was set

before me. According to the menu, here was to be rump steak, chicken breast, gammon steak, pork sausage, fried egg, tomato, garden peas, mushroom and chips. Great, I thought: a rep's breakfast! Turned out to be a dog's. Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God ...! The steak – requested medium rare – was virtually incinerated, and bore all the texture of pirana pine. The egg was in fact Polycell bath grouting that had been fried the week before, but – with tenderness and love – kept tepid for me. The chicken you could have used as a plane to knock off the rough edges from the blockboard of the steak. Both the gammon and peas were mercifully absent, the chips oily, and the sausage – though a bit burnt – quite good. So I ate the sausage. Both of our still-filled plates were quietly removed – and Greta, dear Greta, you could see it in her eyes ... true to her namesake, all she wanted was to be alone.

Then the manager came over to say hello. The manager had heard on the grapevine that we "hadn't had the best of meals". The manager was right. The manager

said he was not going to give me a bill. I insisted on a bill. The manager dug his heels in. The manager then apologised. He said he was "still training the team". Well I did laugh – for what an absolute corker that was! This team couldn't be trained to pull a bloody cart: the ingredients were the poorest ever, the execution dire beyond imagination. And get this: had I received a bill, the whole fiasco would have tottered nearly sixty quid. So if ever you are unlucky enough to find yourself in the Premier Inn and the need comes upon you to 'eat, drink, relax' ... well there is a vending machine in the lobby with crisps and Snickers: your best bet by far.

Often I am asked what is the best restaurant in Hampstead. Well – it's open to debate. But – just as three years ago – this, by a very long way indeed, is unquestionably the worst, and consequently it receives an unprecedented zero stars. Well established and much-loved local restaurants have performed had to remember that, over the years, the fundamental things apply; their dedication will be a comfort to them, as Thyme goes by.

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

FACTFILE

■ THYME

Premier Inn
215 Haverstock Hill, NW3
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■ Open: presumably all day long, but it doesn't really matter as you're not ever going to go there, are you?

■ Food: ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆ (poor Greta – well you've got to, really)

■ The Feeling:

☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: Either £60 for two people not eating, or no bill for two people not eating.

Then head to the cool north with its elegant and delicate whites

cessive Les Preuses vintages, made from 50-year-old vines, which Nathalie brought to that tasting are pure, delicious wines. The philosophy is simple: "If you have beautiful grapes, you have beautiful wines," she told me.

It was fascinating to see the differences, year on year, in one wine from one producer. The 2008 was very special indeed, which bodes well for the 2010, already aromatic and long but far away yet from its full potential.

Compared to grand cru chablis, petit chablis, lowest level of the appellation, is often dilute and simple. Not true in the case of the 2010 from Domaine

Moreau-Naudet, which Stephane Moreau was proud to show at the tasting of one of his UK importers, Lea & Sandeman. It has splendid minerality and length – "posh stuff" as I noted – and is remarkable value for money.

There were seven more examples of Moreau-Naudet 2010 chablis there and they were all lovely. But as a buyer, I'd go for the petit chablis and the very fine premier cru Montee de Tonnerre. I think Moreau approved of my preferences – he was particularly enthusiastic about how well Montee de Tonnerre expressed its terroir.

His grand cru Valmur is excel-

lent, too, though rather more burgundian in character (and a lot more expensive). Moreau is another who nurtures his vines very carefully, along organic principles.

Stockists

Where to buy these wines. There are several Fevre wines at The Wine Reserve (www.thewinereserve.co.uk), free delivery on orders above £100. The current vintage of Les Preuses is 2006 at £44, there is domaine chablis at £14 and premiers crus Fourchaume 2007/09 at £21 and Vaulorent 2008 at £23. At Bordeaux Index ([\[index.com\]\(http://index.com\)\) limited supplies of premiers crus Fourchaume or Mont de Milieu 2008 are £162 a case of 12 including London delivery.](http://www.bordeaux</p>
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Lea & Sandeman has Moreau-Naudet petit chablis 2008 at £13, 2010 at £14, and 2009 Montee de Tonnerre 2009 at £22.75. There are other premiers crus, and grand cru Valmur 2008 is £35. Case discounts apply, free delivery if you spend at least £100.

One final recommendation: The Wine Society (www.winesociety.com) has a very classic, organically-grown chablis from Julien Brocard, Domaine de la Boissonneuse 2008 at £13.



■ Producer Nathalie Fevre