

My memory of Goldfish will last a long time

All the good rumours surrounding Hampstead's modern Chinese prove true – with its clever combinations that are perfect works of art

As it was Leap Year Day, I was forced to make a headlong dash into the restaurant, a mac slung over me in a perfectly pathetic attempt to deflect the worst excesses of the hordes of marauding women desperate to propose to me. The ploy was only partly successful: my raiment was rent, tussocks of hair were lost to eager, scrabbling fingers, and several of the ladies passed out on the pavement: fortunately St John's Ambulance was at hand. So you can see that entering Goldfish in the High Street was as entering a mellow and welcome haven of serenity, after the hurly burly's done.

I have heard nothing but good about this place, and I have been consciously hoarding the prospect of the experience. The fabulous eighteenth century interior was not really recognisable from my last visit, when probably it was still the Café Des Arts. Original window shutters just about linger on, but it's a very far cry from Fagin's Kitchen of blessed memory (you have to be pretty old to remember Fagin's Kitchen, with its candles, cobwebs and damned good food). These days we have a poem in black, white, wine and orange with oval cut-outs in the walls, a recently expanded space and lit-up geometric glass panels, glowing with red, blue and the occasional goldfish. Maybe they had goldfish dim sum ...? I doubted it. In the old days when Hampstead Fair

used to dole them out as prizes in little polythene bags, there was never a shortage: the paths on the Heath were littered with the little things.

My guest for lunch was Robert Chote, who has been economics editor of both The Economist and the FT, and is currently in charge of the Office for Budget Responsibility. This is far too grown-up for me to have a hope of understanding, so let Robert explain it himself: "You see, in this country, people do not necessarily believe what the Chancellor says – but they might believe us, because we do not have a political axe to grind. Transparency is the key: we show our workings." Okay? And I've had to keep this piece back till the Budget announcements were made, as Robert had been refusing to talk to any journalists (I, naturally, do not count as a journalist, as any fule kno). So Robert and his team of twenty have consulted all the experts, met George Osborne and presented him with alternatives and possibilities: and as of yesterday, you will know the outcome.

We ordered a mixed platter of dum sum, to get us going. I have had some miserable dim sum experiences just lately, but these were perfectly marvellous. We have a serious attitude to food, here: it is billed as 'modern Chinese cuisine' and the cook – the aptly named Kevin Chow – used to be head chef at the Four Seasons, Singapore (and has no



■ Joseph with Robert Chote at Goldfish in Hampstead

Picture: Polly Hancock

truck whatever with MSG). The prawn in particular was outstanding, though the chicken siu mai was rather marvellous too (no goldfish though, as I suspected). I always find that Beaujolais goes very well with Chinese food, so I nabbed a bottle of that. As we sipped, it occurred to me that Robert is always pretty stylishly dressed, favouring as he does darkish suits, darkish shirts with darkish ties and a soft and groovy black leather coat. His hairstyle too is singular: "I work next door to Scotland Yard. There is a hairdresser there called Clipper of the Yard. Geddit? I have a number 3 on top, and a number 2 at the back". Indeed. And in case you are wondering, my own is a 44 and a 67, respectively.

Currently Robert lives in Tufnell Park with his wife – who is Head of Public Spending at the Treasury – and two young children, both of

whom attend Fitzjohn's Primary (it's a pretty sparky household: the nanny is a cricketer, a boxer and is studying for a PhD in Cultural Theory). His affinity with North London in general and Hampstead in particular is a long one. "I first lived in Finsbury Park with the showbiz editor of The Sun and the drummer from Primal Scream. So that was lively. Then a flat above Jane & Dada, just across the road from here, and after that Prince Arthur Road." He intends to return to Hampstead just as soon as the Head of the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Head of Public Spending at the Treasury mutually deem it prudent.

The food was brought by a pair of smiling Chinese waitresses, both very smart in black. And it was wonderful food. Chilli prawn with broccoli was a work of art in vibrant pinks and greens:

and anyway we were rather full ... but a couple did intrigue me: creamed avocado with coconut ice cream ... sauteed banana with red bean paste ... but in the end, we just shared a plate of fresh fruit: kiwi, strawberries, grapes, blueberries and a wedge of mango that was rather cold and unyielding, as well as looking rather worryingly like Wensleydale. So: a capital lunch, the only real flaw being the wailing bloody baby in the background – but then that's mandatory in Chinese restaurants. There's maybe a central depot in Chinatown, and they hire them out by the week. Robert opined that it might be a CD. He then had to rush off to balance the nation's books (good luck to him) and soon after I emerged into the watery sunshine. But I had forgotten that still it was Leap Year Day ...! Clearly in the meantime, this stubborn band of besotted women had been tweeting for reinforcements – the collective scream and stamped was redolent of the golden days of Beatlemania. It was touch and go for a minute, I can tell you – but then my heavily armed minders finally managed to bundle me into the back of the Hummer. Few dead.

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

FACTFILE

■ GOLDFISH

82 Hampstead High Street, NW3
Tel: 020-7794 6666
■ Open Mon-Thu noon-10.30pm, Fri-Sat noon-11pm, Sun noon-10pm.
■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
■ Cost: Set lunch at £9.95, or £25 and £36 for two. Otherwise, infinity and beyond ...

I have had some miserable dim sum experiences lately, but these were perfectly marvellous. We have a serious attitude to food here

and tastings in cocktails, beers and teas

May's is all about vodka.

■ For those who don't want to touch alcohol, the soon-to-be-opened **Diamond Jubilee tea rooms** at Fortnum & Mason might be the best bet. From April 1, to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee, tea lovers can sample from a menu of more than 150 teas. The Diamond Jubilee Tea Salon will bring to life the often overlooked process of brewing: your cuppa will arrive with a timer that will ring once your pot has reached its optimum brewing time (to remind you to pour, of course). There will also a tea

tasting room serving those passionate about all things tea. Being at F&M, of course, it doesn't come cheap: tea food menus start at £38. But it might be worth it if you want to come out of a tasting session feeling regal, rather than raw.

■ Jubilee Tea Salon details can be found at fortnumandmason.com.

BrewDog, 113 Bayham Street, Camden Town. Tel: 020-7485 6145.

The Forge, 3-7 Delancey Street, Camden Town. Tel: 020-7383 7808.

BrewDog serves 25ml measures of super-strength single malt style beers for tasting



■ Fortnum and Mason's new tea salon has more than 150 teas from around the world