



Two of the best and Italian food

Lunching with *Ham&High* reader Lucy Scott-Moncrieff gives our restaurant reviewer a very jolly time

Some people are of the opinion that winning something such as an Oscar, the Man Booker Prize or an El Gordo sweepstake could in some way be faintly desirable. But true connoisseurs will know that the only thing in the world truly worth winning is the annual competition to have lunch with me: What a prince of a prize, I'm telling you! And the unfeasibly fortunate winner is ... Lucy Scott-Moncrieff: Hampstead resident these past 15 years and a human rights solicitor who this summer is due to ascend to the giddy height of being president of the Law Society. You see, only the very best people apply to have lunch with me.

We were due to meet at an up-market Italian restaurant in Crouch End – and I was deliberately early so that I could have a mooch about. I like Crouch End – it's homely and nicely old-fashioned. But within a stone's throw of the restaurant there was ample evidence of how these days the naming of shops – in common with websites – is a wholly arbitrary and rather laughable matter. What do you think Black Katz might be? A nightclub? A Caribbean beauty parlour? A magic shop? Well it's a property management company. And what about this one, virtually next door: The Engine Room. Another nightclub? A provider of MOTs? A urologist? Nope – it's a ladies' hairdresser: Of course it is.

'Madeleine moment'

The restaurant is called Qui. This is not pronounced 'key', as in the French for 'who', non non – but 'kwee', as in the Italian for 'here', si si. Don't ask me why they called their restaurant Here: Ask yourself – where else would it be? Maybe they are soon to open two more branches by the names of There and Everywhere, who can say? The only other diners that Thursday lunchtime were six old fellows at a window table, enjoying the bargain set lunch (£10.90 for two courses, £14.90 for three) as, I suspect, they do every single Thursday lunchtime, come rain or shine. And then there was Lucy and myself.

I received rather a lot of letters when I threw open this invitation for lunch just before Christmas, so huge thanks and apologies to all who entered. Lucy, though – she said nice things about the column (vital) and clearly enjoyed both food and restaurants. And also her surname stirred in me a 'madeleine moment' – for was not Edward Scott-Moncrieff the classic translator of Proust...? "Indeed," she verifies. "He was my grandfather's first cousin". She likes the Victorian novelists – Trollope and Dickens in particular – and loves to cook. Her garden (just accepted into the National Gardens Scheme) is her pride and joy: It boasts an 'eco-pond'. "Not a swimming pool, a pond. But I do swim in



■ Joseph with lunch guest Lucy Scott-Moncrieff at Qui in Crouch End

Picture: Polly Hancock

it". And to prove the point, she whipped out her iPad and showed me a picture of herself neck deep in said pond on New Year's Day, amid much floating ice. But apart from that, she seemed a perfectly sensible woman. The iPad is her other pride and joy: "Oh God, yes – I love it more than my children." The elder of whom, Harry, is a magician whose speciality turn is to bang a six-inch nail up his nose. Hampstead, eh? You just never can tell.

Qui is white and tranquil: not beautiful, though in no way offensive. Green olives are on the table, and a little freebie is

fridge. Dean Martin said cha cha amour.

As we awaited our mains, we sipped a young and fresh Montepulciano, and I chatted to Lucy about her work. She runs a rather large practice near to The Forum in Kentish Town, her team of lawyers specialising in cases defending society's most vulnerable. "There is a lot of eating out connected with work. My favourite local restaurants are Market, Camden Brasserie and Odette's." And in those she shows good judgment: I've reviewed all of them favourably. And she loves to cook huge Sunday lunches for hordes

fried courgette) that we ordered as a side. The so-called sauté potatoes were a letdown, though – halved new potatoes still in their skins, and no more than soft and bitter. And my main too: really not very good at all. Involtino of veal, sage and speck on a bed of spinach with a parmesan fondue. Sounds fabulous, I thought ... but it wasn't. An involtino should be a nice and chubby little parcel, but here was simply an overcooked escalope, rather burnt at the edges, folded over an equally overcooked shred of prosciutto. The 'fondue' was a yellowish eco-pond, lacking any hint of parmesan oomph. The tiramisu we then shared was similarly lacking in muscle: creamy enough, but seriously underboozed. Dean Martin said hey mambo, mambo Italiano ... and it's hard to argue with the man.

But we had had a jolly time: Lucy was very entertaining company, and although I can't say for sure, I think she enjoyed this jewel of a prize – so superior to any trinket, such as the Nobel. As we were leaving, Dean Martin said memories are made of this ... and he could easily be right.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed at www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **QUI**
14 Middle Lane, N8
Tel: 020-8341 0527
- Open Monday-Saturday noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm. Sunday all day.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: A la carte is a little too pricey (about £90 for three-course meal for two with wine), though set lunches are £10.90 for two courses, £14.90 for three.

Lucy is about to ascend to the heights of being president of the Law Society. You see, only the best people have lunch with me

brought along: Two golden breaded lozenges of chicken – nuggets, really ... but in a very yummy way. On the sound system, Dean Martin then said that when the moon hits your eye like a bigga pizza pie, that's amore.

Lucy started off with pan-fried scallops, courgette and pancetta in a balsamic reduction. The scallops, served with the coral, were small but plentiful. "They are brilliant with the bacon," she said, "but it's rather too salty". I had prosciutto with pear poached in red wine, served on a chunk of wood (oh God, I can't tell you how sick I am of food served on a chunk of wood). The ham was dry and excellent, the sliced half pear looking suitably beetrooty, but icy cold. This is the eternal problem for restaurants during a slack lunchtime: They don't dare take things out of the

of people: I would ask myself round there, but frankly I'm too worried about ending up in the eco-pond. She takes The Guardian ("I'm a bit of a Prosecco socialist") and the Ham&High. "I just love it. Couldn't be without it. The letters page, particularly – and I first turn," she added deftly, "to the restaurant page." Well shucks, ma'am. And then she brought out a turquoise paper fan which toned rather ripingly with her lime green watch and bangle. "I do get rather hot," she explained. "The fans I buy in bulk in Chinatown." Dean Martin said baby, it's cold outside.

She very much enjoyed her enormous tranche of grilled halibut with salsa verde ("wonderful") and steamed green beans. These were nicely al dente – but the star vegetables were the zucchini fritti (deep-

Plants mix it up when it comes to colour

By the middle of March this year, the bluebells were already in bud in my garden. They are not, unfortunately, the delicate native species but the coarser and more vigorous garden variety that is displacing them – or hybridising with them – in so many places. But whichever sort of bluebell, I have always found it interesting that a plant whose very name is based upon its blue colour should come up so often defiantly otherwise. In other words, many of my bluebells are not blue at all, but white, or even pink.

The subject of genetics always seems to lie somewhere beyond my general understanding. But I do have what might be called an observational interest in this business of colour variation and it is rather ironic that it often seems to occur in species whose name encapsulates their colour. Take the "red" valerian, for example. This Mediterranean plant, which also goes under the happy names of sweet Betsy and kiss-me-quick, was introduced to British gardens before 1600 but was already naturalised by the end of the 18th century. I remember it in my childhood as a seaside plant but it is now well established in our towns, including inner London, where it can most often be found on old walls. Perhaps it retains some affinity for the waterside, however, for I find it commonly alongside the canal where, as well as the eponymous deep red flowers, you can also find sprays of the purest white.

Ragged robin

The Latin word for red is "rubra". In a number of variations, it has found its way into the common names of English plants and animals, the best known among them being the robin. Similarly, among the plants, is the ragged robin, whose attractive, if rather shredded, red flowers can be found in damp meadows. A much commoner example is the ubiquitous Herb Robert. Though, as implied by its name, this is generally red, its flowers in my Holloway garden always come up white. This same white form, I have noticed, also spreads across several neighbouring gardens forming a distinct population. I spoke to a botanist recently who said there were similar white populations in areas of south London and I have now read of "white" areas in the Yorkshire Dales and in central Wales.

Of course, these variations do not occur only in plants with a colour in their name. In our local area, you can also find the early violets carpeting urban lawns from mid March onwards. These, too, often come up white, as well as, well, violet. Much less commonly, I recently found in the East End, a white form of the normally pink common mallow. Then there is the wild radish. This is a common annual of both waste and cultivated ground which shares the bristly leaves of its edible relative as well as the four petals in the shape of a cross, that are typical of the "crucifer" family. Though rather scruffy for most of the year, it becomes appealing enough when it opens its flowers, which can be white, yellow or, occasionally, lilac. The yellow-petalled forms are supposedly more common in the north and west of the country. But in our local populations I have found both white and yellow forms – sometimes side by side – and have never noticed a preponderance of one over the other.

Yarrow

Among all of these, I must confess to having a favourite. The yarrow is a feathery plant of almost every lawn, though frequent mowing means that we do not often see its packed white heads. The yarrow produces white flowers but these can be infused with greater or lesser degrees of pink as if the plant were blushing. They can also be flushed with a deeper purple as though the whole head of flowers has been dipped in red wine or stained with berry juice. It is a feature that has been taken and developed by plant breeders to produce various colour forms for the garden. And this year I have succumbed to temptation. I have purchased myself a packet of Achillea "Summer Berries" – yarrow, to you and I – for the garden.