

# So much on her plate, and it's all 'very nice'

Our gastronomic guru enjoys an ample lunch with a mystery guest, while also sharing his thoughts on the recent mayoral contest



» Did you vote for Boris? I did. No contest, in my mind. The overwhelming thing about Boris is that he's honest. Any promises he didn't fulfil during his initial term as mayor I am convinced that he simply did not have the time to get around to ... or else came to the conclusion that they were, after all, impractical or too damned expensive. Does this make me naïve? Conceivably so. I haven't always been a fan of Boris the mayor, but I have long been an admirer of Boris the man. On one occasion I was lucky enough to be sitting next to him at one of his fabled *Spectator* lunches, when still he was editor of that organ. There were all sorts of distinguished people around the table ... and me. The editor of *The Daily Telegraph* was there, I recall ... an opera critic ... the German ambassador ... various other bods. What struck me was Boris's knowledge in each of their fields: not thrown out in a boastful manner, by no means, and neither the fruit of some hasty mugging-up. So when I first learned he was running

for mayor, I was actually dumbfounded. He was the perfect editor of *The Spectator*, and was tipped for the top spot at the *Telegraph* ... so what on earth was this, now? Politics? Who would have thought it?

Now Ken ... a very different kettle of newts. He craves above all power and publicity at any cost whatever (usually ours). He may seem perfectly amiable when bumping around the Finchley Road Waitrose (and he is) but here is the man who swore to Londoners that he would never so much as even consider the abolition of the Routemaster, very shortly before abolishing the Routemaster. And as ever when world-famous things that everyone loves are summarily done away with, the replacement is much, much worse. And so we got the benighted bendy bus – which Boris vowed to get rid of and replace with a new sort of Routemaster, and he did. Ken sanctioned so many architectural horrors on this city ... the buildings we hate, that architects continue to foist upon us. I thought of this in Swiss Cottage on my way down to Kentish Town for lunch – this UCL Academy they are throwing up in Avenue Road? Have you seen it? Slabs of black. And where they have run out of slabs of black, they have bunged in slabs of white. And random bits of planking. Hideous, and already stained by the ceaseless rain, and it isn't even finished yet.

*The Oxford is the sort of building that everybody loves, a good and solid Victorian corner pub with old-fashioned furniture and lighting*



■ **The Oxford**

The Oxford in Kentish Town in the days when it looked rather less rough around the edges. I was waiting for an editor. A female editor. And that's all I can tell you about her because she insists upon being the Mystery Guest. Probably ashamed to be seen with me – and let's face it, who wouldn't be? I shall call her Ringo, if only because she was wearing rather a lot of rings. Ringo herself, by the way, was once asked by a reporter why he had so many rings on his fingers and replied that it was because he couldn't fit them all through his nose. About which many demurred.

## Tempting menu

Anyhoo ... here we are, Ringo and me, looking at the rather tempting menu, and sifting through the 18 wines they offer by the glass. In a place that has serious ales – including those from the Camden Brewery not far down the road – this is im-

pressive. We kicked off with Shetland mussels in a white wine, celery and garlic sauce with samphire (plump, peppery and plentiful) and – for Ringo – a sautéed chorizo and potato salad with croutons and a poached egg. She queried the presence of croutons with potato, but managed to wolf them both down. The portion was actually enormous, the egg nicely oozing, the sausage a good and tangy mouthful – she pronounced the whole thing “very nice”. Just very nice. All I could get. Well look – she has a lot on her mind. Like learning Japanese and wondering why all her past boyfriends have had the same name. Spooky, no? I think she yearns to meet a Vladimir, a Marmaduke ... or maybe even a Ringo. She loves her meat, this girl, and I had been buoyed to find on The Oxford's website a large rib of beef for two people to share ... though alas it hadn't made it on to the menu I was holding. So she settled for a

28-day aged Aberdeen Angus ribeye with chips and a green salad. It was large though rather thin, the steak, while still managing to be rare, as requested. This she said was “very nice”. I know. But look – she has a lot on her mind. Like writing a novel and planning to travel the world. I had a cheeseburger, which I had been told by the waiter was one of the most popular things on the menu, and his personal favourite. And it was ... OK. Good meat, though not at all juicy, the mean bit of cheese rather congealed – but decent enough, I suppose, as such things go. After an age we were offered puddings by a completely different waiter who had suddenly materialised from somewhere. “Is the chocolate brownie good?” I rather fatuously asked him. “Good? Is it good? You want to know if it's good? It's great. Absolutely great.” So I had that ... and it was good – not great, but good. And Ringo had a truly colossal mound of sticky toffee pudding (you might be picturing someone on the lines of Hattie Jacques by this time, but actually she is of model proportions). And she said it was “very nice”, quite as you have come to expect. Yes but look – she has a lot on her mind. Because she takes on absolutely everything, this girl. And both Ken and Boris should be watching her closely, because it can only be a matter of time before she's running for mayor. I'd probably vote for her.

Picture: Bernard Pretorius

■ **All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).**

## FACTFILE

- **THE OXFORD**  
256 Kentish Town Road, NW5  
Tel 020 7485 3521
- Open every day for lunch and dinner.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Usual upper-gastropub prices. About £80 for three-course meal for two, with drink.

## guidelines to ensure the two partners avoid stepping on each other's toes

green wine, green vegetable.

But what of bacchus? Four were in the line-up, three bacchus alone, one blended with Ortega and pinot gris.

In its herbaceous pungency, bacchus recalls sauvignon blanc, often suggested as the best asparagus wine. That character can be overdone, though not in these peasantly fresh and fragrant wines. Two from Chapel Down – England's largest wine producer – proved an interesting contrast: Lamberhurst Estate bacchus reserve, blended for M&S

(£12), was more substantial and warmly fruited than the straight Chapel Down bacchus (reduced from £11 to £9.60 at Waitrose until June 6). Each, from the 2010 vintage, was a happy match; 2011, coming soon, should be even more appealing, given the potential of the sample shown at the M&S press tasting.

Denbies bacchus 2010 (£10.50) took time to express its attractively delicate, elderflower character; its big sister, Denbies Ranmore Hill 2009 blend (£13, both from [\[vineyard.co.uk\]\(http://vineyard.co.uk\)\) proved runner-up to L'Empreinte in the style and class league: a touch of smoky oak balanced by flowers, crisp fresh fruit and a creaminess on the finish which flattered the salmon which followed the asparagus.](http://www.denbies-</a></p>
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Of two sauvignons we tried, generously scented and flavoured Villa Maria Cellar Selection 2011 (£12, Majestic, Co-op) shone on its own, while crunchy green Yali Wetland 2011 (£7.50, Majestic) matched the green spear well.

But the choice doesn't stop there – gentle Castell de Raimat albarino (£10, The Sampler, Wine Rack) was an unassuming foil to the asparagus flavours; oaky, quirky, fascinating Errazuriz Wild Ferment chardonnay 2011 (£13, Majestic, Co-op) unfortunately drowned them. Or consider any of these, which all have fans – aligoté, arneis, chenin blanc, mauzac, muscadet, dry muscat, verdejo, vermentino, weissburgunder... Can England's asparagus fields cope?



■ **Asparagus can be combined with a variety of wines**