

My taste of the Orient with an academic

The walls may be the colour of digestives but it was the fortune cookies that took the biscuit as far as our reviewer was concerned

Weng Wah House – or the Weng Wah, as it tends to be called – has been a fixture on Haverstock Hill for a very long time indeed, sweetly nestled as it is next to a KFC and now opposite Thyme, which is, by my official decree, Hampstead's worst restaurant. The fascia is bold and unmissable with huge red and chrome lettering standing proud from a Chinese yellow ground. It always used to be my takeaway of choice – but in those days they didn't deliver, which was always a pain (they do now) and then the prices began to get a little bit cheeky, so I transferred my custom to Welcome in Belsize Village, but I can't have been that welcome because it soon closed down (push off!) and then it reopened (welcome!) and then it closed down again (What's wrong with you? Didn't you hear us? Push off!) and so I abandoned that while still there were rumours of its reopening yet again (unfounded, as it turned out: push off forever). Then at some other point, Weng Wah was gutted by fire. More rumours suggested that this might have had something to do with the Tongs, but I very much doubted that on the grounds that sugar is so very rarely served with China tea, and anyway nobody actually uses those fiddly little things any more.

There used to be a little annex, alive with bright green tiling and lanterns and things where people waited to collect their takeaways: that's all gone now. The hordes of hungry now stride the length of the room and pick them up at the bar, which I don't think helps the atmosphere in a restaurant. The place was empty at lunchtime on a Tuesday, save

for a solitary Chinese lady who was rapidly paying her bill and leaving (I have this effect). My guest was Vanessa Clewes-Salmon, a vivacious and highly knowledgeable art historian whom, it startles me to realise, I must have known for about thirty years (although chivalry impels me to remark that she was at the time probably the only four year-old art historian in London). Vanessa is always on time, but I was deliberately early ... so I had a look about me. The walls are the colour of a McVitie's digestive, shading in the evenings towards maybe Hobnob, while the carpet is royalish blue and the chairs are chrome and brown leather: so to accuse the place of having a colour scheme would be a gross injustice. There are a couple of aquaria on either side of the attractive bar, these full of merely decorative fish, not those destined for death on a plate. There is a painting of stallions stampeding through the surf, their nostrils worryingly aquiver, and a huge picture of a sort of pagoda which is a dead ringer for the Feng Shang Princess floating Chinese restaurant in Regent's Park, though I'm damned sure it's not meant to be. The music is of the sort that might be drip-fed to you were you undergoing a deep tissue massage in a darkened room, this occasionally slipping into the plink and plonk they hit you with when you are kept on hold at 28p a minute to a call centre in Mumbai.

Too salty

Set meals are listed, as ever, though Vanessa and I scanned the rather unattractive laminated and monochrome menu for a little bit of variety. So we were having the 'chef's special hors d'oeuvres' which turned out to be very un-special indeed: nice enough crunchy fried



■ Joseph with art historian Vanessa Clewes-Salmon at Weng Wah House

seaweed, though far too salty, and then some clumsily assembled sesame prawn toasts, okay spring rolls, and then some other sort of fried rolls that appeared to be filled with whitish sourish goo. "Heinz Salad Cream" was Vanessa's verdict: not nice – and not great value ei-

having flirted with South End Road and Cannon Place along the way. She was briefly at Henrietta Barnett, and after that she went to Channing in Highgate. "Very much a school for young ladies in those days. Brown knickers with your name sewn into them". Then she

while the accompanying pancakes and cucumber were the waste of time they always are. Then we had Singapore vermicelli – with pork, chicken, shrimp and beansprouts – Szechuan spicy king prawns in a 'bird's nest' (actually contrived out of crispy noodle, which – though an appealing hybrid of Shredded Wheat and raffia – still came as something of a disappointment); and then the star of the show: sizzling sliced fillet of beef with asparagus in XO sauce. This would have won prizes in any sizzling contest – my God, it was positively spitting with pent-up fury. The meat was lean and tender – though in ridiculously large pieces, if chopsticks were to be your handicap of the day: no knives, of course. Then we needed rice ... and I, like the puerile idiot I am, was drawn to Fok-kin rice (and especially when I read that here was 'Mum's recipe') but settled instead for fried rice with diced vegetables, which was good. As were the plentiful and very juicy big prawns. The Singapore noodles were also rather moreish, though

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ther, at £12 the platter.

Things got a lot better, though – and while we awaited the mains, I got to chatting to Vanessa about her intensely local background. She grew up in a beautiful old house just next to the Heath ... and now she is living there again with her QC husband,

read History of Art and the Italian Renaissance at UCL, returning after a brief spell in PR to study Islamic art, in which she is an expert.

The quarter crispy aromatic duck – deftly fork-shredded at the table – was a cut above the usual: moist, and actually tasting of duck,

the curry powder was a bit overdone: my voice went husky as I watched Vanessa weeping – and here was nothing to do with emotion. "It does," she said, "clear out the sinuses".

As we opened our fortune cookies, the waiter told us about upstairs: you can hire it ... for a Karaoke night! Yay! And then, according to the website, you can "set yourself free and gorge on out of the world drinks". Vanessa fortune read thus: 'Soon you will be on top of the world' (as opposed to out of it) so maybe she's already booked up. Mine read as follows: "Think a lot before answering any question next Thursday". Those wacky Chinese, eh? Vanessa then told me about her new local business: Vanessa Clewes-Salmon Contemporary Art, specialising in colourful, uplifting pictures. She's having an exhibition at 10-12 Perrin's Court opposite Villa Bianca as we speak – so give her a call, if you'd like to go along (07739 665031).

Troubling

My brow was furrowed as we walked away: you see, suddenly, I had a lot on my mind. It was weighing heavily upon me, and I don't care who knows it – this awful knowledge that now I had to think a lot before answering any question next Thursday. Oh God, the stress ... I think I need an out of the world drink.

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

FACTFILE

- **WENG WAH HOUSE**
240 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7794 5123
- Open Mon-Fri noon-3pm, 6pm-11.30pm. Sat noon-12pm. Sun noon-11.15pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: Not cheap – but there are set meals at £17.80, £19.80 and £22 (per person).



and I'll finally get to tell my kreplach from my kneidlh

er will approach a table and politely enquire "Is anything all right ...?"

But The Gefiltefest will, I feel sure, be a wonderful indulgence for all. The great Claudia Roden – resident of Hampstead Garden Suburb and author of The Book of Jewish Food – is to be interviewed. She's written loads of cookbooks, actually, on things as diverse as picnics, coffee, Middle Eastern and Spanish food. She's even published one about 'Arab-Israeli' food, which I call right neighbourly. There will be quite a few

talks and cookery demonstrations – Challah baking, for instance: yum yum – and an opportunity for children to handle live chickens, should any child actually be moved to do such a thing. The rather creepy invitation to this event reads thus: "Come and meet and greet and handle your Friday night chicken!". Maybe it's a Jewish joke – who am I to say? There's also a panel discussion which will ask 'Does Jewish food really exist?' – so bold a question surely designed to instill panic in Jewish grandmoth-

ers everywhere.

So there you have it: The Gefiltefest. Mandy King is in charge of marketing – and for the very fact that I am writing all this, it is evident that she is good at her job. She suggests that the whole caper might easily be subtitled Much Ado About Noshing. Indeed. So go. And eat eat eat.

■ The Gefiltefest is on Sunday May 20 at Ivy House, 94-96 North End Road, NW1.



■ Homemade challot – traditional Jewish bread used to celebrate Friday night and festivals
Picture: Rachel Marcus