

Gaffes can't erase fond memories of La Gaffe

On learning it has clocked up 50 years, our reviewer paid a visit to a venue that was once next door to his home – and had mixed fortunes

La Gaffe and me: we got history. Way, way back, amid the shifting mists of time not yet quite forgotten, my wife and I lived at 1 The Mount Square – a rather grand Hampstead Village address for what was a modest skinny corner terrace house that made up for its total lack of outdoor space with a charming and cosy interior. So our kitchen window, you see, backed directly on to the rear of La Gaffe – this prompting everyone to sympathise deeply. Oh God how ghastly ...! Poor you! Behind a restaurant! The whirring fans! The smells! The ... bins! Yes, well ... we never had any trouble at all. La Gaffe was owned and run in those days by Bernardo Stella – quite the Hampstead character – and it was a happy ship. The only thing Bernardo would have loved more than having La Gaffe was the winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature – which in the end, I think, eluded him. Later, Bernardo bought 1 The Mount Square (not from me – I'd already moved on) and incorporated it into what has become a thriving hotel. And I think all this goes some way to explain why I haven't returned for simply decades: not because of bad memories, but the very reverse: years' worth of tenderly fond ones. But now the restaurant has clocked up 50 years (blimey!) and so I considered it to be time.

The exterior (and similarly Tuscan interior) still bears its flamboyant curlicues, ironwork and loopy writing – all now a little bit faded – and the window boxes packed with red geraniums are a welcoming sight. Though both Bernardo and the restaurant are Italian, he chose to call it La Gaffe – which, as we know, is French for The Error. The Blunder. The Botch. The Screw-Up. The – dare I say it? – Dog's Dinner. A daring name, wouldn't you say? Maybe here is the supreme encapsulation of very weighty irony. And now, it might well be the only conspicuously successful business in a very long stretch of Heath Street (with the exception, I suppose, of Pizza Ex-



■ Joseph with Professor Mark Ronan at La Gaffe

Picture: Polly Hancock

press). Most of the other shops are given over to very strange things – lots of eerie 'salons' devoted to making your skin less white, and your teeth a lot more so. And 'galleries'. And places that have been abandoned and derelict for literally years. When I lived up there, Peter O'Toole and Dudley Moore were near neighbours and the street was alive with the buzz and colour of Maxwell's, Chic, Drazin's, Goulding House, many fine pubs and a record shop: yeh, well – them was the days.

My guest for midweek lunch was Mark Ronan, professor of mathematics at UCL. Now this doesn't mean that he is simply awfully good at hard sums, no, no of course not. True mathematicians see beauty and balance where people such as I just go "Duh ...?" Witness the title of his 2006 book: *Symmetry and the Monster*. Mark is also an expert on Babylon (and which of us in these enlightened days is not?) as well as opera, theatre and dance. He attends new productions between three and five nights a

week, and writes them up on his blog (Mark Ronan's Theatre Reviews). He is a Highgate man, who swims in the ponds every single morning, bar Sunday. Which is why he's so slim, I suppose, and looks so disgustingly fit. Still he eats a lot, though: he was starving – and immediately zoned in on that day's special, ossobucco with saffron rice. The restaurant these days is run by Bernardo's son, Lorenzo – a very genial and enthusiastic chap with a smile for everyone, and I ordered from him vitello casa nostra – nothing to do with the Godfather's horse's head, I'm relieved to report, but veal with baby artichoke in a white wine and cream sauce. Before that we were having gambretti alla diavola – prawns with pan-fried mushrooms, fresh tomato, garlic and chilli (this for Mark) – and baked asparagus wrapped in Italian ham, topped with Parmesan, and grilled. To get us going: a glass of Chardonnay.

And here come hitches: Lorenzo bounded back into the (empty) restaurant to say: "I have good news

and bad news: which would you like first?" And Mark and I, we did what everyone does: looked very wary, and muttered darkly "bad news please ...". "Well," said Lorenzo, "we've run out of ossobucco". Uh-huh. By ten past one there had been an unstoppable run on this day's special in a restaurant where we were the only diners. Turned out it was yesterday's special. "And," I gently enquired, "the good news ...?" "The good news is," he beamed very brightly, "you get to choose something else ...!" Mm. Yes. I see. So Mark went for rack of lamb. And then he was asked to sample a white wine that wasn't Chardonnay. "The Chardonnay," explained Lorenzo, "is not sufficiently chilled". "Do you mean," I asked him, "not chilled at all ...?" "In a word ... yes". Turned out this was the day they were getting a new fridge: a bit later on, we watched them humping it in.

Mark's prawn thing was like a tomato sugo – very chilli hot, apparently, but he liked it a lot. My asparagus was way over-flabby,

the ham very fatty indeed, and the Parmesan had separated under the grill into something you didn't really want. My veal, however, was a considerable improvement: tender, the sauce quite decently done, and the sweetness and meltiness of the artichoke very pleasing indeed. Crisp fried courgettes were just the way you like them, and Mark demolished with gusto the red cabbage. Broccoli, though, had been steamed to the point of disintegration, and the gratin dauphinois should not have been served: hardish potato slices in pools of butter with little hint of gratin and none of the USP creaminess. Mark's lamb was a rack of three which might have been pinker, but still was fine and meaty and much enjoyed.

And then he wanted cassata – and particularly so when he learned that it was from the great Marine Ices – but there was none. So we both went for pere al porto: a whole pear, poached in port. "So," I said, eager to muscle in on the mathematical side of things, "two pears – that makes four ...!" Neither Mark nor Lorenzo smiled. Well look, I know it was quite pitiful: I didn't even laugh myself – and when I make a joke, that's a rare thing, I can tell you. Anyway, the pear – though too cold – was excellent, as was the accompanying vanilla ice cream. Lorenzo well knew that our experience had been, shall we say, mixed: here was a bit of an off day. But I think that in the evening, when it tends to be full, things certainly would be firing rather better. Bernardo is lucky in having so dedicated a son to carry on La Gaffe: looks like it'll be fine for another 50 years. So not a gaffe at all, then.

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

Factfile

- **LA GAFFE**
107-111 Heath Street, NW3
Tel: 020 7794 7592
- Open for lunch Thurs-Sun only. Open for dinner nightly. It is also a hotel.
- Food: ★★★★★☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆
- Cost: Reasonable. About £75 for three-course meal for two with wine.

 **LONDON 24**
Get our **FREE** app for great places to eat

core values when it comes to running a planet-friendly vineyard

odynamically and with environmental respect. "The softest pillow is a clear conscience," he said of the argument against herbicide use.

He also emphasised the need for balance, which brought harmony and happiness. From that came enthusiasm, "the cheapest form of fertiliser any person can put on the land" – an argument echoed later by Lemon as he spoke of how the farmer's ego enriched his crop.

More specifically, Millton described how his biodynamic preparations were made by "our grass going through our cows on to our grass into our compost". And he explained his reluctance to use screwcaps on his bottles: "Wine, especially biodynamic wine, is a living being. It has to be under a closure which responds to

the four seasons gracefully."

There was a very firm personal reason why the family vineyard had gone down the biodynamic route, said di Campalita. The catalyst was her own health problems as a town-dwelling child – solved finally by referral to a homeopathic doctor. Why not the same approach to viticulture?

Survival

Ted Lemon dwelt on the progress of farming since early humans first realised that by sowing seed they could be sure of crop succession. Apples in France apart, he produced other statistics of change and effect as the pattern developed from survival though profit to – belat-

edly – some consideration of health implications.

His final emphasis, however, was that Rudolf Steiner had constantly argued that no aspect of biodynamic farming should ever replace sound traditional farming practices. "It is very easy to get lost in some very esoteric practices."

■ Try these wines to see if you agree that biodynamics produces fine results: Millton Vineyards Te Arai chenin blanc and Opou chardonnay, both £13, www.vintageroots.co.uk; Stella di Campalto Rosso di Montalcino San Giuseppe 2009, £29.50, www.bbr.com; Littorai Vineyards (Ted Lemon) Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir 2009, £29.15, www.vineyardcellars.com.



■ Ted Lemon