



During the run-up to publication of one of my novels, an oriental publicist was assigned to me. Sweet girl, could be sour at times. We'd been in the publisher's office, and suddenly she looked at me and asked quite accusingly: "You like tie?" At which point, as English chaps will, I fingered the knot of mine rather gingerly, assuming that here was the thing being alluded to. "Well ... yes." I stuttered, reasonably uncertainly. "Quite fond, you know." As indeed I was, a Hilditch & Key thick silk woven job, it was. "And me," she then went on to say. "Not too spicy?" "No no," I rapidly assured her. "Not too spicy at all. Just right. Like you exactly the way you are." She looked at me fearfully, and then as you would a pitiable imbecile (a look I have encountered both before and since), before we sloped off for a spot of lunch. And only as we walked into the restaurant did I tumble: "You like Thai?" – that's what she had said to me. Lord, I did feel such a fool.

Exhibitions

I was reminded of all this nonsense just the other week in Heath Street, when my wife and I decided to have dinner in Tip Top Thai. This tiny little place has been here as long as I can remember, though I've never been in. Largely, I think, because they don't open for lunch – but here was the perfect opportunity, because before all the nosing, we were going to the private view of the second of a series of exhibitions in Burgh House put on by the Heath & Hampstead Society (which you should join, if you haven't already: they do mighty good work). This one is entitled *Old Hampstead Rediscovered*, devoted to the most evocative aspect of all: village scenes. Burgh House, it's so lovely, isn't it? A bit overpowered by an adjacent 1950s block, and no sort of garden to speak of, but still, a very lovely house. This small exhibition has the added and poignant touch of mounting contemporary photographs next to the old watercolours – a tiny fraction of Camden Archive's 3,000 strong collec-

Not quite a Thai to die for, but pretty hot stuff if you find that spice is nice

A woefully uninspiring dining room doesn't detract too much from our reviewer's enjoyment of oriental delicacies



■ **Tip Top Thai** in Heath Street, Hampstead

Picture: Polly Hancock

tion. The bad news is that where the Village has changed, it has very decidedly changed for the worse – the good news being that so very much of it has barely altered at all. The High Street, the Holly Bush area, most of Heath Street, Church Row – take away the beastly ribbons of cars and it could be any century, really. There's a lovely picture of that bit of the High Street that leads into Perrin's Court – and the Coffee Cup isn't there! Everything else is, though.

So, I'd seen that, chatted to a few local worthies, got accosted by a couple of irate women (there are always one or two who have some or other bone to pick with me about a review I wrote years ago: they can be amazingly aggressive). Interestingly though, whenever I am approached by women in Waitrose about my *Ham&High* stuff, they are invariably sweetness and light, a more discerning class of reader, clearly. And having downed a glass or so of Cuvée de Richard – Majestic's surprisingly good and very drinkable everyday French – it was time to wander off for dinner. The Village seemed to be particularly lovely on that warm and mellow evening: I think I still was basking in the light of the pictures.

It was only upon entering Tip Top Thai that I remem-

bered that I do actually find Thai food rather too spicy. Oh well, bit late, we're here now. It's as titchy on the inside as you'd expect from the frontage – only nine tables in a whitewashed, tile-floored space with café chairs, Edwardian dining chairs, the odd oriental print and a very small bevelled mirror extravagantly framed in ba-

The wonderfully titled Crying Tiger was sirloin of beef, marinated and grilled with a 'special hot chilli sauce'. Had the tiger tasted it, he would indeed have been crying – my wife was, it was so very hot

roque and gold encrustations. There is a counter surmounted by a stone dragon (or Peking dog – possibly a hybrid of the two, if such is genetically feasible) and an urn filled to brimming with large imitation white flowers. In front of the counter, one of the tables has been colonised by seemingly the proprietress, intent upon her paperwork and adding machine.

When we sat down, the Radio 2 traffic news was on, but later they switched to Classic FM. Our hard black table was decorated by a dwarf cloisonné bowl with a half-dead rose in it.

Wanted a drink. And here is yet another place that sells prosecco only by the bottle. I get the reasoning: if they sell just a glass, God alone knows

Ah, he lamented ... I'm afraid we're out of that one too. Mmm. Well ... how about ... this one ...? Maybe ...? Yes! He clapped his hands. Whereupon he walked out of the restaurant and into Heath Street, quite shortly returning with a 2009 pinot noir at a fairly hefty £22.

Takeaway The menu is long – for here, essentially, is a takeaway place.

Throughout the evening, the phone was buzzing with orders, and a disgruntled bloke wearing an Arsenal strip would troop in, scowl, grab the plastic bags of food and troop out again. The only other table taken was by a vociferous pair of estate agents: "Yeh yeh yeh, I know, the location is crap, but the tech is high end and totally on trend." Ah well. So we kicked off with tempura goong, which was great – large prawns in a perfect light and crispy batter with broccoli and mushrooms given the same treatment. Marinated soft crab in garlic and coriander was pretty good, but no more. Then there was stir-fried roasted duck with chillies, aubergines and beans (plentiful and tender, but very heavy on the chilli) and then the wonderfully titled Crying Tiger: sirloin of beef, marinated and grilled, with a "special hot chilli sauce". And had the tiger tasted it,

he would indeed be crying – my wife was. Weeping and gasping, it was so very shockingly hot. Not me, though, I just watched. I'm no mug (she's still sobbing now, look – softly, in a corner). Very nice egg noodles with bamboo shoots, mushrooms, spring onion and baby sweetcorn in yellow bean gravy ... and sticky rice that was not so much sticky as quite implacably tenacious – it had to be ripp'd untimely from the plate. So, not quite tip top, then, but still pretty good – in a woefully uninspiring room. With the bill came a pair of Cadbury's Eclairs. And I was annoyed to find out later that I'd got a splodge of yellow bean sauce on my Thai. Tie, I mean.

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

FACTFILE

- **TIP TOP THAI**
77 Heath Street, NW3
Tel: 020-7433 3455
- Open Tuesday-Saturday, 6pm-11pm. Sunday 6pm-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: It can mount up, as with all such menus, but two people should be satisfied for about £50, without drink.



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