

# No satisfaction but some quite perfect pasta

After everything from frustration at the bank to his BlackBerry going on the blink, our reviewer badly needs a peaceful lunch with a chum

I can't get no. No, no, no. It's just been that sort of a bloody week, quite frankly. Everything I attempted just came to dust. Modern life – I don't know. Took my son to the Royal Free for a booked-in procedure, except that it wasn't booked in at all, you see – no record of it whatsoever. They said it was strange. I used another word. Got a letter from the bank inviting me in to review my accounts (because I am "one of their most valued customers", ho ho bloody ho). So I went at 11am on the day, and at 11.15 I said to the teller that if I didn't see this woman just immediately, he could close the accounts right now. She turned up then – said she'd been on the phone, you see, and she couldn't hang up because it would have been rude...! And then she asked me for my name. And did I have any ID? And why was I here, actually?

So I stormed out of there and discovered that my BlackBerry had become the only BlackBerry in the entire bloody world not to send or receive emails. Slogged up to Carphone Warehouse in the Village. A bright little girl there said she was a whiz with BlackBerrys. Had the back off it. Pressed buttons. Hummed. Hawed. Summer turned to autumn. She then said I'd have to phone Virgin. Did that. I was told by a recording of some oleaginous weasel that I now had six options. Then four more. Then just the two. And lo – a human. Asked me a thousand questions, I understanding neither their nature nor the accent in which they were put to me. Then they played me rap music for 12-and-a-half minutes. Then something clicked and I was told



■ Il Baretto, where Joseph Connolly and George Pitcher had lunch (inset) Main picture: Polly Hancock

by a recording of some oleaginous weasel that I now had six options ... oh good Christ in heaven!

So I was looking forward to a peaceful lunch with a chum, and on the hottest day of the year cantered down to St John's Wood and an Italian restaurant I had spotted a while ago called Tino's. Which was shut. Oh yes, shut. It says on the glass "Open Every Day". It's only when you get to the small print you see that lunch is on offer only from Friday to Sunday. It was Thursday. So I had to quickly warn my guest. Except, oh sweet God, my BlackBerry had become the only BlackBerry in the entire bloody world not to send or receive emails. So he arrived, and I explained. I further explained that there was nowhere else round here that I hadn't already done, and the same went for

Marylebone. We trawled his iPad, and after many false starts eventually landed up in Blandford Street, of all places – though did hit upon a very good Italian restaurant, Il Baretto, so thank the Lord for that at least.

### Priesthood

These, actually, were my guest's words – for here was the Rev George Pitcher, until quite recently the secretary for public affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury. "A spin doctor?" I enquired. "Well," said George, "I was his bitch, basically."

George has led a most singular life: an editor at *The Observer* before setting up his own PR company. And then, just as the millennium dawned, he received a vocation to the priesthood. He is currently attached to St Bride's, the Wren 'writers' church' just off Fleet Street.

And he likes his grub.

Il Baretto is in a street just crammed with eating places, but it might be the best of them. There is a small bar at ground level, and a cool and sprawling restaurant beneath. All the staff are Italian, properly trained, very smartly tricked out and just affable enough. The chairs are deeply comfortable, and the walls are covered with black-and-white photographs of famous Italians eating spaghetti – including, but of course, Sophia Loren, who once said of her figure that "everything you see I owe to pasta". There is a lovely gadget on the counter to the open kitchen like one of those old bacon slicers from the Home & Colonial, and that sees to all the prosciutto. George ordered spaghetti all' olio plus something else I didn't quite catch: it wasn't actually on the menu, but

the waiter said that it was no problem at all. I had tagliolini with scallops – and this was quite perfect. Gorgeous orange pasta studded with bright green fresh-torn basil and sugo-ish tomato, the scallops plentiful and juicy – sublime. Then George wanted vitello alla limone, which of course wasn't on the menu either (he maybe distrusts menus, I don't know) and that was also no problem. He was very pleased with both courses – the pasta just so, the veal maybe a little unyielding, the lemon sauce "quite excellent".

### Photographer

And then, oh God, oh God, oh God, I remembered that the *Ham&High* photographer Polly Hancock was on her way to Tino's in St John's Wood! Yes, and my BlackBerry had become the only BlackBerry in the entire bloody world not to send or receive emails. So I phoned her. And her phone wasn't working. I'm telling you, I can't get no. And so we asked the waitress to take pictures on George's iThing, one of which you can see here, and don't laugh. My main was a paillard of chicken, a flattened breast rolled up into a sort of crepe-looking cylinder – a bit dry, but decently grilled. The shredded zucchini fritti were addictively good, and nor did the sweetly cubed sauté potatoes hang around too long.

George – quite the most entertaining priest you could encounter – lives in a cottage in Sussex with his wife. "The Royal Marsden said she couldn't have any children. We've since had four. I'm thinking of suing the NHS for the school fees." One daughter in her twenties wants to be a tightrope walker. "Well," he opines philosophically, "with a first in Eng lit from Cambridge, what else are you going to do...?"

Over a very fine (shared)

tiramisu, George told me about how he and Rowan Williams had eventually parted company – all down to when he said off the cuff, when asked by a journalist how at a certain reception the Archbishop had taken Cristina Odone's comments, that he had "taken her roughly, over the canapés". A jape, of course, but as we all know, in these miserably PC times, you jape at your peril – with-in hours he was out. "The problem was with all the courtiers. When I was taken on, Rowan had said to me, 'We are too risk-averse here. Change that'. I was there to grab the media's attention. Oh well." So we left Il Baretto – a rather fine, if pretty damned expensive, little gem – and sloped off to the St Bride's summer barbecue. And there, deep down in the vaults of this beautiful church, he showed me the secret ossuary, a very spooky dark hole piled to shoulder height with compacted 16th-century human skulls and femurs. And I thought, yeah, everything you attempt just comes to dust. It's just how this week's been going, I'm afraid: I can't get no. No, no, no...

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

### FACTFILE

- **IL BARETTO**  
43 Blandford Street, W1  
Tel: 020-7486 7340
- Open Mon-Fri noon-3pm, 6pm-10.30pm. Sat 12.30pm-4pm, 6.30pm-10.30pm. Sun 12.30pm-4pm, 6.30pm-10pm
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Yes well – there had to be something. About £130-£140 for three course meal for two with modest wine.

## of previously unsuspected uses for the products of the vine

er chain in California is adding wine to its milkshakes, suggesting that the result is a little less sweet and leaves a wine flavour on the finish. Pinot noir joins cherries, chocolate and vanilla ice cream in one mix; another features sparkling white wine, orange juice and vanilla ice again.

In southern France, however, the wine is going into the cows rather than their milk. One farmer near Montpellier has reported "lean, marbled and tasty" beef as a result of adding leftover grapes and red

wine to the regular feed of some of his herd. It makes the meat more expensive, but Parisian chefs are keen to buy it. There has even been a safe daily wine limit set for cows – a litre and a half, which roughly equals two to three glasses for two-legged drinkers.

### Milk

Back in Australia, too, cows are enjoying the fruit of the vine – adding grape must to their feed has been shown to increase milk production, so farmers are delighted with

their foaming churns.

The fad for fruit and vegetable-originated foam in restaurants may have faded, but there's new life for the effect in cocktails, with the appearance of an alcoholic foam to put the finishing touch to mixologists' creations – a variety of flavours are available, from peppermint to amaretto.

Rather less frothy, though the likely price may seem silly to some, is a forthcoming auction: the wines from the late, legendary El Bulli will go under Sotheby's hammer short-

ly. The restaurant listed 1,600 wines, at prices from €21 to €5,300-plus a bottle. I doubt there will be many bargains...

Finally, if you enjoy wine, throw away your wasp-killer sprays. New research has shown that the stripey stingers are natural winemakers' best friends – during winter hibernation the particular yeast which starts grape juice fermenting is preserved in their guts, ready to set the next vintage bubbling away soon after they bite into a ripe wine grape.



■ A wedding dress made from the skin-like layer on a vat of red wine  
Picture: Ray Scott