

Sorry...did I mention I'd written a new novel?

Our reviewer dines at a famous local hostelry which just happens to be at the heart of the area in which his book is set...

This piece is going to be really very tremendously subtle, you know – because although I am about to write a review of a local hostelry, quite as you have come to expect, what we also have here, if you read rather carefully between the lines, is a plug for my brand new novel.

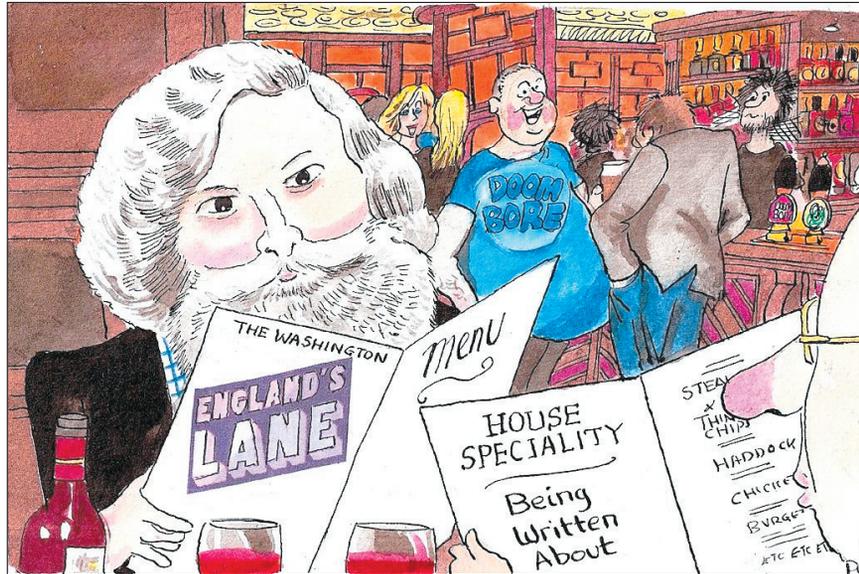
This, however, will be so very lightly woven into the texture of the prose that you will hardly be able to detect it.

A practically subliminal sleight of hand, the skill of which, I fancy, will be skirting extraordinarily close to the uncanny. And how's this for openers?

The place I am reviewing today is The Washington, a famous pub on the corner of England's Lane. And guess what my new novel is called. Go on: guess. No idea? No? Give up? Really? Well I'll tell you, then: it's called England's Lane...! You have to admit, it's a damned cunning ruse: give me credit where it's due.

I grew up around this area, and trotted up Belsize Lane every morning to St Anthony's School in Fitzjohn's Avenue. England's Lane was the centre of my universe, John Barnes (then a department store) a weekly treat, and Selfridges the very closest we ever came to the borders of exoticism.

The novel is set in the closing months of 1959, when housewives (and very few women were anything else) went shopping every day, with their little wicker baskets tucked into the crook of their arms, finger and thumb protectively poised upon the



■ Joseph Connolly dines at The Washington

snibs of their purses. Here is the last hurrah for the London row of shops where the hand-painted names on the fascias chimed with those of the people who ran them, and lived upstairs.

Baker for bread, the wet fishmonger, Barrett's for meat (then as now), United Dairies for most of the general needs. Stammer for ironmongery. Lawrence's for sweets (I was a great patron of their penny tray, and I remember the lady who worked there always saying "Anythin kelse for you ...?").

There was a delicatessen – one of the earliest – called Bona, a stationers called Moore's (which sold Matchbox Toys and coloured Platinumum (bros) and Allchin's the chemist: still there, and externally handsome – though the beautiful glass and mahogany interi-

or, I understand, was long ago sold off to an interior decorator.

No such awful fate has befallen The Washington. While the Barclays Bank opposite has become a Starbucks, The Washington looks very much the same, with its Corinthian pillars and portrait of George Washington.

Wonderful

But here's a funny thing: England's Lane has nothing to do with England, and The Washington has nothing to do with George. The nearby farm had been owned by one James England, while the street was put up by a speculative builder who named the corner pub after the Sussex village where he hailed from: Washington.

I went there for dinner with Ham & High cartoonist Ken Pyne – as you can see

from the fab drawing that accompanies this restaurant review (which yet will be revealed to be a parallel plug for my brand new novel, did you but know it).

Ken has been rather unkind to his own profile, though has taken the extraordinary trouble of reproducing part of the book jacket's artwork on the back of my menu, which is pretty bloody subtle in itself.

The glory of the interior is the stunning fretted and carved mahogany bar and fittings, the mirrors and the original acid etched glass. There's a large and clunky bit at the centre of the horseshoe bar – I suspect it's a disguise for aircon – but the rest is wonderful. The ceiling is glossy burgundy deep-fielded Anaglypta with a cornice in gold, the floor is highly polished old oak boards, and the massive

beer pumps of satin copper.

The drippy shell chandelier is questionable, and the red tubular pendants really don't blend in at all – but all in all, this is a welcoming and unbuggered-up local, the menu surprisingly extensive. We were in the little snug to the side – the old Public Bar, I should think.

There is a prix fixe at £13 for two courses, £16 for three, as well as a carte with twenty choices. Ken was sipping a Cornish ale called Doombar (not, it occurs to me, a good name for a pub) and I wasn't.

They didn't have the Fleurie I wanted, so I went for an alternative decent burgundy at £25. We shared a starter of three different sorts of mushrooms on rye toast with a Stilton cream sauce. This was terrific: hot and meaty mushrooms, including oyster, the sauce not at all disgusting (as Stilton sauces so often can be).

Ken was toying with having Gloucester Old Spot – a rarish pig breed – but as he thought it might have something to do with provincial and vintage teenage acne, he went instead for rib-eye steak with confit tomato and a green peppercorn sauce. Although the most expensive item on the menu (£16) it was enormous, and Ken ate the lot, fat and all. Well, he's a growing boy.

I managed to steal a little bit, and it was pretty damn good. I had half a Shropshire roast chicken with herb butter, red wine gravy and fries.

This was only fair: decent chicken, but terribly overcooked and therefore the texture of boiled drying up towel. Chips were so-so, and the gravy nearly sublime.

There were quite a few oldish regular blokes at the bar, as well as lots of much younger women: all were having a

good time. Back in the day, any female coming in here was either a mad old granny, scrounging port and lemon, or else a lady of dubious morals. I did have a very nostalgic evening, contrasting the new with the old. The here and now ... and the past of my brand new novel, which is called England's Lane – which you maybe didn't know, or even the fact that it is out.

It was raining when we left, so I suggested to Ken that we get a taxi up to The Flask for a nightcap. "In the rain," I explained, "my hair goes like Jimi Hendrix". He ruefully stroked his pate. "Mine," he said, "just goes ...". So we did that, and all he would talk about is my brand new novel called England's Lane.

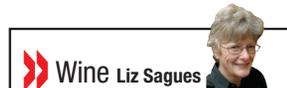
Can you believe it? Couldn't get him to stop. It's just as well that he did, though. Because otherwise I'm not really sure, on balance, whether I would have been able to work in to this so much as a solitary mention.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk And did I mention...? England's Lane is published by Quercus in hardback and ebook.

FACTFILE

■ **THE WASHINGTON**
The Washington, 50 England's Lane NW3. Tel 020 7722 8842
Open Mon-Thu 12noon-11pm, Fri-Sat 12noon-12pm, Sun 12noon-10.30pm
■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Cost: Good value pub grub. Prix fixe £13 two course, £16 three.

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Wine Liz Sagues

Alternative wine culture is so refreshing

Refreshing is a word which doesn't figure too often in wine descriptions. But that might be changing. It's an adjective regularly used in an alternative wine culture which is increasingly edging towards a place in the mainstream.

The people who favour refreshing wines want them to be made as straightforwardly as possible. No herbicides or insecticides in the vineyards, organic or biodynamic growing is preferred, and minimal intervention in the cellar, with fermentation from natural yeasts rather than packeted powders and little or no dosing with sulphur (it's a valuable preservative, but in modern wine-making can be overused).

As a result, a lot of the wines have a fruit-led freshness and are restrained in alcohol level – and are very much at the refreshing end of the wine spectrum. If, sometimes, things go awry, the results are distinctly quirky.

But the natural wine movement is refreshing in more ways than that. The attitude of those involved can be so very different from colleagues of more commercial bent.

Olivier Cousin farms a few acres of mainly red vines in Anjou, just south of the Loire river, using four heavy horses rather than tractors for all the jobs in the biodynamic vineyard.

Olivier is often questioned about why he accepts so slow a

means of working his land. But why rush, he argues.

Working through the vineyards at horse's pace gives him time to study the growth of the vines and the progress of the fruit, to spot problems before they're out of hand.

Like so many of his colleagues in the natural wine movement he's a bit of a rebel, and has seriously upset the French wine bureaucrats – there's a court case regarding labelling pending against him, despite the fact that he chose some time back to label his wines simply vin de table.

He won't be intimidated: last time I talked to him he pulled out one of the cardboard boxes into which he packs his wine. "AOC" it

means in big letters. Smaller ones complete the words: A(njou) O(livier) C(ousin). Nothing but the truth there, surely.

Cousin's wines fall very much into the refreshing category, but they still have character, structure and depth – for me, his 2009 Pur Breton (£13, Les Caves de Pyrène) is the star, but they are all very good.

Some wines from other growers which I tasted at this year's Real Wine Fair were a little more challenging.

Les Caves de Pyrène is one of the most adventurous importers. See the list on www.lescaves.co.uk, but for prices and to buy direct you need to contact the helpful shop staff on 01483 554750.



■ Olivier Cousin