

Nicholas Lander in Islington and Venice

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Islington in north London is, according to many, the new West End with scores of restaurants, drinking houses and outlets for retail therapy along its main drag, Upper Street (which also boasts, sadly, a similar number of homeless).

And now to add further proof to this hypothesis, Islington has its own Conran restaurant, Almeida, opposite a building site from which will rise the new Almeida Theatre.

Before any analysis of my two meals at Almeida let me get two things off my chest. Firstly, Sir Terence Conran has done more than any other individual over the past generation to change the London restaurant scene for the better. His eye for design and detail is exemplary; his courage in going into ambitious sites - from Bibendum to Orrery taking in Mezzo and Coq d'Argent - has been breathtaking and, as a result, Londoners and visitors to the capital have enjoyed good wine and food at good prices in locations that would have once been considered implausible if not impossible.

But in building up this restaurant empire Conran has necessarily distanced himself from the restaurateur's primary challenge, that of making people feel welcome. He has never really been a restaurateur, rather a man who makes restaurants happen and as more and more commercial opportunities have presented themselves his company has been in pole position to expand. As the group's less expensive brand, Zinc Bar & Grill, begins to spread across the UK I was beginning to get the feeling that the connections between the restaurants and their creator had become just too distant.

Not that I was naive enough ever to suppose that Conran would be opening the door, taking my order or showing me the wine bottle at any of his establishments. But what is different about Almeida is that if for one day he were to slip back on to the shop floor this is one restaurant where he would fit quite comfortably.

Almeida Street is just off Upper Street and the restaurant's entrance is unusually modest - there is, for example, no dramatic set of steps to be negotiated as at Mezzo or Quaglino's. Rather the restaurant is immediately visible off to the left with a space for drinks and a private diningroom down a small flight of stairs to the right.

Nor are there any design effects in the restaurant, which seats about 100 comfortably, to distract from the main views across the entire room through to a most magnificent open kitchen clearly visible through three open arches which have been specifically created to unite the back and front of house. It is as it were the very opposite of Pandora's box: instead of a normal restaurant design in which your order is transmitted (this is incidentally all done by computer signals these days not by bits of paper) from the maître d' via a swing door to a kitchen brigade that, rather like small children, is out of sight and therefore out of mind, Almeida makes it all available for your enjoyment. There are the fish and meat sections; to one side in the coolest corner is the pastry section and right at the back, just for kitchen junkies like myself, is where the all important washing up gets done.

Conran's ambitions for Almeida are as obvious as its design. It is to offer the simple, provincial, French food and wine (the list has been very well chosen by Bill Baker with an emphasis on the best value French wine regions and includes 16 wines by the 46cl pot Lyonnais) that he fell in love with 40 years ago. But everything comes with a light touch that is in keeping with the new century but does not detract from the food's timeless good taste: steak *au poivre*; *salmis de gibier*; *confit de canard* and scallops *en brochette* may not have been on British menus for some time but that is no reason to neglect them.

My first meal at Almeida was terrific. A *mouclade* of mussels, plump molluscs in an egg- yolk- enriched sauce, was followed by a thick slice of turbot with a perfect hollandaise - undoubtedly one of the pleasures of eating in and judging a restaurant - and a slice of lemon tart from the trolley. Most unusually, there is another trolley with *terrines*, *rillettes* and *charcuterie* for a first course which a friend enjoyed followed by a pink rack of lamb, carved at the table.

Our second meal was very good in parts, particularly a rendition of the south- west French dish of half a dozen oysters and small, spicy sausages and a precisely sautéed piece of *onglet*, a flavourful cut of beef much neglected in the UK. But there were slips, most notably a calf's kidney that was ordered medium but came far too pink and an overcooked and therefore stodgy *crème brûlée*.

These faults were, I believe, due to the fact that although Almeida aims to inculcate the sophistication of the West End it is in fact a neighbourhood restaurant and suffers from the 8.00/8.30pm onslaught, the time when everyone wants to come out and eat. In due course, the kitchen and the waiting staff should be able to cope better with this fact of life in swinging Islington.

Almeida restaurant, 30 Almeida Street, Islington, London N1 1TD (tel 020 7354 4777)