Eating out with the aurally challenged

26 May 2012 by Henry Jeffreys

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These days I seem to be having a lot of lunches with the hard of hearing. To make matters worse I am myself slightly deaf - probably a legacy of a youth spent in Northern nightclubs. I fear that I'll end up like my late grandmother who just used to reply 'whisky' to every question. I work near Soho so am spoiled for choices when it comes to eating. Unfortunately the minimalist/shabby chic trend in London restaurants means that none of these places has the vital noise-absorbing fabrics that I need when eating out: no curtains, no carpets, and most new places in Soho don't even have cushions. If you want to have an informal lunch where you're intending to do more listening than drinking and gesticulating, where does one go in central London?

Then I remembered that the Giaconda Dining Room has a nice, thick black carpet. The sort of carpet you can imagine a 70s Bond villain having in his bedroom. It's an odd little restaurant about the size of a mobile phone shop crammed between the music joints on Denmark Street. This was where I decided to meet my elderly guest. He was already waiting for me when I arrived. I greeted him and he said something I couldn't quite hear. 'What?' I replied. 'I thought you said that this place was quiet,' he said. So despite the carpet, it's not the quietest of restaurants. It really is a very small room and it was full. This place was a pioneer in the small room/great food school of restaurants that has swept London in the last couple of years. But whereas places like Polpo or Duck Soup appeal to the young, the Giaconda customer is rather different. It's more - and I mean this in the best possible way - bourgeois. The people at the table next door are more likely to be lawyers, doctors or publishers, than the advertising or film-business people that you get on Dean Street.

My guest immediately took to the Australian waitress. The waitresses are always the same: Australian Tracey and Slovakian Katerina. They rule the tiny floor with the rod of iron necessary when keeping such a crowded room in order. I have a phobia of being bossed about in restaurants but from these two I don't mind. Underneath their forbidding exteriors they're both cheerful, knowledgeable and very good at waiting, a rarity in London. They're also dressed a bit like the waitresses in Betty's Tea Rooms, which is a bonus for me.

Like the waitresses' outfits, the food is not fashionable. It's sort of French and sort of Italian but served in gentlemen's club-sized portions with lots of comforting offal - the two signature dishes are a breaded boneless pig's trotter for starters and ox tongue with parsley and capers. My guest went for the bream on the specials list (there's always good fresh fish) and I went for veal kidneys. My kidneys were cooked with cherry tomatoes and capers. They were the best kidneys I've had a long time: browned on the outside and bloody in the middle, very tender, very meaty and not stinky like lamb's kidneys can be. The bream was apparently superb; I don't like eating off other people's plates. Sadly my guest wasn't drinking; he claims to be too old to drink anymore. It's a shame because the wine list here is good. There aren't any self-consciously 'natural' wines, just lots of good quality Old World wines, most of them for under £40. It's a list to drink from, not to show off. For the lawyers there are a few upmarket burgundies of both persuasions whereas we publishers stick to the bottom end. My favourites are a crunchy Marcillac from Domaine du Cros, a pungent Faugères from Domaine Léonides and there's a nice old Rioja from Urbina. To go with the fish they always have a decent Vinho Verde, Muscadet and a Txakoli. Wines by the glass change daily depending on the whims of the staff and there are a few halves.

Though the Giaconda Dining Room has been open for only about four years, it feels like somewhere that has been around since 1952. It's an anomaly on the London restaurant scene because it has no concept, no big idea. You cannot see it expanding into a mini chain. What it reminds me most of is a small family restaurant in a back street of Naples or Palermo just getting on with doing what they have always been doing. The chef is an Australian called Paul Merron. The waitress who served us is his wife. When he broke his arm in a cycling accident not long after opening, he simply closed the place as there was no one else to do the cooking. That gives you some idea of how small this operation is.

By the time my guest had finished his Eton Mess he was beaming with happiness. 'What a lovely little restaurant' he said. When offered coffee, he said that he couldn't at his age. A few days later my father (not deaf, though often pretends to be), called to say that he was meeting someone he hadn't seen for years for a good long lunch. Could I suggest anywhere?

Giaconda Dining Room, 9 Denmark Street, Soho/Covent Garden, London WC2H 8LS, tel +44 (0)207 240 3334, www.giacondadining.com