



Written by
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20 Jan 2018

A warm pub in the cold north east



The charity *Speakers for Schools* does precisely what its title would suggest.

It was created in 2011 by journalist and TV presenter Robert Peston with the single aim of uniting the calibre of speakers normally associated with public and independent schools with the heads of state schools who would not normally have access to them. In the past six years over 4,200 speeches have been organised, including three by Jancis and two by me.

In fact, it was on the eve of my second speech that I found myself at 6 pm on a particularly cold and windy night walking the mile and a half from the comfort of the Crathorne Hall Hotel, 10 miles south of Middlesbrough, to the Crathorne Arms for supper.

I must admit I had accepted the invitation to speak to the schoolchildren at the Unity City Academy in Middlesbrough partly because I had hoped to spend the night at the Tontine, a

hotel-restaurant I had previously enjoyed, in Northallerton, North Yorkshire, owned and run for almost 40 years by the quirky brothers Tom, Peter and Eugene McCoy.

But time has moved on. The Tontine was sold several years ago and the brothers have gone their separate ways. And in what sounds like a rather acrimonious business divorce, they have even stopped speaking to each other. But via Rory, Eugene's older son, I made contact with Eugene and discovered that he was still in business at the Crathorne Arms. I made my booking.



Eugene, now 67, looks older only by virtue of his grey hair. Other than that he seems to have barely aged apart from a slight limp from walking the many miles looking after his customers. In fact he now seems more at home in a pub, where he does not have to bother about sleeping customers or the prospect of having to cook breakfast for them, than he ever has done.

The Crathorne Arms stands back from the road and belongs, as does everything in the neighbourhood, to the good-natured Lord Crathorne (Eugene's opinion). In fact, it was he who approached Eugene five years ago with an invitation to take over what was at the time a derelict pub. Eugene, a canny operator, waited a while and then took it over, putting his heart and soul, as well as many hours of hard work from him and Barbara, his long-suffering wife, into renovating it.

The transformation is now complete and for anyone who remembers the old Tontine, Eugene's new home will come as no surprise. Opposite the front door is the bar, behind which Eugene and his two staff appear to recognise everyone who comes in and immediately make them feel very welcome. To the left is the area in which their bar menu is served – and I was told with some pride that when I was there a couple of burly farmers were enjoying plates of seared scallops with king prawns and garlic butter – while to the right is the restaurant. (Beyond the bar area to the left, the McCoys have added a room that is used for live music performances once a month.)

This is full of furniture that the McCoys took from the Tontine but could not carry up the stairs to where they live. 'It is principally junk', Eugene explained, 'but it is the kind of junk Barbara and I have got used to over the years'.

This is the kind of junk that makes for a very atmospheric restaurant. Wooden floors and tables and candles are perhaps the only obvious inclusions. Everything else is a clever and well thought out hodgepodge. There are old menus from Lasserre in Paris to Gérard Boyer in Reims to one of Simon Hopkinson's original Bibendum menus. They are mixed with mirrors, chandeliers, old barrels from Spanish sherry bodegas as well as lots of old cookbooks including those by John Tovey and Nico Ladenis – all memorabilia that have been collected on the McCoys' travels. After four years, all these contribute to a comfortable, even fascinating, backdrop for a

good night out.

The chef is 37-year-old David Henry, who, having trained at [Sharrow Bay](#) in the Lake District, has now settled with his wife and family in the north east. His menu, which will change quite fundamentally in February (when it will incorporate several of the ingredients Eugene loves to buy at the Indian wholesalers in Middlesbrough), was highly suitable for a cold January night and included quite a few dishes I will always associate with the Tontine. There is, and will always be, a classic prawn cocktail; French black pudding served with a poached egg; and the perennial favourite, McCoy's seafood pancake.

I began with a luscious gruyère and parmesan soufflé (£7.95), another long-established favourite, and followed this with an intriguing-sounding veal escalope served with brown shrimps, capers and a parsley beurre noisette (£15.95). With this we drank a bottle of 2012 Syrah from Terre Rouge in California.

While enjoying these, I could also enjoy the spectacle of watching Eugene in action. There is only one word to describe his style of walking and that is swift, a pace he has kept up to this day. Watching him walking from behind the bar into the restaurant to ensure his customers are happy while making the occasional foray into the kitchen, it is absolutely obvious that here is a man in love with his profession.

And this love, he readily admits to. 'It is the "craic" [chat] I love, the business of being behind the bar and making everybody feel welcome and relaxed. And watching the fun emerge. To this end I think a pub suits me even better than anything more formal and more complicated, which is what running the hotel had become. Get it right and it is great fun.'

This trait, this interest in one's fellow man that is an essential ingredient in all the best restaurateurs I have met, Eugene has successfully passed on to his elder son Rory, one of the trio behind London's [Duck Soup](#), Raw Duck and Little Duck, which has just opened to great reviews in Dalston Lane, London E8.

And yet while acknowledging that the principles of his profession may not have changed over the past 40 years, the customers and their expectations certainly have. According to McCoy, what his customers have learnt from their travels abroad has completely altered not only what they want to eat but how they expect to be served. 'We have a great deal to be thankful to Easyjet for', he explained.

Perhaps it is his inherent optimism but McCoy also believes that the fortunes of his home town of Middlesbrough may finally be turning a corner. 'The city has lost so much of its iron and steel industries and the traffic through its port, but a lot of money, planning and hope is being invested by several wealthy individuals and that has to bring change. There are even a couple of good restaurants in Bedford and Baker Street (and I had a very good second breakfast at the Baker Street Kitchen the following morning after my talk). The reputation of the university is growing, too. 'It all has to be for the city's brighter future.'

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