

Charon QC reviews The Three Bridges...

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The Three Bridges Restaurant
www.thethreebridges.com
 Cucina Italiana
 153 Battersea Park Rd
 020 7720 0204
 Owners: Marco Cristaldi and Antonio Lombardi
 Head Chef: Piero Cottino
 Pizza Chef: Marco Vitale

Review visit: Wednesday
 23rd April 2008

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Should I wear a dinner jacket ?... a suit?... I wondered, as I shaved and thought about my trip to South London.

It was South London I had to go to ... so the black suit, black tie, Ronnie Kray look would have to stand in the wardrobe for my trip out of the manor that night. In the end I decided on a Chiswick 'artists' look - jeans, black polo neck and an implausible battered brown drizeabone coat to give that High Plains Drifter feel to my arrival south of the river. After contacting the Foreign Office website to see if there were any travel warnings about trips to South London, I made my way to Chancery Lane for a meeting before going down to The Three Bridges restaurant.

The meeting concluded, I walked back down Chancery Lane. I saw a barrister friend of mine standing outside The Gaucho Grill smoking. He looked tired and worn down. He told me that work was slow, fee note payments even slower, that his newly purchased flat was about to be worth less than his mortgage, and that he was looking forward to the High Court giving the banks a stuffing on overdraft charges because he was fed up to the back teeth with his own bank and started muttering about pounds of flesh. (Smith J did, in fact, give the banks a mild stuffing the next day: Office of Fair Trading v Abbey National plc and Others www.lawreports.co.uk/WLRD/2008/QBD/apr0.8.htm)

My friend had been at the Argentinian Malbec and asked me if I fancied joining him for a couple. Ordinarily, of course, I would have accepted but I had to explain that I was going on an expedition to Battersea to review a restaurant for [LawandMore](http://LawandMore.com).

"Up and coming place, Battersea" my friend remarked, lighting another cigarette from the butt of his last one. "And handy for MI6" he added mysteriously, peering down Chancery lane with the intensity of a United Kingdom Border Control official who has not yet been replaced by a machine. www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/apr/25/theairlineindustry.transport

"Well quite" I said with a nervous laugh, not really knowing how to add to the conversation at this point.

"Believe me, Charon, this government has it in for us. The only ray of hope is that having been given a good stuffing by his backbenchers on the 10p tax revolt, Brown will get another stuffing when it comes to the extension from 28 to 42 days detention without charge vote."

I couldn't help wonder if my friend's pre-occupation with stuffing was symptomatic of an underlying frustration of another sort, rather than disillusionment with life in the law, banks and politicians that day.

"Well... on that I agree. Good thing too. The DPP is against it, The former Attorney-General is against it, The present law officers seem to be against it and even Jack "The Lad Chancellor" Straw is against it." I replied.

My friend looked at me closely, his left eye closing slightly. "Indeed, Charon... so what takes you across the river?"

I didn't fancy his chances with MI6, if he was contemplating a career move, if he couldn't even remember that I had told him I was doing a restaurant review two minutes before. I gave him the information again."

"I like Italian food. You like a bit of Italian opera don't you Charon?"

"I do" I replied.

I continued my journey down Chancery Lane, turning right and walked past The Royal Courts of Justice. The reference to Italian opera reminded me of an evening at The Luggers in the Strand twenty or more years ago with John Manningham-Buller, now Viscount Dilhorne - an ex Tax specialist turned barrister. We did some teaching together in those days. John is a very tall man, about 6ft 6" or more and has a deep profundo bass voice. My voice is fairly deep, cultured on cigarettes, Rioja and other rads. John's voice was just cultured - a superb opera singer in his own right. We were half way through dinner when John (an amusing man with a sense of theatre) suddenly broke into song. He knew the owners well. The restaurant went silent and John sang. The other diners loved it. I wondered if I was going to be listening to Italian opera at dinner.

Crossing the river, something I have not done to go there for some time, was surprisingly easy and I arrived at The Three Bridges restaurant about ten minutes early. I took advantage of this excellent time management on my part to have a smoke and take in my surroundings. I could see three bridges. I could see the Battersea Dog's Home and I could see a man being questioned by police fairly vigorously about a hundred yards down the road. The man appeared to be over-refreshed as I was soon to be in a very enjoyable way.

"Buona sera" I said, using up my tourist Italian in almost one fell swoop. (I do speak very bad tourist Italian. I recall a trip to Florence with a girlfriend over ten years ago when I asked for the bill. The waiter seemed to be rather puzzled with my use of Italian and left with a frown. I turned to my girlfriend and said "I think I may have asked the waiter if he could bring me an Italian Count. (I count is the bill. Conti is a count.)

"Marco?" I asked the smiling man who approached me.

"No, Marco is downstairs"

I explained that I had been asked to ask for Marco. This seemed to add to the mystery of why someone dressed as an extra from *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* was standing in the middle of the restaurant. I was shown to a round table at the far end of the restaurant - a table with a view! A bottle of Brunello 2003 Casanova di Neri, decanted into an elegant ship's decanter, was waiting open on the table. Brunello is a fine wine, deep and strong, a fairly full bodied wine, entirely suitable for a professional Rioja imbiber. It does the business. This was a particularly good example.

Marco Cristaldi, one of the owners, came over to my table to greet me - his enthusiasm for his restaurant obvious immediately. We talked about Battersea. He said it was difficult to get to, that reviewers usually played on this. (I mentally crossed out using my "*John Simpson liberating Kabul*" style when relating my expedition to cross the river.) Marco told me that he was confident that Battersea would come up. Development was happening. He told me that senior bankers, television people from QVC and another studio nearby and even people from MI6 - obviously not very secret people from MI6 - were already visiting and he was building a good local base of regulars. He explained that first and foremost his restaurant was about the food, the wine, service and that 'location, location, location' was not so important. It did, though, he explained, impact on the prices he could charge. His wine list is extensive and well balanced. Unfortunately, I know quite a bit about wine prices and was able to compare them with pretty average restaurants and gastro pubs in West London. His bottles were a good 25 per cent cheaper than equivalents in Chiswick - and the food, for reasons I will go into, was better than anything I have eaten in West London in the last six months - again at about 25 per cent less than Chiswick prices.

I came to the conclusion very quickly, as the evening progressed, that *The Three Bridges* is a posh restaurant set in a gastropub style setting - but with the ability to be relaxed and be welcoming to all.

My guest arrived on the dot of 7.00 and so the ceremony, the games, began. Prosecco arrived. I drank too much champagne in the dying days of the 1980s to be charmed by fizz and prefer red wine these days. The glass of Italian fizz was good and started the ball rolling. Marco asked if I would like to choose my own meal or let the chef give me a flavour of a range of dishes. I took the latter option, not realising at this stage that I would be eating my way through seven full courses of food!

Squid arrived. I don't eat squid. Marco did not know this, because I hadn't told him - so, instead, I was served up one of the best pizzas I have ever eaten - almost a prop from a Roman orgy film in its decadence: *Pizza With Bottarga and Sturgeon eggs and teleggio cheese*. It was a full size pizza, quite enough for one person's entire meal. At £13.50 it is an expensive pizza but (the sturgeon roe, botargga and teleggio are not cheap ingredients) was delicious. Normal, non roman orgy pizzas, range from a very reasonable £6.50 to £9.00 and they are the real deal, cooked by Marco Vitale from Rome. The Bottarga and teleggio cheese, quite apart from the sturgeon roe, made this a memorable experience. My guest enjoyed the *pan-fried lemon scented squid, served on a bed of rocket salad with wine must and tomato tartare*.

I sipped a bit more of the Brunello and felt the wine relax me, as a good wine can. Next up was Rose of smoked salmon with red caramelized onions and poached quail's eggs, served with summer salad. Despite eating three quarters of a 12 inch pizza, I was able to enjoy the smoked salmon, beautifully presented; the caramelised onion a good condiment. Marco at this point did tell us to just taste the food, that there was no need to eat the whole dish as there were more delights to come. He explained that the chef wanted to serve each of us the usual serving and would not be offended if we did not eat the whole dish.

Marco appeared like a wraith bearing a bottle of *Pinot grigio Blush from Forchir*. I am not a great white wine drinker, but the wine was delicate, subtle and refreshing. For me, the more robust Brunello was a better companion for the salmon. I don't, personally, worry about the choice of red or white wine for fish. Others do.

At this point, the restaurant started to fill up. A few young couples, a couple of single men, dining alone, and a very serious looking man, cultured, blue and white striped shirt, glasses, looking as if he was a real food critic, poured over their menus and each received the same quick, friendly and attentive service.

I went outside with my guest to have a cigarette. We took some wine with us. When we went back inside it seemed, to my eye, that the entire place was full of food critics and restaurant reviewers - real ones. It amused me to think that this was so, as yet more Brunello was poured into my glass by our friendly waiter. The next two dishes arrived and were both good: *Timbale of grilled vegetables, courgettes and peppers, served on a bed of Scamorza cheese with basil olive oil and Homemade pumpkin ravioli* made with red pesto sauce and truffle olive oil. The pasta was al dente - as I like it, but, perhaps too al dente for my guest. For a man who eats bil tong as an almost daily staple, I did not think he would have particular difficulty in coping with pasta al dente.

And then.... with a fine glass or two of *Dolcetto d'Alba di Montezemolo* came the remaining courses: *Black ink homemade Tagliolini served with courgettes and cherry tomatoes, with Tuscan olive oil - Panfried breast of Duck with rhubarb zest and dried plums, - Homemade pannacotta, with kuzu lime sauce from Japan and fresh strawberries basket*.

I'll return to the food, after this brief digression. At this point a large group arrived, taking the long table butting up against the wall at the far end of the restaurant. The men (three), professionals, clearly, dressed in blazers and trousers (one of the men wearing red trousers) were outnumbered by a group of very good looking women, three of whom seemed to be either wives or partners. I'm pretty sure they were regulars. I'm as nosy as the next person - and years of teaching in tutorials has given me the skill to listen to conversations many tables away, should I be minded to do so. Perhaps I should consider applying to MI6?

The walls with unusual and graphic paintings, the wooden floors, the yellow and green paint scheme, all combined to provide a good feel. One thing that struck me was the very smooth, attentive, service - unobtrusive and organised.

So, to sum up and give a judgement: The food was very good, the wine also, and the service and welcome excellent. I have given **4.5 / 5** - simply because it is going to be difficult for some people to go down to Battersea - but, frankly, this is a 'diamond of a place', as my guest who lives in Fulham said - and if you haven't been to Battersea go - there is an excellent restaurant there. It is called The Three Bridges. Antonio and Marco the owners, the head chef Piero Cottino and Pizza Chef Marco Vitale, who cooked my memorable pizza, and their team know what they are doing. They will be genuinely pleased to see you - and you will have a great evening out. My friend from Fulham will be going back with his friends - and I will certainly make a point of doing so.

The prices are 25 per cent cheaper than across the river - and the food we had blows a lot of gastropubs, with more expensive but less appealing food, out of the water. This is a serious restaurant, a cucina italiana. As far as I could see - and I looked - the diners: lovers, business people, friends dining in the restaurant that night, were enjoying themselves - and that is what I like to see when I go to restaurants. I have given 4.5 / 5 for what was, in truth, a 5/5 experience - BUT I am an academic lawyer and I am used to marking exams for degree examinations. We never give 100% This restaurant, however, gets a First Class Honours - deservedly so. It is easy to cross the river - and is well worth the effort.

I reckon you could have a very good evening, judging by the prices on the menu and wine list, for £25-£30 a person; perhaps a little more if you want three courses. The portions are generous. If you want to go up a notch or two on the wine, the wine list is extensive - they are well priced.

And so I returned to Chiswick, full... stuffed in fact, and pleasantly over refreshed. I passed on the 'wafer thin mint'. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr._Creosote

a piu tarde....

Charon

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