

# The Guardian review

By Matthew Norman

The process by which restaurants are selected for this page is one on which I am loth to dwell, for fear of letting daylight in on magic. But let's for once take that risk, and admit that in today's case we were looking for somewhere Christmassy and romantic for a special guest.

"Christmassy I get," said my guv'nor on this page, "but why romantic? You taking the missus?"

Close, I said, but no cigar. It's Simon Heffer. A silence ensued, yielding first to a coughing fit and then a longer silence. "I see," he managed, "and you want *romantic*? Tell me you're joking."

I was joking about the romance, if not the guest, and luckily so. For it quickly transpired there could be no worse choice of venue for anyone planning to seduce Simon than La Poule Au Pot, most venerable and consistent of Belgravia bistros, and as thriving as ever it was since opening in 1962. We had barely sat down when Simon made a revelation. "This is where I brought Mrs Heffer on our first and indeed only date," he said. "We were engaged five days later. Sometimes you just know."

Sometimes you do indeed, and I defy anyone not to know within 30 seconds that they are smitten. It smells great in a winery, casseroley kinda way, while for those who've been eating their carrots, this devilishly underlit interior looks glorious, in a chic, French farmhouse kitchen kinda way, with a richly cosseting terracotta colour scheme, china cockerels in showcases and loads of giant plant pots. There can't be a more charming, cosy, nook-and-crannyish restaurant, and even this Meldrovia grump (me, that is; not Simon) could take no umbrage at having to squeeze up against walls to let the waiter pass and guide us to what was, for two gentlemen d'un certain girth, a tiny table.

Much like Simon back in 1987, I was in love even before the arrival of a menu laden with every classical bistro dish you dream about but seldom find. In the event we eschewed this fossilised piece of culinary social history, written only in French (the arrogant buggers), because the vast list of set menu dishes rattled off by the waiter sounded so enticing. Primarily out of malice, but also to gauge the quality of service, I affected amnesia and made him repeat the bleeding lot. He did so without a flicker of Gallic froideur, which seemed the only inauthentic aspect to the meal.

Shock Francophile Simon, who means to mark his 50th next year by crossing the Channel to learn how to cook their fancy foreign muck, kicked off with moules marinières. "Fantastic quality, lovely sauce, impeccable," he said. "If you were in a bistro in Dieppe, this is what you'd get." Gazing enviously through the plastic rose-clad wire mesh beside the table (the room bubbles with eccentricities) at plates of escargots being bustled around the room, my onion tart seemed a slightly girly choice. Still, this vast wedge of fluffy, eggy, cheesy'n'oniony delight came alluringly browned on top and bursting with flavour.

The main courses were precisely as they should have been, neither smart nor subtle, pretty nor poncey, just big helpings of plainly delicious food. The Heff loved his chicken in a delectably smoky cheese sauce, with creamy mash and crunchy beans, not least because it had the unnerving (for British meat-eaters) flavour of chicken. Boeuf bourguignon was almost as impressive, the meat nestling alongside juicy mushrooms and shallots in a gutsy, red-wine gravy that offset a hint of dryness.

Even for two portly fellows, pudding was a struggle after that lot, but we dredged up the Dunkirk spirit and shared a flawless chocolate mousse. "A marvellous restaurant," declared Simon, shortly before raising the spectre of Monsieur Hulot by taking the identical Burberry raincoat of an elderly gent. As so often, he was right.

"Do you know, after 22 and a half years of marriage, it's time I brought Mrs Heffer back here for our second date." Who now will dare say that the age of romance is past?