

## Matthew Norman



What cod hath joined together, let no man poncify

This week:  
**Geales, Chelsea,  
London**

CRATING 7/10

Geales, 1 Cale St, London  
SW3 3QT, 020 7965  
0555; www.geales.com/  
chelseagreen

Three course meal with  
wine: £35-45 per head  
(less with tea); set lunch:  
£9.95 for two courses



In honour of Joseph Stein, writer of the Broadway version of *Fiddler on the Roof*, who died a few weeks ago aged 98, we begin today with one word. Tradition. Or, more accurately: traaaaa-dishhhh-unnnnnnn!

Topol's orthodox Jewish milkman was obsessive about it when it came to the prospective nuptials of his daughter to a young man whom he regarded – something here for one Michael Middleton to ponder? – as beneath her.

I'm also a stickler for tradition, though only when it comes to fish and chips. Regarding this priceless invention of 19th-century Jewish immigrants who left the old country for the East End when the pogroms came to lose their allure, no nonsense can be brooked. For with something as immutably perfect as the holy wedlock between battered fish and deep fried potatoes, any poncification is, as the Talmud so curiously fails to spell out, an abomination in the eyes of the Lord.

It was a gloomy journey, then, to the second branch of Geales in Chelsea. The original in Notting Hill, the subject of my first-ever review not long after it opened in 1939, was a Desert Island restaurant of ours, partly for the lovely elderly waitresses modelled on Julie Walters's "Two Soups"; but mostly for the magnificence of the fish, fried in beef dripping as tradition demands to lend such savour that I suck my soft palate at the memory just as the amputee

clutches in phantasmal pain at the long-departed leg.

Then a couple of fellows who had made their name and money at a swish joint in Mayfair bought and murdered it. The venerable haddocks were replaced by gamine young Frenchwomen, the beef dripping was abandoned, the portions were shrunk and the prices viciously hiked. With that in mind, this journey to the new outlet was made on feet clad metaphorically in hobnailed boots. Such a vast improvement is this one over its elder sibling, however, that today's extremity-covering garment of choice is the kid glove.

It isn't a patch on the pre-gentrification Notting Hill stalwart, frankly, of which old regulars are tauntingly reminded by the presence on the wall of the original menu. Yet nor, despite the weeniest tables for two outside the Borrowers Staff Canteen, is it a pernicious clip joint, while the room looks smart in the neutral style (slate-grey walls, lilac pillars, black and white checked blinds, aged floorboards) without feeling clinical.

If the Edwardian snaps of fishwives awaiting the day's catch on a dock seem out of place a few doors down from Jane Asher's cake shop (we bought a Dalek birthday cake there once and hope to conclude the repayments by late

2031), a manager with an insanely lavish moustache handled our inverted snobbery with charm.

"Right, I'll get brewing up," he said when we eschewed the wine list to order more seemly strong tea, "and start talking in a funny northern accent."

With the Twinings traditional breakfast came two excellent starters. Five large prawns served in a cup were as fleshy and sweet as you could wish, and came with a fine lemon aioli. A more generous

serving of whitebait, most underrated of the smaller piscine life forms, was superb, despite the limitations of a feckless, sub-Hellmann's mayonnaise.

Also immaculate were the main courses. The manager had congratulated my friend for requesting haddock and chips with the words: "I don't normally do this, but that's a very good order." My friend was thrilled ("I'm so glad I went for something dangerously outré," he murmured, "rather than the bleedin' obvious") and almost as chuffed with the dish itself.

"This haddock is so fresh," he said, "it hasn't really finished being a live fish. Just the faintest hint of the sea." My cod was also faultlessly fried in light batter and it too hinted vaguely at flavours aquatic.

The absence of that beef dripping to macho up the dish

was, as always, keenly felt. But chips were golden, fat and crunchy, mushy peas had the ideal consistency (though not enough mint), and tartar sauce was strong and tangy. Pickled cucumbers came cut into spears, when tradition dictates they should be served as complete Zeppelins, and might have been better preserved. Which was more than could be said for the elegant ladies who lunched at the next table.

By now our resistance was waning alarmingly. A half-hearted and politely ignored attempt to revive it by asking the manager for a scoop of Wall's, in preference to organic vanilla ice cream served with a deliciously tart apple and blackberry crumble, went nowhere.

"I hate to say so," said my friend as we lingered over the Twinings, "because it goes against some unwritten law of nature, but I can't find much to fault here."

Nor could I. No union between a fish and chip gaff and a smart road in a royal borough will ever feel quite right to sticklers for tradition on either side of the social divide, which partly explained the failure of Tom Aikens's chichi Tom's Place on this site (the neighbours weren't happy: dahling, the smell!).

Geales must have a better extraction system. Despite the gaping social chasm between the partners – God willing, this is an omen for another forthcoming inter-class wedding – I suspect that this marriage is built to last.

Your  
table is  
ready

## Quite interesting

A quietly intriguing column from the brains behind *QI*, the BBC quiz show. This week

Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly  
Mae West

### Slow notes

The longest and slowest piece of music in history is John Cage's *As Slow as Possible*, originally written in 1985 as

They have also launched the Rosetta Project, which plans a record of all the thousands of languages expected to become extinct in the next few generations. Long Now Foundation board members include the musician Brian Eno, the neuroscientist and author of



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