



IN A SEMI-HAPPY MARRIAGE?

▶ John Harlow picks apart a hot topic dominating US dinner parties


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Winner's Dinners: A decent rib eye for my favourite rib tickler

Our man has a superb steak in Knightsbridge with his comedian friend John Cleese, who is once again doing one-man shows and films

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Michael at the Rib Room with Michele Caggianese, left, and John Cleese (Nino Bosnjak)

My friend John Cleese (age 94) has a blonde girlfriend, Jennifer (age 16). You'd think that alone would be enough to cause bodily collapse. But our Jonno is haunted by his ex-wife Alyce (age 92), whose triumphant (for her) divorce proceedings left John with less money than she had, and on top of that he had to pay her \$1m a year for seven years.

So instead of enjoying the sunset of life reading books and occasionally writing a postcard, Joh

has to work. He's managed this with all the grit and determination I'd expect from a true Scorpio.

He's done a one-man show around England, Scandinavia, Upper Silesia and Omsk. He recently returned from Australia via Bahrain, where he's cooking up more employment. He's doing a guest shot in a movie in Greece.

"It's financed by a Russian so I should be all right," said John with considerable optimism.

In between all this he suggested Michael Winner (age 97) lunch with him at the **Rib Room** restaurant in the **Jumeirah Carlton Tower**, Knightsbridge.

I've known the Rib Room since it opened in 1961, then covered with drawings by Feliks Topolski. It's gone up and down like a yo-yo. The latest redesign is pretty good in an "I'm in a hotel and don't you forget it" way. The very comfortable leather chairs are racing green. The carpet, checked.

We discussed the steaks. John said, "The rib eye is more marbled." That's clever. I thought he was a culinary idiot. I asked for that with bone marrow sauce. The waiter took my menu away before I'd ordered my vegetables. Got it back and requested cauliflower cheese.

The prawn cocktail starter was extremely good. It was in a big bowl. Very 1950s.

John said, "There's a little bit of zing in this sauce. Can you tell me what it is?" I thought: "He really is mad — he thinks I know about food." The bread was also good, upright rolls like balls sliced up.

The handmade chips were anaemic, not crisp on the outside, needed more time in the oven. The cauliflower cheese was very al dente with no taste of cheese at all. The steak was superb, much helped by putting bone marrow on the top.

The waiter suggested blackberry and chocolate soufflé, hot cassis sauce — 11 minutes at most to produce. I chose the "classic treacle tart, lemon thyme clotted cream". I'm a world expert on treacle tart. This had no taste of treacle whatsoever. The texture was clammy and slushy. I left nearly all of it. I ate some watermelon to get the taste of the ghastly treacle tart out of my mouth. The watermelon was fine.

I was glad to see the sugar wasn't wrapped but the white sugar cubes were all under the brown sugar cubes. I dug around with my fingers. The restaurant manager — he was good — Michele Caggianese, saw I was behaving atrociously and brought some sugar tongs. Why weren't they there in the first place?

All in all, summing it up, considering a bit of this and a bit of that, it was a pleasant meal. They should still try harder.

- For years I've had at home very heavy spaghetti, which my cook buys at Waitrose. "Enough," I said. Knowing nothing about spaghetti (or any other food) I emailed my two favourite, brilliant and very nice Michelin-starred Italian chefs: Angela Hartnett of Murano and Giorgio Locatelli of Locanda Locatelli.

Locatelli uses De Cecco in his restaurant; he added that some shops stocked Latini and Verrigni (from Abruzzo), which were excellent. Angela Hartnett uses De Cecco at home but in the restaurant serves Verrigni. She said, "For super posh, try Carluccio's own brand." Her Italian

grandmother used Barilla, which a Soho shop, Camisa & Son, has stocked for 60 years.

Angela gave me the name Fabio Antoniazzi, boss of La Credenza, which supplies restaurants. He personally came round with two types of Verrigni and a catalogue offering endless cheeses, hams, salamis, olives, shrunken human heads, frozen horses — you know the sort of thing. His spaghetti was sensational. It's nice to have friends in high places.

- Last Thursday I performed my second one-man show for Times+ at the marvellous Wilton's Music Hall. Both sold out in seconds. Went very well. At the first one, some chap collapsed and everyone thought he'd died. Bit of a commotion.

Normality soon restored. An audience member asked, "Has anyone died before in your shows?"

I said, "Forty-five went last September. We carried on regardless."

Can't believe it, the assembled people kept asking for Hymie jokes. Here's this week's.

- From David Bloom: Becky is cooking Sunday lunch. She says to her husband, Hymie, "Go to the garden, dig up a large cabbage."

Hymie is bending over the cabbage when he has a massive heart attack and dies.

That afternoon Becky's friend Sadie Cohen comes round and is told the story.

"That's terrible," says Sadie. "What did you do?"

"What could I do?" replies Becky. "I opened a tin of peas instead."

Michael's missives

I see that Geraldine's photographic skills are improving. At L'Hermitage Gantois she's captured you furthest from the camera.

Geoff Greensmith, Surrey

You failed to mention that L'Hermitage Gantois is haunted. In the photo, behind three smiling faces, the spectre of a very old man can be seen. Spooky!

Sue Greeson, Berkshire

What was Michael doing on the Belgium border in hotels more used to the demands of business people rather than a pernickety old reviewer looking for trouble?

Howard Goddard, Surrey

My friend Rita and I went to Lille for the day. Ended up in the most boring art gallery possible eating cakes and willing the day to end. We have moved on, but once visited the place never seems to fade from memory.

Angela Stern, London

Britain is on its uppers. Europe is in financial meltdown. But you're in Lille eating foie gras and paying £76 for a five-minute taxi ride. I don't know how you do it, but with expertise like that you should be advising the government, who've clearly lost the plot.

Patrick Tracey, Carlisle

I'm bemused by photos of smiling restaurant staff as they bid farewell to Michael above a column that vilifies them, their food, service etc. May we have photos after they've read your column? Far more interesting.

Tim Burton, Berkshire

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