

## Winner's dinners

# Banged up and mash — a meal that's a steal

If it's as difficult to get out of HM Prison High Down as it is to get in, then it must be the most secure place on the planet. All I wanted was to nip over for lunch. I was invited by the ex-convict, ex-cabinet minister Jonathan Aitken and his lovely wife, Elizabeth. She was my neighbour when married to the actor Richard Harris.

You might expect my old friend Jonathan would ask me to the Ivy or Scott's but he's a prison groupie. He explained that **The Clink**, a special restaurant in High Down jail, is run by the inmates.

What a palaver. The Home Office said, "You can't bring a camera."

I said, "BBC TV did a programme on The Clink. It used cameras. Why should mine be banned?"

After more poncing around than I care to recount, Geraldine and I, the camera, my Rolls Phantom and my chauffeur appeared at the prison, situated, if you want to make a booking, in Sutton, southwest London.

Jonathan pointed to a sign at the prison entrance which read, "Heightened state of alert".

"That's because they know I'm coming," I suggested.

We waited for ever. Jonathan explained, "The important factor of prison life is to be trained in queuing." I don't do queuing. I was further disappointed not to be sitting with prison inmates. They were just cooking and serving, under the supervision of the prison's professional chef, Alberto Crisci.

An elegant prisoner restaurant manager, Kane Sterling (in for drug offences), showed us to a corner table where we could gaze on other diners: Japanese tourists and various hoi polloi.

A representative of HM Prison Service asked me, "Is there anything you need?"

"A cloth napkin, please," I said, declining the paper one.

Elizabeth explained, "It's all made by the prisoners — tables, chairs, everything." It was very posh.

Abdul Vutt was one of our waiters. Efficient. Cheerful. He was in for fraud.

I asked, "Did you get much out of it?"

He replied, "No, it was intentional."

Didn't get that, but so what?

Our main waiter was Wayne Anthony White from Barbados. Jonathan had told me, "In prison you learn not to ask anything because you always get an untruthful answer."

I asked Wayne, "Why are you in here?"

He said, "Because I did something regrettable."

I asked, "Did you murder six people?"

He said, "No. Illegal substances."



Michael with, from left, Jason James, Jonathan Aitken, Alberto Crisci and Elizabeth Aitken

Let this be very clear: all the staff were fantastic. Polite, on the ball, far better than the dodgy lot you get in most West End restaurants. Before I left I said to a group of them, "When you come out, if you want a reference get in touch with me. You were all terrific."

I started with deep-fried stilton quenelles followed by saddle of rabbit en croûte. I also asked for a cocktail of passion fruit juice, papaya, blackcurrant, pineapple, mango and a dash of essence.

"Wayne," I said. "I don't want to wait for those seven people you've just taken orders from. You must get your priorities right. My order comes first."

All the food was beautifully presented, well cooked, absolutely excellent. It was a superbly run restaurant. Abdul explained the restaurant was short of waiters that day because on Friday a lot of prisoners go to the mosque. The restaurant had run out of vanilla and coconut ice cream so I had strawberry and raspberry.

I wanted to photograph Wayne and Abdul but was told I couldn't because they hadn't been cleared. So we did Alberto, the chef, and Jason James, a prisoner from Saint Martin, who made the starters. He'd already been cleared for the BBC.

This is a marvellous restaurant. The prisoners beat normal waiting staff by a million miles. A trip worth taking. I won't return in case next time they don't let me out.

□ We were early for the prison. So we stopped in Station Road, Belmont (part of Sutton), and nipped into the **Arty Café** for a coffee. It bought in its cakes. Next door was **FM & LJ Stenning**, family bakers. It baked almost everything itself.

I took a sausage roll and a pink-iced fairy cake back to the cafe to accompany my excellent cappuccino and a packet of lightly salted "nothing artificial" Kettle Chips crisps. The fairy cake was sensational; sausage roll, historic.

GERALDINE LYNTON-EDWARDS