

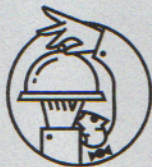
turned out that I wasn't, and that the Blonde had booked the table using the number on their website, which is still being answered by the Mayfair restaurant. "We don't have a table at the moment," said the maître d'. "Unfortunately, we haven't got the banquettes in yet."

There is quite a list of things that they don't have yet — much of the menu, including all the pizzas, which are advertised as "Chucs classics". They have only just opened. It's their first weekend. Perhaps we should cut them a little slack. But the rule is that places that have soft openings and discounts on their menu prices while they iron out the wrinkles are excused reviews, like theatres doing previews. But if you're charging full whack, then actually what you're doing is using other people's money for staff training.

And then there are things on the menu that aren't what they seem: branzino, for £28. The English translation helpfully points out that this is Chilean sea bass. It isn't. Branzino, also called loup de mer, spigola and sea bass, is not Chilean sea bass, which is a name made up in the 1970s to sell the unappetisingly known Patagonian toothfish to the Americans. Toothfish is a large Southern Ocean fish that is now severely endangered and commonly poached. It's not even a distant cousin of branzino. It's an easy enough mistake to make, if you don't know what you're doing. But if you don't know what you're doing, then what are you doing in this business?

On to the food. The pasta, cacio e pepe, was boring and bland. They forgot one, and when it came, it was so undercooked it was grittily inedible. The club sandwich, which is particularly good in the original restaurant, didn't work as a sandwich; that is, it collapsed, like a drunk's alibi, and the constituent parts weren't really worth eating by themselves.

If I were asked to guess, I would say that the kitchen is way too small for the size and complexity of the menu, and that the staff aren't comfortable with any of it. But I'm not a consultant, so I don't have to guess. They may get all this right in the end, but I'd kiss Chucs *arrivederci* for a year or so, and let them use someone else's money and time to fix their teeth ■



THREE OF THE BEST Italian restaurants

Edendum, Brighton

From the Latin "eating", Edendum, in Brighton's south lanes, is an Italian restaurant, cafe and food shop serving traditional fare with a modern twist. Don't miss the homemade gnocchi.

69 East Street,
Brighton, East Sussex
BN1 1HQ;
01273 733800,
edendum.co.uk

Don Giovanni, Manchester

Next to St Peter's Square in Manchester, and established in 1984, this claims to be the city's oldest Italian restaurant.

Try the warm octopus salad with potato, red chilli and lemon.

1-2 Peter House,
Oxford Street,
Manchester M1
5AN; 0161 228 2482,
dongiovanni.uk.com



La Lanterna, Glasgow

This family-run restaurant is still winning awards 40 years after it opened. A

refurbishment has updated the look and new additions to the menu have kept customers happy.

35 Hope Street,
Glasgow G2 6AE; 0141
221 9160, lalanterna-
glasgow.co.uk

Barr Fly

Celebrate the Bard's 400th anniversary with a tippie he would have approved of



Damian Barr

Four centuries ago, in two Saturdays' time, Shakespeare shuffled off his mortal coil (I couldn't resist). You may mark the moment touring Will's London by boat, watching adaptations at the BFI or by opening your Complete Plays for the first time since school. Missing from all the commemorations is a detailed examination of the Bard and the bottle. Enter Barr Fly.

"Undoubtedly, he drank lots," says Professor Stanley Wells, author of *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*. "Mild ale was a breakfast staple. We know his wife brewed it at their home. But I find it difficult to believe he could have got so much done if he'd been on the booze all the time. On the whole, the drinkers are nice characters — notably Sir John Falstaff. The nondrinkers are strait-laced and puritanical."

Due to the paucity of clean drinking water, ale was essentially

Elizabethan Evian. My first pick is Warwickshire Amber Ale from Marks & Spencer (1). This ruddy Tudor red is a warmly balanced brew from Shakespeare's home county with a mildly malty aftertaste. "I feel sure he would have drunk wines too," Wells says. "We imported malmsey, claret and sherris sack." Malmsey, still available, is a sweet madeira. Richard III drowns his brother George in a barrel of it. We know sherris sack as sherry. My second pick is nutty dry Fernando de Castilla Antique Amontillado — as serious as Hamlet and as aged as Lear (2).

Cocktails, as we know them, did not exist in Ye Olde Englande. "I expect he would drink them now," says Wells. Suggestions abound in Shakespeare, *Not Stirred: Cocktails for Your Everyday Dramas* by Caroline Bicks & Michelle Ephraim (Scribe, £9.99). Highlights include Kate's Shrew-Driver, Gertrude's Milkshake, Prospero's Dark and Stormy and (my favourite) Rosalind's Gender Blender (basically a vodka berry smoothie). My final pick is a refreshing gin-based nod to Shakespeare's love of flowers: the Garden of Curiosity (3). All's well that blends well ■

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DRINKING THIS WEEK

1



WARWICKSHIRE AMBER ALE

This gentle ale balances lightly citrus hops with a warming kiss of malt at the end. A boozy digestive biscuit. Exit, pursued by a bear.
£2.39, M&S

2



FERNANDO DE CASTILLA ANTIQUE AMONTILLADO NV

Savoury but mellow, this toasty amontillado packs orange peel, bitter almonds and a big finish. Demands briny olives.
£23.99, Virgin Wines

3



GARDEN OF CURIOSITY

By Ally Martin.
20ml Hendrick's gin,
20ml fino sherry,
20ml St Germain
elderflower liqueur
Stir together in a glass
filled with ice. Garnish
with cucumber.