

Turn back to Provence

AS THE season of picnics and more formal outdoor eating approaches, think pink – but, please, not white zinfandel or white grenache... The UK rose market continues to flourish, while sales of other colour wines stagnate, but half of all the bottles sold are Californian, and too often in those two styles.

So if your tipple of preference is startlingly bright and sweetish, as are many of the top sellers, this is the point at which we part company. I like my roses to be a soft, shell pink, their scents and flavours evoking flowers and juicy red fruits but their taste dry and satisfying, alone or with food. In a word, Provence.

For every bottle of Provence pink which is opened here, 49 Californians are poured. It's time the proportions changed, and Nathalie Pouzalges is doing her bit to help. She's head oenologist at the only research centre in the world specialising solely in roses – naturally, it's in Provence – and to hear her describe some of what she does is fascinating.

Take just one example: she's aware that Provence rose is most frequently seen as a simple product destined to please the throngs who swamp the south of France in summer. So she and her colleagues set out to prove that it should be regarded as a serious, place-oriented wine.

From different locations throughout the three major Provence appellations, they chose 14 vineyards. The vine age and grape mix (cinsault and grenache) was the same, as was ripeness, harvesting process, vinification and every other humanly-controllable element that contributes to a wine's character. Before smelling or tasting they looked at the colour of the wines. Each one was noticeably individual... So it was, too, with scent and



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flavour.

And diversity ruled among 70 wines from the very good 2008 vintage shown in London recently. The colours ranged from the very softest pink to vibrant raspberry, the aromas from gentle to ebullient and the flavours from simply, fruitily pleasant to complex, elegant and stylish. Best of all, I wanted to drink nearly all of them, not spit them out.

That's something which characterises other pinks, too, from the south of France. Languedoc has some lovely examples: I tasted through an intimidating number in February and emerged into the damp chill of Oxford Street smiling broadly.

Many employ the same grape varieties as Provence – cinsault, grenache, syrah, mourvèdre – and have a comparable delicacy of scents and flavours. And without the cachet of the Provence name, they can be more affordable.

But down to business – where can you buy delicious pinks, Provence first? Best bet for high street choice are the Nicolas shops – Domaine de la Grande Palliere (£10) has long been one of my favourites, but there are more, including Carte Noire from Saint-Tropez (£10).

Majestic has the classy, complex Chateau Sainte Marguerite Cru Classe, £10. And make the effort to contact Robert Rolls Fine Wines in St John Street, Clerkenwell (020-3215 0011) for three tempting cuves from the excellent Domaine Saint Andre de Figuere, priced between £7 and £12. There is wider distribution of Languedoc wines, and all these are particularly good: at Co-op, Mont Tauch Village du Sud (£4.50); Majestic, Domaine Begude (£7.50); www.thewinesociety.com, Mescaldis coteaux du Languedoc (£7), Chateau Sainte Eulalie minervois (£7).

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MIGHTY MOLLUSC HUNT

CAFE Rouge in Hampstead will mark this weekend's National Escargot Day with a snail-themed treasure hunt on Saturday.

The High Street restaurant is paying homage to the humble snail by teaming up with Eurostar, Bonne Maman and other partners to give away prizes in celebration of France's famous delicacy.

As the restaurant celebrates its 20th anniversary, staff are celebrating by hiding 20 oversized cut-out snails around the area which can be redeemed for special prizes including:

Return tickets to Paris with Eurostar.

A shopping bag containing

biscuits, cakes and a ceramic cookie jar from Bonne Maman.

Goodies from President Cheese, one of the world's premiere cheesemakers.

Bottles of French wine and champagne.

Cafe Rouge vouchers.

Each snail will be labelled with instructions about how to claim the prizes.

True to form, the snails will reside in those damp and dark shaded places rarely looked in – so those moving at a snail's space could miss out.

The snail hunt will be held on Saturday from 11am. Log onto www.cafelrouge.co.uk/ned for more details.

ATTENTIVE readers might recall that last week I lunched in the whitest restaurant in town – St John. Soon after I went for dinner to the Hampstead outpost of the Argentinian chain, Gaucho, whose interior is modelled upon that of a coal mine. Walls, floor and ceiling, all black – but unlike St John, they just won't let the idea lie: there are other factors too, and these are weird.

It took a while to accustom my eyes to the fathomless gloom during the lengthy amble from entrance to table; although one is above ground, we have here the air of a converted tunnel. From the outside, this Heath Street building rather resembles the dickied-up fire station in Ghostbusters, should any of you be so old or trivia-minded as to recall that thing.

And while a hack far slacker than I would at this point dub the place a "Tardis", you won't be hearing it from me. Suffice to say that the main long thin bit seems to stretch back for ever, whereupon it blossoms out into yet another, even larger space. From time to time the midnight of the walls is punctuated by a panel of hairy bovine – bristly hide that extends to the upholstery of the 1970s-style chromium pedestal swivel chairs.

Do you begin to detect a theme here? No, me neither – so let's just settle for that of a determinedly dated eatery given over to solemn genuflection before the altar of beef. Cows R Us, they might have called it – didn't, obviously, because that wouldn't be retro-cool or ironic. For this, bizarrely, is what I think they are working at here, in this rather spooky recreation of Hades.

Then there are the chandeliers: vast, rococo and pendulous – the sort of thing that Liberace might have gazed up at from amid the bubbles in his Steinway-shaped Jacuzzi. They don't actually emit any light, of course, but when in a restaurant was that ever the point? So we have here a backdrop where Cruella de Vil might lurk and cackle, plotting to make topcoats from the newborn of an unsuspecting herd (poor cows). There is also a splatter of Stringfellow's to it, and a nod to the Playboy Mansion circa 1974. I shouldn't have been surprised by the appearance of Hugh Heifer himself, silken pyjamas flapping about his, um – calves.

No girls, though – not in that sense – but a bevy of helpful and attractive waitresses. I was with Max, a local lad who spent his youth in Highgate, mooching with intent. Then, 30 years ago, he went to live in Canada, for reasons that continue to elude him. I was just pleased he got the right place (at the time he was in London we had met in the Groucho, so you can see the potential for confusion).

Max owns a travel company and has on many occasions eaten Argentinian beef and drunk Argentinian wine in Argentina, so I was red-hot keen for his comments. Myself, I don't know a thing about the place, except that the wine can be thick and soupy and fellingly alcoholic (not, actually, a good thing). But here's a snippet from Gaucho's website: "Argentina is where the survivor mentality meets with the herd instinct with sometimes chaotic but always fascinating results!". Mm – as in the invasion of the Falklands, I suppose.

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Anyway: time to order. The menu came in the form of a truncheon (black leather) that

Black – and it can send you into the red

FACTFILE

■ **Gaucho**, 64 Heath Street, NW3.
■ Telephone 020-7431 8222.
■ Food: ★★★★☆ (steak), ★★☆☆☆ (everything else)
■ Service: ★★★★☆
■ Open: Mondays to Thursdays noon to 11pm, Fridays and Saturdays noon to 11.30pm, Sundays 10am to 10.30pm.
■ Cost: More than £100 for two, with soup. Sorry, wine.

Joseph Connolly
goes on a steak-out
on Heath Street



Picture by Polly Hancock

the migraine of an intro, endlessly. You do wonder, don't you? Who it's meant to be for. We'd nearly finished the wine by the time the steaks came; I'd asked for the red with the lowest alcohol content which turned out to be something called Zuccardi, at 13%. Still thick and soupy, though – and not remotely good value at £30.75.

Which brings me to cost: the bill here is quite frankly ridiculous. Everything is extra: a thimbleful of (vinegary) bearnaise: £2.50. Three (vinegary) portobello mushrooms: £4.75. So-so chips, spinach – all extra. Yes yes yes, I know: but what about the steaks? Well very fine indeed, actually (and so I should bloody well hope). Tender and extremely flavoursome, without a doubt. Max said his was as good as in Argentina, or even Chicago (the highest praise, as those who know, know) – with one rather telling difference: in Argentina (and even in Chicago) beef and wine are pretty cheap. In

Heath Street, they ain't. All of the above, plus one bottle of horrible Hildon water – came to £104.35. Without service. Well.

The bubbly waitress was eager to tell us that soon they would open the little garden at the back where there would be an all-you-can-eat barbecue at £35 a head, which she seemed to imagine was a giveaway. "Do you like steak?" I asked her. "I don't remember," she happily replied. "I haven't had one this year. The chef gives me bits for my cat, though. I go home after my shift and eat crackers". Got to love her, haven't you?

And then I wanted to leave – ride bareback and rough-shod across the sun-scorched pampas, and home to my estancia. But I don't know... a sort of lassitude came down upon me: all that black, I think. I felt I could just have sat there and stared at it till the cows came home. Oh, enough – look: if you want it, this is Gaucho. No more argy-bargy.

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