

SCHOOL hols – dontcha love ‘em? You might well be contemplating giving this latest vile neologism a whirl – a ‘staycation’: i.e. the recession has left you so utterly battered and broke that any euphemism at all for being thoroughly unable to afford a holiday is, on balance, better than none. All those pull-outs and supplements that have fallen from your newspapers lately – ‘Great Days Out’, ‘Fun For The Kids’ – and you dropped them into the bin because the relentlessly frolicsome covers chock-a-block with buckets and spades, thatched cottages, idyllic coaching inns and smiling, for God’s sake, left you more than faintly bilious. So London it is, then – and how about a spot of culture? Well if you are thinking of taking the kiddies to the Tate, please don’t: it is already rammed to the rafters with the little bleeders. They slouch in sullen knots, obscuring the paintings, while some evangelical, bullying and semi-deranged adult informs them of what they are ‘seeing’. She (it’s usually a she – when it isn’t a he, anyway) will indicate allegory, flourish the dread term ‘brushwork’ and maybe even utter the word ‘painterly’. The young ones scowl and turn up the volume on their i-Pods. Then they fall upon the gift shop, gasp at the laughable insolence of the prices and settle for the only two affordable things in the whole self-consciously ‘fun’ emporium – neither of any earthly use to a child of today: a pencil, and a bookmark.

This is Tate Britain I’m talking about. At Tate Modern they might well be having a whale of a time because the big attractions there seem to be climbing on things, sliding down chutes, lying on the floor or falling into crevices: a meagre substitute for Battersea Fun Fair, but better than looking at pictures. And lovers of the original Tate, who were given to believe that calm and sanity would descend upon the place once all the junk was shipped off across the river, might be surprised by the first thing to confront them: it is, oh dear, an installation. Or maybe it isn’t – maybe it’s a sculpture, who can say? Anyway, the beautiful

Hefty prices, don’t they know it’s a recession!

On top of facing bad news from a commissioning editor, novelist Joseph Connolly not only has to face a paltry portion of chicken (at more than 30 quid!) but he can’t even afford a whole bottle of wine at Tate Britain

honey-coloured stone hall is wholly taken up with vast and black intersecting and criss-crossing poles, their pointless points obtruding upon the noble Ionic columns. Eva Rothschild is the guilty party, and her excuse for it is writ large upon the wall: “The jagged blackness creates a confused and anxious alternate [she means alternative] architecture within the galleries, interrupting and usurping the space.” Unusual for an artist to be so refreshingly self-critical: I couldn’t have put it better.

But I was here for other arts: gastronomy and viniculture. The restaurant is rather renowned – Rex Whistler it’s called, in honour of the beautiful murals that he finished in 1927 entitled ‘The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats’ (those who like theirs well done should maybe seek elsewhere). The room is lovely to behold – a glorious and fantastic pilgrimage rampant with Classical and Renaissance architectural features and much Chinoiserie, as well as all sorts of vintage puns and anachronisms: chariots and bicycles, say. The restaurant has always been famous for its wine list, so I wasn’t too unhappy when a commissioning features editor from a national newspaper suggested the venue, because she was fed up, she said, with everything south of the river. I say she is a commissioning editor, but the thrust of lunch, fairly depressingly, was to explain to me why she was no longer commissioning. Our old friend the recession again. “We are not allowed to use freelancers any more,” she said. “Even major



Oh Lord! Let’s just have a drink then: Joseph Connolly.

writers such as yourself”. All flannel, of course. Major? More like busted to the rank of non-commissioned officer. Oh Lord: look – let’s eat and have a drink. All sorts of very good breads were immediately proffered by smily waitresses in pinnies made of old sacks that say ‘Ally Capellino’ on the bib. The prices here are hefty – a set lunch at £15.95 for two courses or £19.95 for three may not seem too bad ... but there was a rather lacklustre choice. Going a la carte, all starters are £7.75, all mains £15.55 (not including sides at £3.40 each), all puds go for £5.80, while cheese is £7.75. This, without wine, comes in at hefty.

Ah yes: wine. Lovers of the finer Burgundies and clarets have traditionally flocked here because right up until the 1980s, they somehow managed to sell very splendid things at less than wine merchant prices: the food (not very good, back then) was a tiresome irrelevance. Well the days when one could gorge on Latour in exchange for buttons have long departed – but still there are bargains to be had. A Chateau Margaux at £370 may not be too tempting (there’s a recession! No one’s commissioning!) but a Trotanoy 1997 (a neighbour of Petrus) at £84 is not at all bad. Didn’t have it, though (there’s a recession! No one’s commissioning!). And as it

gently dawned upon me that this brush-off lunch was to be down to me, I thought the fine selection of half bottles suddenly enticing. So a wee Pontet-Canet 02 at £24.50, then: lovely it was – shame there was so little of it.

We skipped starters (there’s a recession! No one’s commissioning!) and went for spring chicken on spinach with carrots, baby leeks and morels: very fine indeed – flavoursome, utterly fresh and with a well-tempered jus – but my they were mingy with the chicken: I’d say we had half a poussin between us (at over thirty quid). The Jersey Royals were first rate, as were the crispy chips: done in dripping, I’m guessing – they make you greedy, like seaside chips do. Then some cheese to partner the wine of which there was none bloody left (damned if I was ordering more, though). The selection was good – Irish goat was the usual, but there was another Irish one which was excellent: Ardahan Farmhouse, not unlike a French Liverot. There was also something akin to Stilton, a good and flaky cheddar and another on the lines of Brie – plus Duchy oatcakes, black biscuits, grapes and chutney. As I eyed my executioner carelessly wolfing it all down, I got to wondering how a commissioning editor fills in her day when not actually commissioning. Answer? Lunching with jilted writers at their expense in order to tell them that she is not actually commissioning. Jesus. We didn’t have coffee: there wasn’t a lot more to say. One good thing – the cheese didn’t appear on the bill (I think because

I’d moaned about the paucity of chicken): still somehow managed to be seventy-five quid, though. On my way out, full and dejected, I saw a sign: ‘Turner and Rothko’. Good God – what a pairing. In foodie terms this is akin to serving Strasbourg foie gras with a dollop of Heinz Baked Beans. Oh well. And everywhere in the Tate are huge boxes inviting voluntary contributions. But look – don’t they understand? There’s a recession! No one’s commissioning! You learn to ignore those boxes, though – to simply blank them out: this is more than flair – I have elevated it to an art form.

□ Joseph Connolly’s latest book is *Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design* (Faber and Faber; £25). www.josephconnolly.co.uk

FACTFILE

- **REX WHISTLER RESTAURANT**, Tate Britain, 20 John Islip Street, SW1 020-7887 8825
- Open for breakfast Sat and Sun 10am-11.30 am. Lunch every day 11.30am-3pm. Tea every day 3.15pm-5pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Set lunch £15.95 two courses, £19.95 three. A la carte £100 for two with wine. But if you want to do the wine list justice ... well you can’t. There’s a recession! No one’s commissioning!

Other areas give rioja a run for its money

IF, IN drinking the wines of Spain, you want to be in the best company, go for the sherries and smart sweet wines. That’s not to dismiss the gamut of dry wines, from happy cava and crisp whites to serious rich, tannic reds. But the true stars of the 2009 New Wave Spanish Wine Awards come at the end of the 105-wine list. Don’t rely on my opinion alone: there were some very distinguished wine writers saying so, when the line-up was revealed earlier this month.

The New Wave initiative, now in its fifth year, aims to highlight the best of Spain’s myriad offerings available in the UK, and this year’s choice is the top 10 per cent of those submitted. Attending the tasting of the award-winners is a splendid overview of the whole of

vinous Spain. What’s fascinating, for example, is that rioja – though the largest representation, yet again – meets some very strong competition from lesser-known regions or alternative styles of wine. I’ll move on to the sweet treats in a moment, but among the dry wines there were some very, very drinkable examples from places which feature in few wine drinkers’ vocabularies: Alella, for example, Sierras de Malaga, Emporada, Valdeorras, Navarra...

One region



which shone for whites was Rueda, where the verdejo grape rules – often in company with the somewhat similarly aromatic sauvignon blanc. It’s an unlikely source of crisp, fragrant whites, but modern winemaking more than compensates for the difficulties of a continental climate. Unfortunately for summer picnickers, most of the New Wave examples are yet to reach mainstream UK outlets.

The situation is much the same for quite a lot of the reds, too. So thank goodness for Tesco, which does Spain proud. All these New Wave are recommended: Tesco Old Vines Garnacha Campo de Borja (£5.50), Torres Vina

Sol tempranillo Catalonia (£6), Vina Mayor Tesco Finest tempranillo Ribera del Duero (£7.55), Baron de Ebro Reserva 2004 rioja (£5.55 – a mature bargain).

But for rarer delights, Ham&High vinophiles are within easy reach of Moreno Wines, whose shop in Maryland Road, Maida Vale (ring 020-7286 0678 to check opening times), is a treasure trove. Strike gold – literally, in the colour of the first of what I thought were two of the very best wines in the list. Montecristo 2008, a moscatel from Navarra, has a herby, spicy edge to its sweetness, with freshness too.

At £12 for 50cl, it’s remarkable value.

Capricho de Goya, another moscatel from the same producer, Bodegas Camilo Castilla, is more walnut than golden in colour, but is a stop-you-in-your-tracks wine, deeply perfumed, delectably rich and complex, and lingers even

longer, again with wonderful freshness. The old 37.5cl packaging has been replaced by a smart new 50cl bottle, and £19 is well spent.

Moreno has a huge choice of dry wines, too, and I lost count of how many were in the New Wave list. But begin a memorable tour of the country with these: Inocente Fino, a clean, dry, yeasty, sherry which you can drink through all the savoury part

of a meal, £8; Marques de Alella, a zesty, sweet-fruited white aperitif wine, £11; La Bascula The Charge viura, a great seafood-friendly white rioja, £10; Getaria Txomin Etxaniz, tongue-twisting but an enjoyably spritzly white from the Basque country, £15.

For more, go to the shop and be tempted...

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ Always know and record the location of your main water stopcock in case of an emergency. The last thing you want is to have a leak causing damage and are then busy hunting around trying to shut off your water supply or, worse still, having to pay someone else to try to find it.

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