

DOYEN is not a word to be used lightly, but in wine writing there's one man to whom that title most certainly applies – Hugh Johnson. His name appears on the cover of some of the most authoritative tomes ever published on the product of the grape, and also on one little book which for 33 years has been an essential for many newcomers to the understanding of wine.

Crucially, his works have stood the test of time. The proof is that new editions and innovative offshoots continue to appear, even in these days of wine publishing recession. It's understandable that, after almost 50 years in the business, Johnson no longer writes every word – in fact, he has largely handed over to talented successors, whose contributions he fully

Johnson is the last word on wine



acknowledges. But the Johnson name isn't merely a selling point, he still makes telling points.

Take the introduction to the 2010 edition of Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book (Mitchell Beazley, £11) as an example. He rails against the current

“demonising” of wine in the UK and France and describes as an “act of breathtaking stupidity” the EU's intended destruction of the appellation controllee system (and its equivalents elsewhere across Europe).

Meddle at your peril is his message to the Eurocrats, and he urges wine consumers to set up the barricades through exploring, enjoying and sharing of the world of wine.

Which is where the Pocket Wine Book is invaluable. It isn't a list of recommended wines and where to buy them, but something much more interactive: a guide – from Alsace to Zimbabwe – through the

countries which produce wine, regions and appellations within them (star-rated for quality and value), the best producers and vintages, vinous issues of current concern and a whole lot more.

There is page after page of small print, barely an illustration beyond some basic maps, so an immense amount of information is packed in – 38 entries for Croatia, 24 pages on the chateaux of Bordeaux. Yet it remains remarkably easy to use. With age, the slim volume has fattened: at 320 pages, it's 120 up on my well-used 1990 edition.

“Indispensable, definitive,” said The Observer then. That's still true.

And it will lead you on... Next, in heavy, encyclopaedic, much more expansive comparison, to Hugh Johnson's Wine Companion (Mitchell Beazley, £40). As in the previous (fifth) edition, the updating is the work of Stephen Brook, and though the Companion remains old world biased Brook has made very substantial revisions.

Happily, though, the format has gone backwards, very much closer to that of the elegant 1983 first edition, with many of Paul Hogarth's evocative sketches returning, plus gentle sepia images and smart new full colour maps.

Those maps come from the

World Atlas of Wine (first published 1971), where now Jancis Robinson is Johnson's collaborator. There was a new edition in 2007, and for 2009 that has been condensed into the more portable, paperback Concise World Atlas of Wine (Mitchell Beazley, £19).

The pretty photos and decorative wine labels on the hardback pages have gone, but all the maps remain. It's fascinating to see the relation of vineyards to geography, and the words, though succinct, top up the glass of detail. The understanding of terroir starts here.

LIZ SAGUES

MAXWELL'S in Heath Street, Hampstead – long gone now, but one of the original

decent hamburger joints – was where we always used to take the ickle kiddies for a treat. And sometimes for an extra special, joy-packed, all-action, oh-my-God-how-does-our-oh-so-wonderful-Daddy-think-of-such-things sort of a treat, we took them to Maxwell's in Covent Garden. Look: it was good enough of me to give them a meat meal without imagination having to come into it – at least they got to marvel at that giant neon Coca-Cola sign (again). And it was outside the Covent Garden Maxwell's that living statues used to sprout like a particularly invasive fungus: here a berk in Baco-Foil, there a moron in a Mummy's shroud – and more Charlie Chaplins than you could shake a malacca cane at. My daughter Victoria was struck by a Marcel Marceau-type buffoon, frozen mid entrechat: her eyes were luminous with wonder ... and then, of a sudden, he switched feet. Her screaming could be heard in Seven Dials: burying her face deep into her mother's stomach, she babbled of demons and was quite inconsolable. I even had to eat the better part of her cheeseburger, so there was a kind of an upside to it.

Anyway – they're all still there, this pack of indefinables, swaddled in silver paint, tar-soaked tarpaulin, or content to be ghoulish in chalk dust. They seem to split their time between this piazza and the Royal Mile in Edinburgh during the Fringe ... and maybe, when ancient, they were solemnly pursue their turgid destiny, trudging in a mournful convoy to the basement of their mentor Madame Tussaud, there to expire, stiffly.

I was in Covent Garden this

All Covent Garden's cheer abandoned here

The Baco-Foil clad living statues may be entertaining the market's crowds, but there's nothing to lift the spirit at Bertorelli's – with its gloomy interior, indifferent staff and so-so food, finds **Joseph Connolly**

time not for Maxwell's – which, incidentally, appears still to be thriving – but Bertorelli's in Floral Street. Still, though, I had to run the gauntlet of some importunate would-be grandee, seemingly formed from Portland Stone, and then a man with no head, his Buddy Holly spectacles hovering in mid-air above a truncated neck (the children and tourists seeming far more taken by the bloke in a three-foot top hat forming dachshunds out of balloons. Face it – you've seen one headless man, you've seen them all).

Floral Street ... pretty name, no? To do with the nearby Floral Hall, from when Covent Garden was Covent Garden and this little part of it was devoted to flowers. And so you happily trip into Bertorelli's to find that from floor to ceiling it is decked in ... gloom. Oh God it's so very dim in here – not softly lit, or anything, just the feeling that most of the bulbs have been blown, the management bugged if they're going to do anything about it. The original Bertorelli's in Charlotte Street, before it was ritually destroyed and made trendy, was Stygian too, but in a good way: the pre-war light fittings dangled dutifully over your booth, doing their puny best. The bossy and elderly Italian

waitresses would bellow at you to finish your greens, and they weren't even joking. Needless to say, my chums and I just loved all that. We called this place The Irish: Bert O'Reilly's, you see? (So tender, and so very witty: how could we fail?).

I was lunching with Sue Bradbury, something of a legend in publishing, who has just, after 36 years' service, retired from being the driving force at The Folio Society. This is a great organisation for which last year I had the honour of writing the introduction to their 60th anniversary bibliography. After all this time they continue to publish books to the highest production standards imaginable – and it is still 100 per cent English owned: rare.

I remembered this branch of Bertorelli's as being monochrome and rather airy, but it's hardly that now. The walls are slubby, the carpet rather stained, the upholstery jewel-coloured and alive with an Indian motif, of all things: no hint of Italian here. The miserable wall lights are chromium and twisted – a dead ringer for the tubular bells on the cover of Bruce Oldfield's eponymous and irritating album. The music here, though, is a mouth organ drawing of the sort got up to by a melancholy cowhand on the range where the deer and the antelope roam, just prior to chucking his cawfee on the fire and bedding down for the night with a horse.

As we perused the menu, I observed to Sue that it was odd these days not to be offered a set lunch. But she had spotted the separate menu a couple of tables down. Huh! I didn't bother making a fuss, but only because we'd already decided on what to eat: for Sue, zucchini fritte from the contorni side of things as a starter, and good old prosciutto San Daniele with melon for a couple. Just as well we'd ordered a couple of glasses of elegant and peary



Colourful attire but nothing lifts the gloom for Joseph.

Prosecco, because the food took an age. When finally it arrived, I said to the waiter, “Could I have some butter, please?” He pointed to a bottle on the table. “That olive oil,” he said. I regarded it. “Yes,” I agreed, “it is. Could I have some butter, please?” “People dip in oil,” he grunted. “People well might,” I countered. “Could I have some butter, please?” He shrugged in such a way as to suggest that I could die on the floor, for all the interest it held for him. Sue's zucchini were crunchy, which is good, and so was the melon, which is not.

She was looking forward to one of her favourite dishes: tortelli al granchio e aragosta (I think particularly because she'd been on the F-Plan diet for 40 years – that's the one, according to Denis Norden, where everything tastes of pencil shavings). This is crab and lobster ravioli, really, with roasted tomatoes. It was al dente and very lobstery – not always the case – but let down badly by its absolute

dryness. Shame: this was nearly very good indeed. I had tagliatelle carbonara, more or less because I hadn't in ages. The egg was very much there, the cream not so, while the smoked pancetta was horribly salty. Once more, it could have been excellent with rather more care (and cream). And when these mains arrived, I said to the waiter “Butter ...?” and he said “Oh yeh – you wanted butter, didn't you?” And by the time I'd finished the tagliatelle and the bread was all gone, he brought some. In a far from full restaurant, this man was basically sleepwalking. There was more: we were given a dessert and coffee menu, and then abandoned for 25 minutes, by which time we had jointly decided to give up on the idea.. When eventually he sloped up, I recounted all of this to our wondrous waiter: again came the shrug of almost majestic indifference. Sue's company had been as entertaining as ever, but I think by now we were both quite eager to be away from this.

Outside, we were nearly knocked sideways by a gale,

“The music is a mouth organ drawling of the sort by a melancholy cowhand on the range

though I experienced considerable delight from seeing the headless man frantically clutching thin air in quest of his lunatic spectacles ... bronze and marble statues teetering on the rim of their plinths, and bent double in the wind. Sometimes, you know, the pleasure of lunch can be about so much more than just the food.

□ All Joseph Connolly's past restaurant reviews may be viewed as they appeared on the page on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

□ **BERTORELLI'S**
44a Floral Street, WC2
Tel: 020-7836 3969

□ Open Monday to Saturday, noon - 11pm, Sunday, noon-8pm.

□ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

□ Service: ★★☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

□ Cost: About £60 for two courses for two. Bring your own butter.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ Calling out a plumbing company to clear blockages can work out expensive and can also lead to decorative damage if the blocked pipework leaks through any of the joints. This can be avoided by carrying our preventative maintenance before the drain is blocked. From any decent hardware store or supermarket, buy some drain cleaner and, every now and then, pour some down each plughole or drain and it will clear any build-up that you may have. Always follow the instructions on the bottle, as some of these agents can be very powerful!

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111