

YOU'LL remember, I hope, that a few weeks back I sang the praises of Portuguese wine – and bemoaned the fact that any decent choice of it was hard to find. Too late for that column, but allowing another bite at the deep dark red or crisp white cherry, a list arrived in the post from a small but accessible independent merchant.

Hennings has long had shops in the West Sussex towns of Pulborough and Petworth, but lately it has developed a quick and user-friendly website offering nationwide delivery (www.henningswine.co.uk, £9 charge for a single case, decreasing as the number of bottles increases). I've been to Hennings consumer tastings in the past and been impressed by the quality on offer. Portugal is currently one of the focus areas, with decent

Another bite at Portuguese cherry



reductions on normal prices. The Luis Pato Maria Gomes fizz I recommended in that previous column is £10 and good still wines start at £6. Mix a case of 12 different bottles (red, white and a pink that's not Mateus) or get on the phone (01798 872485) and ask Hennings' staff to do it for you and discover what's missing from the high street.

I came across a rather different approach to wine selling earlier this month, on holiday in Brittany – hardly wine heartland, though the Bretons make some tempting beer. It seems they do like the product of the grape as well, to judge by the burgeoning of the Caves de Regusse outlets. There

were two within 10 miles of where we were staying and another three within the same westernmost county of France, in a total of almost 30 country-wide.

It's an interesting initiative, developed by the people whose wine is sold in the cellars. Domaine de Regusse is big – some 260 hectares of vines, 23 varieties of grape and 48 different wines. Its vineyards lie in Haut Provence, at the foot of the Montagne de Luberon north of Aix, and fall within the appellations of Cotes du Luberon and the much lesser-known Coteaux de Pierreveret as well as vin de pays areas. One vineyard is fully organic and the whole

domaine is run with as little chemical intervention as possible, what the French know as the viticulture raisonnee system.

With that choice of liquid ingredients, the gamut of styles is covered, from fizz and light crisp whites to serious age-worthy reds, plus a few sweet wines to finish off the menu. Those I've tasted have been well made and generally enjoyable and they're reasonably priced.

The winemakers are prepared to experiment. For example, there's an attractive, fragrant rose where muscat is a substantial part of the blend.

Caves de Regusse is a

franchise operation and those who sign up are allowed to sell a small proportion of wines from other sources – the Loire, Burgundy and Bordeaux were, unsurprisingly, on the shelves of the one I visited.

Jean Paul Hellequin, who oversees the Brittany area, is keen that Regusse should break into the UK market. I can't see the same sales approach working here – the range of wines would, for our tastes, be too limited. But if offers the French a choice somewhere between the supermarkets and smaller independent merchants.

LIZ SAGUES

THIS week I am lifting a corner of the veil, affording you a very rare glimpse into this honed and well-oiled machine – the intricate planning and meticulous care that make up the militaristic existence that is, perforce, that of the professional restaurant reviewer, brooking no leeway whatever for error.

First I email the highly respected and bestselling Hampstead novelist, Deborah Moggach, and invite her to lunch at Artigiano in Belsize Village on the 10th. She emails back to say that while this is a thrilling idea, the 10th is alas no good, so how about the 17th? I email my regrets that for me the 17th is a complete non-starter, but could the 24th be of any use to her at all? And she emails me to say that the 24th is actually tip-top because she'll just be back from Kent by then, and I email her back to say Oh Good. Then some days later she emails me to ask whether she has told me that she can't make the 17th, and I email her with assurances that neither of us, in fact, can make the 17th, but that we're on for the 24th. And when that very day dawns, she emails me to say that she might have forgotten to accept my invitation and I email her to say that she has been scrupulous throughout, and that I look forward to seeing her at one o'clock. Soon after, I wander down to Belsize Village, bucked by the sight of Artigiano's awning, its general jaunty and carnival air. Yes. And the bloody place is shut. My fault, of course – should have checked: it is a Monday, after all. Then Debby turns up and I'm standing on the pavement apologising for the fact that the bloody place is shut and she says, Well maybe they'll open it up for us, and I say, I doubt that Debby, because all the chairs are piled up on the tables and everything is in darkness. But nil desperandum, my dear, for in

Paradiso found in a world of lost causes

A glut of closed signs look set to put pay to **Joseph Connolly's** lunch-time date with fellow novelist Deborah Moggach until they stumble on an unpretentious spot which leads down memory lane

common with Koko, The Mikado's buffoon ... I've got a little list! And on it is the Greek restaurant Retsina, just around the corner, and Debby says Oh goody, let's go there then – and we do that, yes, and the bloody place is shut. Dear Lord. So we end up traipsing down to England's Lane, creeping up so very hesitantly to the first place we happen upon: Paradiso ... and it's open! Oh thank you God, thank you, thank you, thank you ...! And we tumble in, humbled, grateful and, incidentally, as hungry as hell.

Talking of which ... the first thing I note about Paradiso is its sense of oneness with The Inferno: the heat is quite literally breathtaking. I am about to speak when the sole other diner requests some air conditioning on account of he is dying, do they see, and the sweet and pretty little waitress attends to that pronto, and soon we are bathed in the balm of relief. I sympathise, though – on a Monday lunchtime as quiet as this, the cost of the aircon and the lighting will easily outstrip anything they are going to get out of us. Tough business, catering.

The second thing I note about Paradiso is that Debby and I have been here before: a rather astonishing coincidence, this, because years ago we had bumped into one another at a gorgeous

garden party in Eton Avenue thrown by Peter Stothard (then editor of The Times, now of the TLS) and afterwards had fancied a plate of something warming to help absorb the rivers of champagne which we had been very eagerly necking. And everywhere nearby had been shut ... with the exception of Paradiso. Blimey. It seems to have become our very own port in a storm.

And the third thing I note about Paradiso is that more than 40 years ago (bloody hell) it used to be my local sweetshop – an aunt, uncle and various cousins living directly above it. Our house was in Adelaide Road, another auntie and cousin were in Fellows Road, and yet one more auntie also lived in England's Lane above a shop across the road which sold wispy and intimate feminine underpinnings, and whenever I was in there with my mother – she stocking up (geddit?) with Aristoc, Ballito and Bear Brand – I felt forced to avert my burning gaze.

Paradiso looks very old-fashioned and unflashy, and I like it a lot. There isn't anything here that qualifies for the word 'décor' – just a varnished plywood room divider, white walls, large and gilt-framed mirrors, a rose on each table ... though in the window, something of a tour de force: a ceiling-high and tortured plaiting of Chianti flasks, just like the ones you used to jam a candle into, and encourage its dribbling. Both Debby and I seemed instinctively to know that the avocado and prawns route was exactly the one to take here, and we were not to be disappointed: a generous mound in that good old pink and gooeey sauce, and half a perfectly ripe avocado, peeled, sliced and fanned, this very conveniently cutting out all need to gouge. I said "Good, isn't it?" and Debby said "What ...?" And I said "Um ... good, isn't it?" and Debby said "What ...? I'm



A port in a storm ... Joseph at Paradiso.

awfully sorry – I've been swimming in the sea in Kent for a week, you see, and I can't hear a bloody thing". I said not to worry – we could communicate by way of nod and gesture, and Debby said "What ...?" Of course we ended up roaring our heads off: the sole other diner whimpered and made a hasty escape – and the sweet and pretty little waitress, she did look wary.

As we waited for the mains – another starter for Debby, calamari, and penne in a bolognese sauce for me – I listened to the tinkle of Italian classics (Come Back to Sorrento, Volare, Just One Cornetto) while Debby, presumably, didn't. I have known her for many years – we've shared a platform at book events a few times (once, actually, we did the Kent Literary Festival, which I confess I hadn't heard of – trouble was, neither had Kent). She is so very bubbly, and excellent company – forever working, but never seeming to, which is always stylish. She does screen adaptations for everything you can think of – notably Pride And Prejudice and, most recently, The Diary Of Anne Frank. Soon, doubtless, she will be adapting

this very lunch into a prime-time four-parter for Sunday night viewing (mm ... and who will they cast? Answers, please, on a postcard).

The penne, and the sauce, were really very good: al dente, properly meaty and also – like everything here – excellent value at £7.50. Debby enjoyed the deep fried calamari rings ... but then deep fried calamari rings are deep fried calamari rings. Aren't they, really? The pleasant Italian rose – Bardolino Chiaretto – was something of a snip at £14.95. So all jolly good, on the whole: Paradiso had saved the day (and it wasn't even on my list). Debby then said she must fly: she had an appointment to get new ears. I said "Did I hear you correctly?" and she said "What ...?"

Anyway, she was gone in a flash, and I was left to take a nostalgic mosey, the length of England's Lane. The United Dairies was just over there ... and Curry Manjilil used to be Moore's, where I bought all my Matchbox cars at 1/6d a throw. Allchin the chemist is still here ... though its peerless Victorian interior is long gone, no doubt enhancing some sod's penthouse.

“ It used to be my local sweetshop – an aunt, uncle and cousins living above it

I turned into Antrim Road and passed outside the 1930's library, where I first discovered the Jennings books. Shut, of course. Open only two-and-a-half days a week. I squinted through the window: so few books. What an age we live in. On a table was a pile of newspapers entitled 'Mature Times'. Yes well ... that's one word for them, I suppose. Decrepit is another.

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad And Bloody Mary (Faber and Faber; £8.99). All past restaurant reviews may be seen at www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

FACTFILE

- **PARADISO**
36 Englands Lane, NW3
Tel: 020-7586 9001
- Open seven days, noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm, Friday and Saturday, 6pm-11.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: About £40 for two courses with wine for two. Bargain.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ Always keep your external gutters, downpipes, hoppers and gulleys clear of leaves and debris. This is particularly important in the autumn but a quarterly check is advised, where accessible. If they do block up and then leak, the internal damage can be worse than the external consequences, so our advice is preventative maintenance will once again save you money.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111