

HERE we are in the middle of Chocolate Week 2009. Is all that sweet richness making you thirsty? What should you drink?

The accepted wisdom is that chocolate and wine are hard to match. I disagree. Certainly, dry whites are out, as are most sweet ones. But as soon as the colour deepens, things change.

There has just been a very successful tasting pairing malbec and chocolate, and you can't find much more power and tannin in red wine than with Argentina's favourite grape. The rich fruitiness, though, can make the partnership work. I couldn't be at the Gaucho restaurant just off Piccadilly to taste the smart chocolates from Perfectly Tempered alongside wines from Casav de Gaucho (www.gauchorestaurants.co.uk/

Right pairing makes chocolate heaven

wineboutique), but my chocoholic spies tell me that there were two star matches.

The first was Schroeder Patagonian Select (£14.40) with orange and cardamom chocolate: spicy orange flavours in both resulted in a happy taste of autumn. Second was Casa Marguery from high in Mendoza (£14.15) with lemon and mint chocolate, where the invigorating, aromatic



chocolate against the minerality of the wine encouraged descriptive flourish: "images of early morning dewy freshness"... Both wines were mature, which no doubt moderated their attack and contributed to the success of the matches.

Those are just a bit too unconventional, perhaps, for most dessert or after dinner choc-indulgence. Something sweeter? I still have fond memories of a tasting of posh chocolates and ports two Christmases ago – the plurals are deliberate because the exercise aimed to show how different styles of both could produce good, better or best combinations.

Particularly fascinating was how Green & Black's Maya Gold was transformed by Quinta do Noval Late Bottled Vintage (2001 then), the chocolate's rather heavy and hard spiciness acquiring a lovely perfumed character, while the port gained a new spicy dimension.

Port, as that and many other matches proved, is definitely chocolate friendly.

So too are the fortified wines from the far south of France: Roussillon's vins doux naturels, which are generally lighter in alcohol than port. The classic choice is deep red Maury, from low-growing grenache vines which emerge from a soil so

stony and dry it's hard to imagine any plant could grow in it. It ages wonderfully, deepening and expanding its cherry-edged flavour.

Pale Roussillon muscats don't usually work, but the deep mahogany-gold ambré versions have a nuttiness which can be an excellent match. So are Australia's liqueur muscats. South Africa makes some lovely chocolate-friendly wines in a port-like style, but you don't see them in the UK. Italy's recioto di amaronè is rare, but worth hunting down: served with a stickily rich chocolate cake it was the perfect ending to a delicious lunch I had on a recent trip to its

Verona homeland.

And a final bargain choice is Mavrodaphne of Patras, the Greek take on the sweet red theme.

Waitrose is a good place to start shopping. It has Maury Domaine Poudroux vendange tardive £10 (50cl), Arnaud de Villeneuve Rivesaltes Ambré hors d'âge £11.25 (50cl), Campbells Rutherglen Muscat £9 (37.5cl) and a fine choice of port.

If all this proves indigestible, just remember that Christmas isn't far off. Stock up now on the right bottles in readiness for all those boxes to come.

LIZ SAGUES

QUO Vadis? According to the Bible, this is the question asked of Jesus Christ by St

Peter on the Appian Way: Whither goest thou? Odd name for a restaurant then, seeing as how most of them strive so hard to be the destination itself – in this case more towards the Oxford Street end of Soho's Dean Street, where if you accosted the average bloke of an evening and enquired of him whither he goest, the answer might well be that he goest with all expedition into Sunset Strip, matey, for a drink or so and a damned good ogle. This rather charming throwback is bang next to the restaurant, and the contrast is marked. Whereas Quo Vadis looks very restrained and classy with its Frank Lloyd Wright-style coloured leaded lights and quality deco detailing, Sunset Strip is lit-up purple, neon and chrome. Here is the last of Soho's licensed burlesques, offering that sweet old-fashioned thing 'striptease'. It's not a clip joint, though – and as it has been going now for 50-odd years it is a fair bet to say that it was named after the American TV detective show of a similar vintage, 77 Sunset Strip ('the street that wears a fancy label!'). You have to be terribly old to remember it, but there was Ephem Zimbalist Jnr as Stu and Edd Byrnes as the hipster Kookie, who largely was confined to parking cars, combing his quiff and calling people daddi-o. At the time, I – barely out of swaddling clothes, it must be stressed – thought it odd that the protagonists should be named, respectively, after a casserole and a biscuit, but look: this is America. And a few years before this series there was the big screen toga-and-sandals epic Quo Vadis, actually produced by a Sam Zimbalist (though no relation to the casserole) who then went on to make the even more splendid Ben Hur, and

Parable of four loaves and some tough fishes

Named after a Biblical question, Quo Vadis promised a heavenly experience. But after disappointing starters and overdosing on bread in the long wait for courses, **Joseph Connolly** finds the answer is to go elsewhere

died in the process: that's showbiz. There are original posters for Quo Vadis in all I know, in the Ladies as well). One is livid with big red words: 'MGM's Colossal Spectacular of Splendour and Savagery' – while another, set atop a lavatory, says 'This Is The Big One'.

I was there with an old and good friend of mine, Mark Reeve, a very personable and talented caricaturist and painter who won an award for his cartoons for the Mail on Sunday and furthermore carries the distinction of being the artist responsible for the last ever cover of Punch. He recently held an exhibition of portraits at the Club at The Ivy, the subject of one of them gracing the show: Howard Marks, Mr Nice himself, no stranger to money, fame and bestsellerdom, and all through having been a convicted drug dealer. The Modern Age, eh? What larks!

I had arrived at Quo Vadis deliberately early to have a nose around. Hadn't been there since it was a Marco set-up, the walls defaced by Damien Hirst. Then there was one more famous falling-out, these seeming to characterise the wonderful world of restaurants far more than anything like, ooh – I don't know ... food, say. It is a very beautiful room – stylish and ordered with a pale parquet floor, chestnut

leather banquettes, bevelled mirror panelling and a vast and central silver urn brimming with shock-pink orchids. The light through those peerless leaded windows lends a mellowness to the general elegance around you. Mark then fell into the room, just minutes after one o'clock, and he was panting like a horse – had run the length of Dean Street so as not to keep me waiting: such politesse.

The menu comes in the form of a large and handsomely printed card: a good value set lunch at £17.50 for two courses, just two pounds more for three. Also an unusual selection of brunchy things such as poached egg, artichoke and mushrooms with a hollandaise sauce, or fried duck egg and black pudding. We were going a la carte – so, for Mark, ham hock terrine at £8, while I went for shrimps on toast. This, I was told by the co-owner Eddie Hart (wearing cufflinks, I noticed, in the form of a Q and a V) was potted shrimps without the butter. Turned out they could have done with that butter, though, because what I received was just a pile of rather toughish little shrimps with no sort of cohesion – looked like a carnival of worms ... or, if that image strikes you as just too off-putting, maggots. Chewy, tasted sour, and then of nothing. The terrine, however, was literally uneatable – icy cold and fatty ("rather like", Mark was muttering ruefully, "a girl I once knew"). He then expanded upon its texture and flavour: "When I was younger and even more impoverished, I bought very cheap tins of Irish stew. If you left some in the tin overnight, then in the morning it was exactly like this." It was sent back, and I requested the return of the menu so that my guest might choose again. He ate good home-made bread in the meantime. I stared at my shrimps. Ten minutes later, we still were waiting for the menu. So I waved and mimed a fair



No miracles here Joseph at Quo Vadis.

deal, and within no more than a further 10 minutes, the menu was ours. Mark thought terrine foie gras and duck confit (at a ludicrous £12.90) but we didn't order it because the waiter had not returned. "Great bread!" Mark politely enthused – having deliberately skipped breakfast, it transpired, in anticipation of a feast. After more flapping around and semaphore on my part, the waiter wandered over and took the replacement order. And that's the last we saw of him for a further quarter of an hour. Seriously. "Great bread!" Mark politely enthused – and Lord he should know: he was about four loaves in by now. He's a bit of a cook himself, he was telling me (as autumn turned to winter). A fan of Len Deighton's Action Cook Book, and he enjoys to cook with wine. I used to do that, cook with wine; sometimes even put a slug into the food.

The terrine arrived, and it was no more than okay – not a bit like the luscious melt of true foie gras. But Mark's steak, thank

God, made up for a good deal: a huge and very tender fillet of aged Hereford beef, cooked rare as he had asked – "one of the best ever", he said. But with mash and spinach (also much enjoyed) both as extras, the dish came in at around £36, of course is ridiculous. My crab linguine was goodish – a bit fishy; I had requested the large portion (at £16.50!) but it was awfully small. I poured the last of the Fleurie for Mark, this time the waiter appearing like lightning to whip away the bottle – but not before helpfully upending it and tipping the lees into my glass. And all this time I had been scribbling like fury in a notebook, as is my habit, and nobody, but nobody, clearly gave a damn. Did the replacement terrine appear on the bill? Of course it bloody did. Making a grand total of £129. Ho ho ho. And had the co-owner bothered to make a reappearance, I should have bowed my head and, more in sorrow than in anger – well, a bit of anger – asked of him

“I should have bowed my head and, more in sorrow than in anger – well, a bit of anger – asked of the co-owner 'Whither?'

"Whither ...?" Because at the moment, baby, thou goest nowhere much.

□ Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary* (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be seen on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **QUOVADIS**
26-29 Dean Street, W1
Tel: 020-7437 9585
- Open Monday to Saturday
noon to 2.45pm, 5.30pm to 10.45pm. Closed Sunday.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Set lunch £17.50 for two courses. If you are foolhardy and go a la carte, then £130 to £150 for two with wine. Ludicrous.

URBANSOLUTIONS
SMARTER PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ Forget using imperial measurements when doing DIY. You should always measure in metric – because that's how timber is sold in shops. It's better to do this at home rather than standing in the DIY merchants trying to convert it over to metric.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111