

WOULDNT it be utterly magical if one quite chill and crispy night, the benign slack-lipped and livid green Auto Monster – that legendary and gigantic gobble-up of motor cars of my fevered and recent invention – would work his wonders the length of Church Row? Pick up all the coloured shiny things that are parked nose to tail, and swallow each of them whole? Residents might well demur, I do plainly see that, but for the rest of us – oh what beauty would remain. To be able to behold the whole sweet length of the Row, right on down to the perfect Parish church, with just the trees, old steet lamps ... and the rest is silence.

Yes rest – dream on baby, as they say. It's a pity it can't come true, though, because the unbroken ribbon of runabouts is the only thing that buggers up a remarkably unbuggered-up street. An extraordinary number of eminent folk have lived here, over the hundreds of years – I slightly knew a few of the more recent, most notably the brilliant Peter Cook before he moved around the corner into Perrin's Walk. In the last few years of his life, I would quite often bump into him in Heath Street (he wearing the same appalling madras check jacket, the hair a white and matted mop – his very own lunatic fringe) returning from one of his regular forays into the newsagent on Holly Hill where he cleared them out of top-shelf mags. He had a thing for titles such as Men Only and Club International which in those days had extremely high gloss and slippery covers. He started off with a bundle of twenty beneath his arm, but by the time he had meandered his way back to Perrin's Walk he was always quite bemused by the fact that only a couple would ever remain, his uncertain progress marked out by the litter of airbrushed porn he left behind him. He also liked to tumble down the stairs of Le Cellier du Midi for an evening feast. They had no licence then, and you brought a bottle – or, in Peter's case, several.

Yes indeed – Le Cellier. Still going – if not strong. In darkness all day, the glass display case attached to the railings outside seeming so very rain-stained and

Down in the cellar we're still stuck in the 1970s

Joseph Connolly revisits an old favourite of his and Peter Cook's but is disappointed it hasn't moved with the times

forlorn, a single and ancient review curling up in its corner. Last year marked this restaurant's 50th anniversary, though Lord you'd never have known it: no announcements, no tie-in with the Ham & High, no special celebratory offers involving the glass that fizzes – and no change whatever to its menu or interior. Which has to be a good thing, no? Well ... only up to a very distant point. And it is at this juncture that I must don the hat and assume the expression of one who truly cares for this place's welfare. I am a physician chock full of the bedside manner who can see so clearly what ails the body, and yearns to cure it. I am a counsellor, a therapist, a priest ... I feel myself becoming the deeply concerned parent of some once so bright and pretty a thing who now has slumped into inertia and complacency – one who just won't pick up after himself and whose only word is a grunted Whatever. Le Cellier du Midi, I'm afraid, has not just failed to move with the times, but seems fatally unaware that the times have actually moved at all.

The welcome is warm enough, from a fellow who turns out to be the son of the chef, and whose family have owned the restaurant for more than thirty years. He wears an earring in his eyebrow, which is remarkable only for the fact that he doesn't at all seem the sort of person who would. This was a Wednesday evening, and I



had booked. "Maybe not necessary ..." he said, with regret. "It's been up and down". Well tonight it was down: my wife and I were literally the only diners for the whole of the evening – a first, in my experience. What is to be done? The owners would do well to heed what Raymond Blanc, in his near indecipherable Gallic accent, said on an episode of his cringe-making and therefore compulsive TV series, The Restaurant: "Times eez ard. Eet eez a bottle out zare. To survive, restaurateurs must come out farting."

So we're sitting in facing settles and looking at the rather handsome black padded menu with a golden Church Row lamp post on it; reminded me of those upholstered covers of yore

in which people blushingly hid their TV Times. A two course dinner is £21.75, or three for £27.95, and the menu is littered with failsafe posh ingredients – fillet steak, Dover sole, rack of lamb, salmon and so on – too many of them attracting a £5.50 supplement, which nudges the place into expensive. One wonders, though, in a less than heaving restaurant which opens only in the evenings, how fresh these ingredients can be – especially the fish. Well my wife ordered stuffed mushrooms – spinach and cheese – and then monkfish in a langoustine sauce. I went for fried scampi ... yes, I know: down here, Edward Heath is still our Prime Minister. There were seven – just like Young's, but okay. The home made tartare

FACTFILE

- ❑ **LE CELLIER DU MIDI**, 28 Church Row, NWV3. Tel 020 7435 9998
- ❑ Open evenings only
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★
- ❑ Cost: About £80 for three courses for two, with modest wine.

sauce lacked all bite, and the rest of the plate was taken up with that shredded lettuce that no one ever eats and is more usually seen in a sundae glass propping up a handful of pinkly glooped prawns. Shirley 'Superwoman' Conran famously declared that life is too short to stuff a mushroom, and my wife's starter more than proved the point – except that here, I suspect, they have nothing but time. It was, again, rather claggy 1970s dinner party stuff. The house red is decent – a Duboeuf vin de table at £16.50 – and I slurped at that as I looked about me. The low ceiling and black beams are atmospheric, but it's all very dingy – not so much unchanged as neglected, I'm afraid. A blue and white ginger jar on a rafter, with vintage dried grasses. A copper hunting horn and a job lot of pictures of the Thomas Kincaid persuasion from a car boot sale – although I would guess that their acquisition pre-dates car boot sales, or even cars. The music was French, but not really: just gargling versions of anything but – Zorba the Greek, Speedy Gonzales ... the mains arrived just as the singer was hushing his way into Eet Zozzan Eetsy Beetsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikineeee ... well, you had to be there. And God I wish you had been. Because it's odd – when there's no one at all around to overhear what you're saying, you talk in whispers, like at a funeral.

The monkfish was not really recognisable as such – thinly sliced, dry and overcooked. The pretty pink sauce had no langoustine flavour, but one large and fresh langouste atop it was welcome. I had what was billed as a herb crusted rack of lamb, but there was no crust, herb or otherwise. There was fat, though – not French trimmed, this, but a generous portion and tender, if oddly smoky in flavour. The take-it-or-leave-it vegetables were an uncreamy pommes Dauphinoise, a few beans and four brussels sprouts. At this point the candle in our Ebenezer Scrooge handled sconce winked once and guttered, by which time Edith Piaf was repeatedly warbling her lack of regret. How about a pudding to share? Places always buck up with the puddings. A chocolate mousse, in this case ... but oh God. Actually hard – heavy, not mossy at all and tasting of a Cadbury's Dairy Milk Easter egg, rediscovered in the autumn. Our bill of £73 represented their entire turnover for the previous twenty-four hours.

This place should be saved, but not preserved in dust: they've got to shape up. Money must be spent on the décor (and especially, dear Lord, in the laboratories) – not to destroy it, but to enhance it. Brunch and lunch deals should be introduced – and the family could usefully visit a few other restaurants on Planet Earth to discover what's been happening during Rip Van Winkle's hundred years of snoozing. "It has been slow lately", the man who runs the place told me. "But we hope that word will get around by word of mouth". The trouble is, I think maybe it already has.

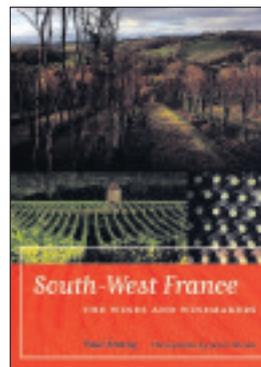
❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All past restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Explore a much overlooked region of France

SOME years back, at a wine-promoting lunch, I sat next to René Renou, then head of the body which controls France's appellation controlee system. The conversation was stimulating and enjoyable, but at one point it disturbed me.

Renou largely dismissed the wines of his country's south west, especially those of Gascogne, on the grounds that they had none of the long and distinguished pedigree of the likes of Bordeaux or Burgundy.

Now it's too late to disagree, as Renou sadly died, still in office, in 2006. But if only I could then have quoted from South West France: The Wines and Winemakers on how, for example, the success of Bordeaux initially depended not on its own "pale and insipid wines" but instead on the export of the richer, better wines from beyond the region's



southern border; or on how the Bordelais then blended those wines with their own to give them more market appeal.

And that is comparatively recent history, set against the earlier importance of the south west's wines to medieval pilgrims.

But to return to the 21st century... Paul Strang, the author of those arguments, divides his time between a home in St John's Wood and another in the heart of the region about which he writes with very considerable authority.

His new book has had a somewhat chequered history. It was originally due to appear under a British imprint, but to Strang's dismay that publisher "tore up the contract, and I had to start again". It was a while before joint publication by the University of California (in English) and Editions du Rouergue (in French) was agreed. Fortunately, he was able to update the text in the interim.

It is a serious and comprehensive book – the number of growers, many described in detail, graded within their appellations and personalised by Jason Shenai's

portraits, must run close to four figures. But Strang maintains that his target readership is wine consumers, if not quite in Harry Potter profusion.

Effectively tempting those consumers, Strang emphasises the excellent price:quality ratio of many of his subjects' wines as well as celebrating the variety of unfamiliar grapes native to the region, a major reason why its wines are unusual, under-regarded and under-priced. In a world of increasing wine homogeneity, that alone is a very good reason for searching beyond the supermarket shelves for bottles from Irouleguy, Marcillac, Pacherenc, Saussignac and many more unfamiliar appellations. If you can't pronounce them, in an internet search that doesn't matter at all.

Recommended price of South West France is \$45 (£31) and it should be in major bookshops.

Or buy on Amazon for £22 (click on Paul Strang – the title alone brings up an "unavailable" message).

❑ For novices to the wine world, a broader, simpler approach will pave the way to such information-rich tomes. So welcome the latest book from the nation's favourite television wine star, Oz Clarke: 'Let me

tell you about wine' (Pavilion, £15). Practical, approachable, unchallenging, you can hear the man speaking the words. But one quibble – the photo strip of Oz spitting is unrealistic. He can easily project the sampled mouthful half-way across a room, not simply dribble it down towards his knees.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ During the winter months, doors tend to swell as they expand with the moisture in the air, which in turn may cause your locks to jam. These can be eased by spraying the lock and the latch with some WD40.

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