

BLACK & Blue. Amazing, really, that it should be called that. I have written before of my general

bemusement over wacky and meaningless names that some or other PR set-up has foisted at colossal expense and with simulated enthusiasm on to the fearful and ultimately deluded restaurateurs as being certified humdingers guaranteed to capture the public imagination (for all the world as if they truly imagined there existed such a thing). And lo, on Haverstock Hill, there came to pass one of five London steakhouses jointly christened in commemoration of the popular colloquialism for severe and extensive bruising following the sort of domestic contretemps where the police are powerless to intervene, or else from some more random and casual street attack when the police are most certainly elsewhere, or maybe just disinclined, or alternatively up to their eyes in paperwork.

I had actually tried to lunch here on New Year's Eve, a damn cold day, if you can remember that far back – though not in the view of my chum Max, whom I'd arranged to meet there, because for reasons he has yet to fully fathom, he spends most of his time in Winnipeg where any temperature higher than around 20C below zero is regarded as little more than fresh. So anyway – I'd been pounding down Rosslyn Hill at one hell of a lick because I was frankly freezing and eager to be fed, and in the warm. Swung into the door of Black & Blue, which didn't give an inch. Shut. Excellent. Phoned Max, while whipped by an Arctic wind. "OK then," he said, "we can go to Ravel's Bistro". "Where the hell's that?" I snapped, as wintry as the weather. "A couple of turnings down from the Royal Free." Right, then. Thudded down there to meet him (mood now black, fingers now blue). Shut. Excellent. Right, then: abandon all idea of writing a review – let's just get some lunch, Christ's sake. "I've got it!" I cried, in a moment of Eureka. "Fratelli la Bufala – been there, it's very good." He beamed, Max, because he likes his beef.

The colours of success?

Joseph Connolly enjoys his meal at Black & Blue in Belsize Park but is left somewhat puzzled by the restaurant's name

So I forced my rigid limbs into stomping on up there, sorely in need now of big hot food. Shut. Excellent. Well now look: Jesus, he may not have wept – but I did, I can tell you. Right, then: The Wells – they'll be open, I'm sure of it. And they were – they were, they were, they were! And packed to the bloody rafters. But they brought out and fitted in a brand new table just for little me, the angels, and Max and I both had a damn good lunch, as ever here: I really do think it's the best kitchen in Hampstead.

Black & Blue, then, remained unfinished business – and so a week or so ago, my wife and I went back there on a day that was even colder than New Year's Eve. And this time it was open – though one could not but smirk at the neat rows of tables and chairs set into the snowy forecourt, hard by a big black fibreglass bull (just this far away from turning blue). Inside it was completely empty. "Just as well I booked!" I heartily quipped. The thoroughly unsmiling waitress stared right back at me, as bovine as the bull. Right, I thought: and a happy bloody new year to you too.

The place is largely made up of marble topped tables for four in booths with banquettes, diner style, and some smaller circular mahogany jobs. There was a large vase of white lilies on a bar lined with chrome stools, which I can't imagine anyone actually sitting at. The menu is a laminated plank, and in between studying its really rather appetising offerings (though apart from a veggie burger, nothing here for the non-carnivore) I



found time to be agog at the music and the pictures on the walls. Once more, some or other committee, faced with the wealth of all the sounds and imagery that exist upon the planet, wisely selected these: photorealist assemblages of garbage (literally) and this lush and so-called "calming" schmaltz, rich in strings and tubular bells, that within no time has you yearning to let loose mayhem, to generate slaughter. And because the restaurant was utterly devoid of diners save for us, some grinning lady in white judged this the perfect moment to slunge a great big mop around our table – just our table, mind – the resultant puddle scuppering my wife's intention to shuffle off her furry boots.

Never mind: food. They're very proud of their 28-day hung British beef, so I went for the smaller of the sirloins at £14 (the

daddy-size being four quid more). My wife thought rack of lamb. This looked very fine, when it arrived: four pink, juicy and flavoursome cutlets on a wooden board with cress, good grilled red peppers and both mint and redcurrant sauces. My steak was a bit small (that's where restraint and moderation get you) and rather too well done, but good meat and tender. The Bearnaise sauce wasn't that at all, and somehow tasted of absolutely nothing. We both had twice-cooked chips which looked like scoring a ten – chunky, hand-cut, bronzy-gold – but turned out to just maybe scrape an eight: not quite crisped enough. And between us was a large and well dressed bowl of various fresh and crunchy leaves, topped by strings of grated cheese and a scattering of walnuts: only lacking apple to make it more Waldorfy. You can

get a bottle of Chilean red for only £15, but we had a couple of glasses of Cote du Rhone at a fiver a go – and they were good.

My wife had been alarmed when she had first surveyed the menu-plank: no puddings...! But now came a separate list of half a dozen, all rather tempting. And as the restful music that had nudged me towards genocide now jolted gear into the raspingly annoying and endlessly repeated saxophonic introduction to a tune which, mercifully or not, never actually arrived, I marvelled too at the frequency of something appearing on a menu that one cannot possibly comprehend, and therefore is compelled to enquire about. In this case, 'Apple Norman'. I know. So I said to the waitress (still she stared – still no smile): "What is Apple Norman?". Her features now just slightly softened at her sudden

FACTFILE

- ❑ **BLACK & BLUE**
205-207 Haverstock Hill, NW3. Tel 020-7443 7744.
- ❑ Open all day.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆ (no smile, see?)
- ❑ Cost: About £60 for two courses for two, with a drink.

appreciation of my total and helpless imbecility, and she leaned forward to enunciate very slowly indeed: "It's. An. Apple. Pie". I nodded briefly, ordered it, and also ordered a chocolate brownie, subjecting only my wife to so much low and bitter murmuring: "So who's bloody Norman, then? Hey? What's he doing on the menu if he's just a sodding pie? Who's this Norman when he's at bloody home, then? Hey...?"

As it turned out, Norman conquered: he was a great warm wodge of pie with cinnamon ice cream, fresh blueberries and raspberries. And my brownie was also big, warm and accompanied by unannounced vanilla ice cream, redcurrants, more blueberries and raspberries with a fresh sprig of mint, all set upon a slap-happy criss-cross of sticky chocey goo: first rate.

It's a pretty good place, this, I was thinking, while we bundled back on all the scarves and coats and hats: value, generosity, and proper fresh ingredients. God, though – a smile would have lifted it. But why in blazes did they have to go and call it Black & Blue...? And then I had a brainstorm: duh! It must be the colour scheme, dimbo! Look around you! Well at the back, there's all this sombre walnut panelling, while by the window it's a much more modern eau de nil... Oh. Right. I see. Brown and Green, then.

❑ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

The best bottles from the land Down Under

THIS year, Australia Day – January 26 – falls between two issues of the Ham&High, which offers a timely opportunity, this week and next, to focus on the country whose wine we drink most of (ahead of California, France and all the other challengers).

But Australia's not been having a good wine time lately: gross overproduction, drought and the strength of the Australian dollar are three of the major problems. Also, the world's wine press has largely fallen out of love with Australian wine and even the value of imports to the UK dropped last year.

So what's the strategy for change? There's a national four-pronged campaign titled Directions to 2025, promoting premium brands, innovative new wines, "regional heroes" and world-renowned top wines. But 2025 is a long way ahead: Australia's First Families of Wine aren't prepared to wait. The AFFW logo is soon to



start appearing on icon bottles from a dozen family-run wineries, spread across the nation's wine-growing regions. Individually, many are already familiar to UK wine drinkers; together, the families intend to convince consumers and the wine trade world-wide "that Australian wine can take on the world's best and win".

Those words come from the families' inaugural chairman, Alister Purbrick of Tahbilk in Victoria, home of the world's oldest vineyard of marsanne grapes (not a fact you'd expect from what's generally seen as a country pretty youthful in wine

terms). True, too, is that Purbrick and his colleagues represent an impressive 1,200 years of wine-making experience. They offer a full wine menu, from sparklers to stickies, with plenty of emphasis on such Oz classics as shiraz and fine cabernet.

There simply isn't room here to detail the 12 examples I've sampled – one from each member. But before I highlight just a few, let me summarise. These wines are very different from the approachable, reliable, but hardly inspiring mass-market brands which brought Australia to the top of the UK

wine league. They've got style, individuality, expression of place and of the character of their growers, and a good proportion of them don't have that over-hearty whack of alcohol which can spoil otherwise attractive wines.

Take the two Hunter Valley semillons – pure, elegant, refined wines. Tyrrell's Winemakers Selection Vat 1 (£20, Majestic fine wine), has just 10 pc alcohol, McWilliam's Mount Pleasant Lovedale (£25, www.everywine.co.uk) 11.5. The Tyrrell bottle, garlanded with gold medal stickers, is 2002 vintage, still wonderfully fresh but with developed flavours starting to show the great ageing potential of Hunter Valley semillon; McWilliam's 2005 is more obviously citrusy, different but equally enjoyable, now and for years ahead.

Other stars included Henscke Julius riesling 2006 (£16, www.laithwaites.co.uk., www.winedirect.co.uk), which combines the best characteristics of new world

and old, and de Bortoli redcurrant and cherry-crunchy Yarra Valley pinot noir 2007 (£16, Oddbins).

But one bottle among the dozen summed up Australia's best for me. Howard Park Leston cabernet sauvignon 2006 (£14.50, www.bibendum-wine.co.uk), from the Burch family's Margaret River vineyard, has minty, eucalyptus aromas cossetting pure ripe fruit, a superb wine from comparatively young vines in a difficult vintage. It's one of the

few Oz reds I could drink redcurrant and cherry-crunchy Yarra Valley pinot noir 2007 (£16, Oddbins).

Log on to www.australiasfirstfamiliesofwine.com.au to learn a lot more about the initiative, and meet the people involved. What's so encouraging is that most of them have been filmed enjoying their own wine, often with food and good company. And that's what good wine is all about.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ If you are using a ladder inside your house, don't let the top of the ladder ruin your lovely walls. Pop a pair of clean socks over the ends of the ladder and then when you pull the ladder away, the wall is exactly as it was when you started.

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