

THE Book Bash. Everyone in the inky trade is aware that come December, one of the parties you simply must be invited to is that fabulous effort jointly thrown by the Daily Mail's books pages and Ephraim Hardcastle's gossip column: it is known with love as the Book Bash. Held at the summit of Northcliffe House in Kensington, home to the Mail and the Standard, way up high in a leafy, glass-domed and titanic birdcage over what used to be Barker's department store, here is a packing-in of every sort of literary luminary, gorging and sluicing on tip-top and never-ending canapes and wine, marvelling at having survived yet one more year of all this, and marvelling too at how very extraordinary it is that so far into the party's history no one has actually tumbled over the rim of this jungly eyrie to find themselves spread like pate over the foot of the atrium, not to say tomorrow's front page.

For the past sixteen years, Jane Mays, a latter-day Fleet Street legend if ever there was one, has been literary editor of the Mail, and now is its consultant – not just juggling the pages but buying all the books for extracts and serials. This she managed with characteristic aplomb and unflappability; if praised for her efforts, she would graciously deflect all credit to her team. Anyway, the Book Bash traditionally ends with Jane and I raising a glass in order to mark our official looking forward to sharing the next lunch. Jeez: journalists, eh? You can't take them anywhere.

And so it was that we found ourselves the other week at our first lunch of the year in one of her old favourite haunts, though a new one on me. Before she moved to Chalk Farm, Jane used to live in Marylebone, and so Fairuz, the little local Lebanese, was but a hop and a caper away. Blandford Street is very foody: in the one short stretch just around the corner from the splendid Galvin Bistrot de Luxe, which I reviewed a couple of weeks ago, I counted a dozen places shifting food and drink, and at this particular chilly lunchtime, all of them seemed to be doing pretty well. Fairuz is one of those small and comforting

Having a bash at trying food of the Middle East

Joseph Connolly steps outside his comfort zone to try some Lebanese food with Fleet Street legend Jane Mays and finds he is pleasantly surprised

tavernas with a suitably weathered driftwood exterior that somehow seems to have grown out of the ground, rather than at some point being built and decorated – and yet it's only twelve years old: odd. The window is plastered with laudatory reviews and those little vinyl stickers that leave you in no doubt whatever as to the acceptance of all major credit cards. There used to be a lot of similar little Italians (trattoria, I mean – not people) but, in common with the Roman Empire, they mostly seem to have declined and fallen. The interior of Fairuz doesn't let you down – rough-cast whitish walls, Moroccan mirrors, reasonably mad and warbling music, quite as you would utterly expect, and paintings of gorgeously robed sheiks, silkily propositioning barely-veiled and black-eyed women. Pride of place goes to another painting of a very famous woman indeed: Fairuz herself. Well – famous anyway if you hail from the Lebanon, where she remains the absolute heroine and legend: the country's 'enchanting songstress', as she is called. From humble beginnings in the 1940s she rose to phenomenal fame – not just as a chanteuse, no no, but a cultural and political icon. She has appeared on stamps and been awarded every sort of medal and honour – one professor from Harvard linking her musically with, among many others, Rostropovich, Ravi Shankar, Pavarotti, Miles Davis and Bob Dylan – which doesn't really, does it, quite give us a taster as to what she might be up to. I've never

actually heard her music, which is maybe just as well: I'd hate to not like it and offend anybody, as by now you will well understand.

I was sitting on a wrought iron sofa, bedecked with tasseled cushions, and squarely in front of me was one hell of a tabletop made out of the vastest hunk of raw tree – all rough-hewn bark edges and three inches thick: you'll never have to stoop and jam in a napkin to stop a wobble with this great boyo. In return for the modest, but still quite annoying cover charge of £1.50, atop this mighty table is set a bowl of sliced raw carrots, decent bread and green olives. These taste initially just oily in an olivine sort of a way, and then something fiery comes quickly a-calling and you gulp at water while trying not to cry. Also in the bowl are a few things that I suspect make their appearances more than just the once: a small whole cucumber, a large whole tomato and an enormous whole red pimento – maybe more décor than seriously edible crudites. I was pleased to be guided by Jane as to the menu – just to look at it was making me dizzy. How many hot and cold starters, or mezze, do you think? Forty-seven – that's how many. We had foul tahina. Which is to say, that's what it's called – pan fried green broad beans with olive oil, lemon and garlic, topped with tomato (and the reverse of foul, I'm relieved to say). Also muskkaat (not muskrat – do concentrate) which is aubergine – baked, I'm fairly sure – with chickpeas and garlic. Best was borak, which is billed as hot fried Lebanese pastries filled with



halloumi cheese, onions and parsley – but apart from the excellent consistency and flavour, the endearing thing is that they look exactly like miniature Cornish Pasties, all dinky and ready for Dolly and Teddy's picnic in the woods.

The great Lebanese wine, of course, is Chateau Musar – truly comparable with some of the finer Bordeaux. But we were travelling a humbler route – the house special, Ksara: more like a Chianti than anything, and not too bad at £4.95 for a hefty glass. It slipped down perfectly well with our main, which we shared – a sort of stew called makloobeh: diced fillet of lamb and sliced roasted

almonds atop a rounded cake of rice with aubergine, and served with a yoghurt salad. Jane was slightly disappointed – said that she'd had much better here – and yes, while the lamb should simply go melty and be gone, this was just a little bit bouncy, and just a little bit fatty as well. "I feel, though," she said, "that all the food here is very clean-tasting – fresh, very healthy ... I really do love the grace of the Middle East." At which point I slopped out some of my wine on to the table in a rather Western, ill-mannered, stale and probably sickish sort of a manner. Rallying fast, I raised my glass with all that was left in it to a toast to Fairuz (still mercifully

FACTFILE

- ❑ **FAIRUZ**, 3 Blandford Street, W1. Tel: 020-7486 8108
- ❑ Open Mon-Sat noon-11pm. Sun noon-10.30pm
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: Set mezza £18.95, set menu £26.95. Otherwise about £80 for three courses for two, with wine.

so serene behind me, though only the Lord knows what she must have been thinking).

And I imagine because Jane has been a regular, we got a complementary plate of baklava – little light and flaky Filo pastry things, crunchily with pistachio and drenched in syrup: they were so terribly and achingly sweet I was practically screaming. In the evenings, I am assured, this place is always rammed to the rafters – and I can see the attraction if you are a local and maybe rather more into this sort of food than I am. The décor, certainly, would lend itself to the night, when all the Moorish lanterns and so on can come into play. But this lunchtime, attendance had been sparse – and by now, of course, the restaurant was empty. Well Jane and I – we've emptied restaurants before. But the waiter was as charming as could be, and urged us to stay for as long as we liked. So what we did was – we raised a glass again in order to mark our official looking forward to sharing the next lunch. Jeez: journalists, eh? You can't take them anywhere.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest book is Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design (Faber and Faber, £25). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Singing the praises of special Spanish wines

ALL good things have to come to an end (though I hope not the Ham&High wine column, as you'll understand as you read on)...

For the past five years, I've been recommending a wine each month in the glossy pages of a magazine directed at Espanophile Brits. It's largely funded by property advertising and, as the editor said with some understatement, 2009 was "a difficult year for publishing a magazine about Spain". So we three wine columnists are sleeping (in an alcohol-related context, that's a better description than resting).

As 2010 progresses, there seems no likelihood that we'll be awoken. But even so, I'll always remain indebted to lead columnist and Spanish wine guru John Radford for including me in what has been a fascinating experience, hugely increasing my knowledge of the wines and wine regions of Spain.

The trouble with such a disorganised end to a relationship

is that a handful of wines I'd intended to feature have fallen foul of circumstances. So you'll benefit: I'm going to sing their praises here.

First, something particularly

unusual. The reds of Priorato, with that wonderful mineral edge to their glossy garnacha fruit, have long been among my favourite Spanish wines. But white Priorato? With 95 per cent of the vineyard area planted with red grapes, it's hardly surprising white wines are rare. But when they have the level of quality and style to be found in Mas la Mola blanco 2007 (£24, Liberty Wines, 020-7720 5350, or Lea & Sandeman, W8), the effort required in finding them is richly rewarded. Buy soon – the 2008 vintage will soar in price.

Over recent years, Jordi Masdeu Catala and Alessandro Marchesan have revitalised Mas

la Mola, a family estate since 1860, with serious investment in the cellar. While there's modern

wine-making, the soul of this wine comes from the old, low-yielding vines – macabeo on gravel soils by the river, garnacha blanca on slatey slopes.

The complex result has apricot and mineral-rich aromas followed by a mouthful of elegant flavours, its creamy richness balanced by good acidity. Then minerality returns, lingering long and attractively on the finish.

Moving on... If a wine has a particularly happy history, does that make it taste better? Idle speculation, perhaps, but I'd like to think it true of Miro's tinto ecologico 2005 Ribera del Duero

(£11, www.corneyandbarrow.com). This very reasonably priced introduction to a cult

denomination is the product of a long wine-making ambition among 15 families from Barcelona, friends since childhood. Finally, in 2001, the dream was achieved and they established Bodegas Penafiel in the high valley of the Duero river.

Some of their new vineyard area was organic, which encouraged them to continue down the green road, and Miro's 2005 is the first vintage. It's rich in colour and flavour, there are scents of ripe red fruits with hints of something darker, and the taste is deep, juicy and crisp within a smooth cloak of oak.

There are other Miro's wines, though not from organic grapes. But each has specially commissioned artwork on its label, making them wines to admire in the bottle before enjoying in the glass.

Final unmissable wine is Pasi 2007 (£23, www.corneyandbarrow.com), the new baby of Peter Sissick's highly regarded Dominio de Pingus family, again in Ribera del Duero. This has

bright purple-red highlights as you pour and enveloping scents which move through fruit to oak and spice. With great depth of flavour, considerable food-friendliness and great ageing potential, this is a very serious wine, still in its infancy.

Enjoy all three, and realise what those magazine readers are missing.

LIZ SAGUES



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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ If you are doing some painting work and switching colours regularly, to save yourself having to keep washing out your paint kettle, just line it with kitchen foil and then when you've finished with one colour, just throw the used foil away and replace with a clean sheet.

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