

IT'S not every day you get to lunch with a Spaz. That's Downing Street jargon, you may be unaware – the contracted collective term for Special Advisers to the Prime Minister: they could nearly have gone for Spam, or even Spasm, but they didn't – they went for Spaz. This might very easily be an example of blue sky thinking on their part, or even thinking out of the box, but it needn't be at all. Anyway, Helen Scott Lidgett has been a very dear friend of mine for ... ooh, it could be as long as 25 years, you know. Is that really possible? Good God. In those days she was head of publicity and marketing at a truly great publisher, Thames & Hudson – one of the very few remaining independents, and still producing quite peerless art books. After that, Helen went to work for Brunswick – the highly successful and international PR set-up of Mrs Prime Minister, Sarah Brown, which she chose to step away from when Gordon assumed the highest office in the land. And until the election – which has to be June at the latest – Helen has been drafted in to Downing Street to helpfully bend the Prime Ministerial ear primarily on any issues concerning the arts. We can only hope he listens. Such initiatives may be a part of this new and caring, more human Gordon Brown who is beginning to be revealed to us, all such stuff generally percolating down to a bout of weeping on television. Maybe or maybe not a good thing, possibly dependent upon either your involvement or aloofness (and maybe even disgust) since the mass hysteria that overcame the nation upon the death of Diana.

Helen was bang on time, as ever – a very welcome whirlwind of laughter, bone dry wit and highly contagious enthusiasm. I had been idly glancing around the place – I can't have been here since the 1980s, I think, when it was just about the trendiest restaurant in London – upmarket Italian – famed for its sheer expensiveness, exclusivity, preponderance of what were not yet called A-listers, sheer expensiveness, popularity with visiting Americans and sheer expensiveness. Then as now it is,

**S**AM Harrop's ears must have been burning. "He has taught us a lot." "He uses our strengths." "He has helped up make our wines more approachable for the consumer." Welcome compliments: but what's so special about them is that they come from Frenchmen (and women) about a New Zealander who is interfering in their time-honoured practices.

For the beginning of this unusual story, wind the clock back five years, when InterLoire, the marketing organisation for wines from France's Loire Valley, decided something needed to be done to make the region's cabernet franc red wines more popular in the UK.

Harrop, Master of Wine, ex-wine buyer for Marks & Spencer and former wine maker in New Zealand and California, consultant to wineries in France and Portugal and joint instigator of some of the very best wines from Catalan France, took up the challenge.

It's been a lot of work, "through a minefield of

# Question time for the PM's special adviser

After Gordon Brown drops his emotional guard on television, Joseph Connolly takes his arts aide out to lunch and sees if she's as prepared to spill the beans ...



Window on the world ...  
Joseph Connolly in  
Cecconi's.

from the outside, a thoroughly depressing and unremarkable place – a corner box at the foot of an undistinguished block, the vast plate glass windows always drearily obscured by dingy-looking vertical louvres, dense as armour. The other week, though, all that had been swept aside – and so if you bagged a window table, as I very promptly did, you had a splendid view of all sorts of very smartly tricked out ladies on the pavement outside, click-clacking along in shiny black stiletto shoes – which around here seem to be part of a compulsory uniform – to a backdrop of the rear of the Royal Academy.

Mention of this reminds me of an ageing Hampstead artist I once knew whose abiding ambition it was to have one of his paintings hung in the renowned or infamous Summer Exhibition. For years, and ultimately decades, he doggedly submitted three canvases, and every single time

they were summarily rejected. He felt awful. Everyone around him felt awful: we dreaded the looming of the Summer Exhibition, scenting the coming despair. And then one year he announced that it was all over for him – finished and done with: never again would he subject himself to this terrible insult and humiliation. The RA could go and hang (though not, alas, him). His long-suffering, concerned and rather ancient wife determined then to take action: that year, unbeknown to him, she submitted on his behalf three of his newest and, in her view, very finest pictures. And lo ...! Every single bleeding one of them was summarily rejected. He died shortly afterwards. I didn't say it was a happy tale.

Anyhoo ... there I was, idly glancing around the place, right? It's largish and quite low-ceilinged – a glossy ceiling, I noted, with toning silvery

wallpaper, all fairly reminiscent of John Barnes restaurant about a hundred years ago (remember it? Plaice and chips served by a nippy who was a martyr to her feet). There is a busy and buzzy marble bar shaped like a horseshoe for meals on the, um, hoof – rather like a chummier version of the Mayfair restaurant Scott's – a vast semicircle of bottle green velvet Chesterfield alive with clusters of businesswomen pecking at prawns and sinking barrels of Chardonnay, and little circular granite tables with chlorophyll leather tub seats such as ours, hard by the window. Through which there howled one hell of a draught. And all the high-heeled passers-by felt they had to pause and subject you to a jolly hard stare. The food, though, is actually very good – but notable for its rather stingy portions as well as our dear and abiding friend, sheer expensiveness.

There is no set lunch menu – odd these days – but a long list of little plates (cicchetti), eight starters, eight pastas and 10 other sorts of mains, with some prices reaching £30. The waitress told us that one of that day's two specials was Dover sole, but she omitted to mention its cost, possibly due to candid embarrassment.

My cicchetti was five wee meatballs, the good tomato sauce bubbling away merrily in a dinky little copper casserole. I have been warned of lurking ingredients in restaurants before – generally peanuts, shellfish or salmonella (just kidding) – but now the waitress solemnly alerted me to the presence of pork. Don't know why – maybe she thought I was an off-duty rabbi, or something: who can really tell? Anyway, they were very good and succulent, those meatballs – and Helen was going "Mmmmm ...!" as she spooned up her potato and black truffle soup. "Mmmmm ...!" she went, "Mmmmm ...!" and really she had to say no more. She was even more delighted with her rather fine tranche of roasted organic salmon – it looked fresh and glossy, with the skin crisped up rather pointlessly (because nobody's actually going to eat it, are they?). Nearly 20 quid, though – and the zucchini fritti £4 more. I had crab ravioli – very beautifully, orangely and redly presented in the ubiquitous big-brimmed white porringer. I had asked for the larger version at £18, but it really was a bit small. And throughout all this, being the relentless Fleet Street newshound that I am, I was desperately trying to wrinkle out of Helen all sorts of juicy and preferably salacious Downing Street details. Drew a blank, of

## FACTFILE

**CECCONI'S**  
5a Burlington Gardens  
Piccadilly  
Tel: 020-7434 1500  
 Opening times: All day and evening  
 Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆  
 Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆  
 Cost: About £120 for three small courses for two with wine

course – she didn't get where she is today by way of indiscretion. All I got was that Gordon enjoys a glass of champagne and is nuts about football: no idea whether that's a scoop or old hat – it's anyway all I have for you. And before she had to dash back to Number Ten and recommend me for a knighthood, Helen just had time for a tiramisu. This came rather oddly layered in a tumbler with alternating bands of cream and brown and covered in chocolate powder. She said it wasn't boozy enough, and that she would have preferred it on a plate. "I like it quivering ...," she silkily confided. I had what was billed as apple tart, but was in fact a rather dry triangle of cake, with a bit of apple in it. The French cream had a nice little hit of vanilla.

With Helen gone to do her bit for the nation – or anyway the Labour Party – I sat there wondering why (I haven't mentioned this, have I?) the waitress and another bloke had earlier seemed so very keen for me to order a plateful of leaves. Don't know why – maybe they thought I was an off-duty rabbit, or something: who really can tell?

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

## New world tricks for old world wines

politics", he admits. But it's showing very fine results.

At the annual Loire wine fair in Angers earlier this month I tasted some of the wines which have been selected as

InterLoire offering extra support for UK promotions there should be pleasure ahead here.

But to return to Harrop's

Another articulate supporter of Harrop's involvement, this time with sauvignon blanc, is Thierry Delaunay, whose family wines have been selling well in the UK for 20 years. Even so, he hopes the project will increase appreciation here of Loire sauvignon blanc. "We want the consumers' reflex to be the

especially as this year the new set of laureates will be chosen here rather than in France.

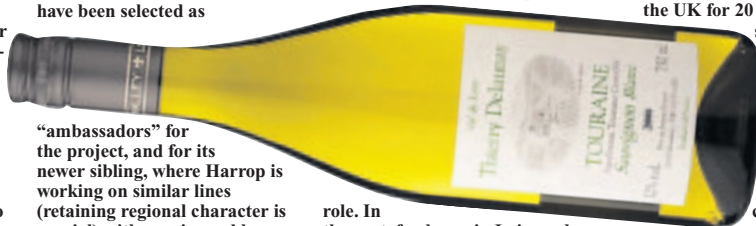
But good Loire wines aren't too hard to find. First, there's an outstanding, very reasonably priced list from the retail arm of RSJ restaurant just south of Waterloo Bridge (www.rsj.uk.com). RSJ also organises exceptional tasting dinners – the next, on March 9, focuses on the superb wines of

Christophe Daviau.

Majestic stocks Delaunay's Sauvignon de Touraine (£7, £6.50 for two or more) and plenty more temptations.

Waitrose and The Wine Society both have well-chosen ranges, too. For reds, the 2007 vintage is generally best avoided, but other recent years have been great for reds and whites.

LIZ SAGUES



"ambassadors" for the project, and for its newer sibling, where Harrop is working on similar lines (retaining regional character is crucial) with sauvignon blanc growers.

The Salon des Vins de Loire is an annual delight for anyone who loves the crisp whites and fresh reds from chateaux country. The 2010 event was even better than usual, as the results of the exceptionally good 2009 harvest were being shown off. A lot of buyers from UK wine outlets were there – from supermarkets as well as smaller specialists – so with prices remaining reasonable and

role. In the past, freshness in Loire reds was too often more lean and green than mouth-wateringly juicy. One big change is the decision on when to harvest.

"He has taught us to love our grapes more and bring them to optimum ripeness," Isabelle Pain told me. "Before, we didn't have the courage to wait." She's delighted that two of the Domaine Charles Pain 2008 Chinons are among the 18 wines chosen as the current cabernet franc ambassadors.

Loire rather than New Zealand."

And even if some participants retain a certain Gallic independence, they respect Harrop and welcome his approval: "I haven't changed what I've done in the cellar at all," one told me, "but he still likes my wines."

The ambassador wines are only slowly making their way into UK wine shops, though that will surely change,

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

If you are painting your windows, put masking tape around the edge of the glass. Be sure to leave a tiny gap between the tape and the frame, this will allow the paint to seal the joint between the glass and the putty. Remove the tape as the paint starts to dry, but don't leave it too long as the adhesive will stick to the window.

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