

HAMPSTEAD, Highgate, food, wine and books – I don't think we talked about anything else

(just blissful) and yet we were dining together for more than four-and-a-half hours. But when your guest is Ion Trewin, that has got to be expected – not just a local lad to the soles of his big and sturdy shoes, but pre-eminent in the literary world for, oh – any number of reasons, really. Tick them off one by one, will we? Yes – best be diligent. Well for ages he was the supremo at Weidenfeld & Nicolson – a highly respected editor of biographies as well as letters and diaries, most notably those of Michael Palin and Alan Clark. The loveable hateable Clark, of course, was the subject of Ion's own first book – published last year to considerable acclaim. My professional dealings with him have only been at one step removed: when, in 2003, Alexander Walker – the legendary film critic at the Evening Standard – suddenly and very unexpectedly died, I (as Alex's literary executor) had to locate for Ion the manuscript of the third and last volume of his commissioned history of the British cinema. It was very nearly finished, thank God – so all I had to do was put together the final chapter from Alex's notes, in I hope an approximation of his style, and pass it over to Ion, who edited it brilliantly. To celebrate, I remember, we had a splendid lunch in Mon Plaisir, which I've praised here in the past.

A couple of years ago, Ion "retired", this milestone marked by a very jolly and memorable party at the Physic Garden in Chelsea. I say "retired" because often with the most able types such an action betokens no more than a shift in focus, usually translating into more work than ever. So, I suspect, has it been with Ion: he is now the administrator of the Man Booker Prize, is concerned with the Cheltenham Literature Festival, sits on the committee of our mutual club, The Garrick, and is rumoured soon to become the inaugural chairman of a newly formed National Writing

Plenty to rabbit about

Novelist **Joseph Connolly** finds plenty to talk about when he meets up with his old comrade in books, Ion Trewin – especially when it comes to solving the mystery of why the chef's been caught on the hop



Academy. And he's started on a new book, the subject of which I am not yet to reveal. So rather a surprise that he had time to dine with me at all, really.

He grew up in Eldon Grove, Hampstead, and from the age of 10 was a boarder at Highgate – as was his father before him, the eminent drama critic J.C. Trewin, and so too was his son Simon, who runs United Agents (literary, not estate). Ion's wife of more than 40 years was a Channing girl, and these days

they split their time between Highgate and Norfolk. So much for the local credentials – but let's now for God's sake have something to eat and drink, because Ion is very good at these things. I picked La Cage Imaginaire because I had heard it was rather fine. And then I heard that it had gone right off, and then I heard that it was rather fine again: time to find out. It is, of course, beautifully sited in Flask Walk – though from my Flask Bookshop days I

FACTFILE

- ❑ **LA CAGE IMAGINAIRE**
16 Flask Walk, Hampstead
Tel: 020-7794 6674
- ❑ Open Monday to Friday
noon to 3pm, 6pm to 11pm
Sunday noon to 11pm
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: lunch: £13.90 for two
courses, dinner £18.90 for two
courses

remember it looking much more romantic and florally adorned than it seems to be now: it's really very white, inside and out. There is a candle on every table, that's true, but these are white as well. Still quite cosy though, rather oddly – maybe to do with the low murmur of jazz of the Brubeck variety. An early visit to the loo was a rather lowering experience, I must tell you: you have to squeeze through what looks like a very narrow aircraft galley, made even narrower by the welter of coats hanging from hooks, and into a tiny, very shabby and quite unsparkling bog with an empty bottle of "handwash" and an absence of lavatory roll. Hm.

It was a pretty cold evening and this tempted Ion into onion soup. This is meant to be a thoroughly French restaurant, so it ought to have been good – but no: "watery", is what he said. "Very thin – with just a bit of cheese on top". He missed the warming intensity of the real McWormy, not to say the gooey cheesy canopy that forms itself into unmanageable strings. My three sauteed scallops were good, though the addition of slices of chorizo and then salsa verde did not strike me as especially Gallic, or successful. The wild rocket was just plain bitter – like nettles. The wine list is all French, though – rising to an '86

Beychevelle at £170. We settled for a more humble Medoc – La Rose Carbonere 2000 which we did enjoy, though it was hardly a bargain at £29.50. The menu itself, by the way, is laminated and rather smudgily printed in copperplate which, by the light of one candle, is a bugger to read.

Still in wintry mode, Ion liked the sound of the casserole of rabbit in red wine, garlic and thyme with mushrooms and Gratin Dauphinois. I ordered the roast rack of lamb in an orange and mint sauce ... and while we waited for that lot, we blathered along in literary vein. Ion was very kind about my book about Faber and Faber book covers – said he was looking forward to the exhibition at the V&A in April (have I mentioned there's an exhibition at the V&A in April? There's an exhibition at the V&A in April). And then the waitress breezed by with some rather surprising news: there was no rabbit casserole, because chef had only just started on it. This at eight in the evening when it was on a laminated (and therefore unchanging) menu. Manfully suppressing his disappointment, Ion said he would settle for the roast breast of goose. He's actually something of a cook himself, having received as a gift a short course at Books For Cooks in Kensington – a foody bookshop with the addition of actual cooking and then eating the result. He was hooked immediately, and is particularly proud of his whole boneless chicken that roasts to perfection in just 45 minutes. And then guess what ...? The waitress was back: it turns out that the rabbit casserole is, in fact, ready now – so Ion can have it if he wants. This sounded so very strange to me that had I had a bargepole about my person, it certainly wouldn't have come into contact with this rum and instantaneous

casserole. But Ion – braver? More trusting? Who can say? – said he'd go for it

It came: here was a huge and molten mahogany mound, and he absolutely adored it: finished every scrap. "Very tender, good sauce, properly casserole" is what he said. Mystery, eh? I had five wee lamb cutlets ("It would have been six," Ion said dryly, "pre-decimalisation") and they were pretty good, nicely trimmed, though heavy on the garlic. The mint sauce was just like that out of a jar – therefore pretty mouth-puckering – and I couldn't detect the supposed orange in it. Men of restraint would have had no truck with pudding – so Ion ordered the strawberry cheesecake: a big pink triangle on a black scallop-shell plate. He loved that too: good crunchy, almost shortbread base, and deep creamy flavour. I said to the waitress "Should I have the pot au chocolat or the crème brulee?" "Oh definitely the crème brulee," she enthused. "It's gorgeous." Well it wasn't: it was curdled. I only ate a spoonful. "Is there something wrong with it?" she asked me later. "There is. It's curdled." "Oh. Well it was freshly made yesterday ..." As if that explained everything. And it appeared on the bill. Oh dear.

Ion toddled up Back Lane in quest of the 210, and I wandered home through the village. The food? All right, I suppose – Ion's rather better than mine. The conversation? Well ... Hampstead, Highgate, food, wine and books: just blissful.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design is published by Faber and Faber (£25). Did I mention there's an exhibition at the V&A in April? There's an exhibition at the V&A in April. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed at the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

NEVER before, surely, has anyone suggested a wine match for fried egg. But Javier Hidalgo dares to do so. The wine he favours isn't exactly something you'd find in a greasy spoon cafe, but then he is fussy about quality. The eggs must be free range. So, which wine?

His choice is a rather special sherry, Oloroso Faraon VORS, which comes in a 50cl bottle, costs about £45 and has yet to reach the shops. The first shipments arrived in Britain only last week.

Like so many of his professional colleagues, friends and just about anyone who lives in the south of Spain, Hidalgo doesn't see sherry as a drink-alone aperitif. It's a food wine, and there are different styles to suit whatever is on the tapas – or main meal – plate.

The fried eggs recommendation came during a fascinating seminar organised by his UK distributors, Mentzendorff. The family has been making sherry for 300 years, using the solera system where older barrels are topped up with newer wine – which means that

Try sherry with food – even fried egg

sherry made in the 18th century can still be a part (albeit very tiny) of the blend in 2010 bottles.

The seminar focussed on aged and rare amontillados and olorosos. There's a clear

difference. Amontillados begin in the manzanilla/fino style, where a natural yeast known as flor forms over the fortified wine maturing in old American oak barrels, then they continue to age oxidatively after the flor dies. Olorosos aren't affected by flor, so their ageing is exclusively oxidative.

Hidalgo's best-known sherry is the widely loved La Gitana manzanilla, light, dry, mouth-wateringly delicious and only £8 a full bottle (Majestic,

Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose). Just remember to serve it very cool and drink up the bottle within a few days.

When a wine in that style, from a single hill-top vineyard brushed by Atlantic breezes, is aged for longer, the result is

admits. Be open-minded and try it, perhaps with a fishy starter.

But that was only the beginning of an extraordinary drinking experience. In Spain, so convention goes, women prefer the olorosos, men amontillados. I beg to differ, though not in a big way – all the Hidalgo offerings were wonderfully appealing.

I'll skip the anada sherries which, quite exceptionally, are single-vintage wines, fascinatingly individual and produced in very small quantities – "the accountants don't like them," says Hidalgo – and move on to the VORS category. These are very old rare sherries with a minimum age of 30 years (as compared to the VOS category, mere 20-year-olds).

The delicate complexity of Amontillado Napoleon VROS

(50cl, £40) captivated me. Drink it with anything smoked, says gourmand Hidalgo – salmon, ham, cheese. Then came the fried egg choice Faraon – "equally good with game" – deeper coloured and nutty.

But best of all was Palo Cortado Wellington VORS (£50cl, £50). Palo cortado is an amontillado style of particularly fine quality and the Wellington

is a wine I'll never forget. So complex are the dry flavours that they almost appear sweet and the freshness is extraordinary for so antique a wine.

These are wines worth any effort to find. Ask Mentzendorff (020-7840 3600) to tell you when stockists are decided.

LIZ SAGUES



Manzanilla Pasada Pastrana (£10, Majestic, Waitrose, The Wine Society) – complex, with an intriguing hint of something almost medicinal and lingering freshness. It's a wine which wins friends in the trade, but selling it to a wider market is hard, Hidalgo

URBAN SOLUTIONS
SMARTER PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ If an engineer tells you that parts need changing, ask them to give the old ones back to you in the box the new parts came in. That way, they can't pretend they changed parts they haven't and they can't use second-hand parts. You are entitled to peace of mind.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111