

ELECTION Day, eh? And three major parties to choose between: rather too many, don't you think? I have come to the conclusion that extensive choice is one of the banes of modern living. During the War, housewives would endlessly queue for whatever was on offer – and although I am not suggesting that here is a Utopian state of affairs, at least such privation must have concentrated the mind.

Now though, if you pop down to Waitrose with the simplest shopping list (bread, milk, coffee, biscuits) the variety and array are quite utterly stupefying. I can just stand there in the aisles, totally transfixed, the miles of shouty packaging merging into the one great colourful and stern accusation of lily-livered slack-mindedness – I cower away from the finger of scorn, jabbing at such pathetic indecision.

I remember once in New York I slipped into a deli for a sandwich; I foolishly had in mind something along the lines of a nice bit of ham in between a couple of slices of bread – but the bombardment of barked-out alternatives, tweaks and embellishments literally had me reeling as a resentful and muttering queue threatened to erupt behind me. Eventually, I yelled to the man to “hold the sandwich!” and I scuttled away to dine instead on a bar of Hershey's and a bumper tub of Jell-O.

I was reminded of all this at the V&A last week, as I stood in the midst of a new small exhibition of Faber and Faber cover art and book illustration, loosely based upon my book on the subject. The exhibition was not curated by me, thank God, because by then my powers of selection were well and truly shot.

The Faber archive is extensive and majestic, as you might expect of so august a publishing house, 80 years into its history. I was given carte blanche for the book, and eventually decided upon 300 colour pages-worth of beautiful book covers, but I easily could have trebled that number.

The choices and resolution involved, in short, were thoroughly debilitating, and once the job was done all I was fit for was simply to lie across a chaise longue in a darkened room, pale and drawn, with no more than an ice pack, fan and soothing draught of elderflower cordial. I

IN THESE additive-aware days there is increasing concern about the amount of sulphur in wine. A basic fact first: sulphur dioxide occurs naturally during the grapes-into-wine process, so no wine can be completely free of it. The discussions are over added sulphur dioxide, a natural antiseptic/preservative which is valuable (often invaluable) in preventing wine from continuing to ferment in bottle, being damaged by various bacteria and oxidising. White wine, the most fragile, is likely to have most sulphur. And the effects on wine drinkers? It's difficult to relate cause and effect exactly, but headaches are one frequently-reported problem, with others including stomach upsets and skin reactions. Asthma-sufferers appear most vulnerable, but it is important to emphasise that sulphur presents no risk to the vast majority who drink sensibly. Given the growing interest in this issue, Plamen Georgiev

The perfect place for an indecisive man

Overwhelmed by choice? **Joseph Connolly** discovers a restaurant where there's only one main course



I'll have the beef then ... Joseph Connolly at Le Relais de Venise in Marylebone Lane.

enjoyed the exhibition, but still was jittering with all the memories.

And my wife said: “So where shall we go for lunch, then?” I said: “I don't know, I can't decide.” She asked: “Shall we go somewhere in South Ken?”

“I don't know. I can't decide.” “Do you want to go back to Hampstead...?” Suppressing a tear, I told her the truth: “I don't know. I can't decide.”

And then God listened to me and I remembered all I had heard about Le Relais de Venise, in

Marylebone Lane. So we took a cab there, pronto.

This place – bang opposite the famous fish-and-chip joint The Golden Hind, is authentically Parisian, inside and out. The dark art nouveau woodwork, deep red and gold awnings and gothic typography give way to the credible bustle of a bistro with leather banquette seating, bentwood chairs, half café-curtains on thick brass poles, a magnificent central display of bright pink flowers (lilies, largely) and ceiling-skimming

Looking after fragile white

must be feeling a little smug. At Wine of Course, his shop in Archway Road, Highgate, and his www.zelas.co.uk website, the focus has been on “natural” wine for well over a year.

Alongside organic or biodynamic vineyard practice, he insists that there must be minimal manipulation in the cellar, and that means little or no added sulphur. His list offers natural wines from France, Italy, New Zealand, Austria, Bulgaria, and Chile. Generally, the widest choice of lower-sulphur wines comes from organic/biodynamic specialists. As Steve Lewis of Vintage Roots – which in 2011 will celebrate 25 years of supplying organic wines to UK drinkers – points out, sulphur isn't banned, but “green” winemakers tend to use a lot less

of it. And the good news is that the EU is moving to substantially lower current permitted levels. He said: “This will hopefully come into law by the end of the year.”

While many organic producers are trialling smaller batches of no added sulphur wines, very few are producing larger volumes, due to the inherent risk of spoilage. The Fairtrade, organic Stellar winery in South Africa is an exception, however. Cellar master Berty Jones reports that what began as an experiment five years ago has resulted in commercial quantities of no added sulphur wines now leaving the cellar. He argues: “These wines have shown that wine production without preservatives is viable.” Vintage Roots

FACTFILE

LE RELAIS DE VENISE

120 Marylebone Lane, W1.
Tel 020-7486 0878

□ Open: Monday to Thursday noon – 2.30, 6 – 10.45pm. Friday noon – 2.45, 6 – 10.45pm. Saturday 12.30 – 3.30, 6.30 – 10.45pm. Sunday 12.30 – 3.30, 6.30 – 10.30pm
Food: ★★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★★☆☆☆
Cost: Salad followed by entrecote frites, £20. About £70 for three courses for two with wine. Bargain.

mottled mirrors studded with wall lights.

Their shades have gondolas on them, as a nod to the frankly bizarre ‘Venise’ bit of the restaurant's name. It's a family run concern, and there a few of them in Paris and other French towns such as Lyon, Montpellier and Bordeaux, as well as further flung outposts like New York and Bahrain.

London has four and this one is our local. But here is the point: common to all of them is a unique selling point, and this is the reason why I was here: there is no menu, there is no choice. You can't even decide when you are coming, because they take no bookings.

And in my present state of mind, that, you see, was very heaven. The waitresses, nattily got up in black with cheeky white pinnies, all have great and visible forebearance for they must say and serve the very same thing to every single punter: “We give you a dressed green salad with walnuts, then entrecote steak with frites. Steak is blue, rare, medium or well done. With our secret sauce.”

To just nod dumbly at her was simply wonderful. “Do you want

wine?” she asked. “You tell me,” I said happily. “House Bordeaux ...?” “Bang on.” And that was the ordering done with.

The leaves were as fresh as the chunks of baguette, though I thought the dressing a little heavy on the Dijon mustard. We ate this with the aid of a giant fork as gripped by Neptune or Britannia, and a teeny little Noddy in Toyland serrated knife, this in keeping with the dinky glasses for wine and water, quite on a par with those they used to dole out with a bottle of Optrex.

And, of course, when you are done, your cutlery is plonked back on to the paper tablecloth. Yes, but where is the beef ...? Well here, actually, put in front of you on a dolly-sized plate with the admonition not to touch it as it is extremely hot and I touched it and she was absolutely right, you know: quite scalding.

The entrecote is perfectly trimmed, sliced quite thin, and covered in the ‘secret’ sauce. The frites, glowing alongside, were spectacular: spindly, but properly flung outposts like New York and Bahrain. The steak was utterly melting and delicious, the ‘secret’ sauce rather marvellous (it's, apparently, shipped over from Paris, so even the chef here hasn't got a clue). It's largely butter, very obviously, and also I'd say brandy, mushroom, a touch of mustard and basil (maybe thyme, as well). Damned good, anyway.

And when you've finished it all up, they give you a second lunch: honestly. You've already had a fair amount of food, but it turns out they've kept back half the steak and a lot more frites, and then they hit you with that lot. Well, yum. So: small plates – big grub. Four lunches between us for £20 apiece: very good. The place was packed with

people who plainly agree – some well-dressed French folk, talking about the coming summer. A couple of raggedy Englishmen earnestly discussing tax evasion, and lots of groups of happy women. Nice to see so many sane and balanced people gorging on red meat, butter, chips and wine and enjoying every moment.

There was a selection of puddings, but that was no good to me: it was the word ‘selection’ that did it – today, I could not be choosy. My wife, though, went for La tulipe de peches et abricots melba – a big bowl of sunshine in the form of a crisped and frilly biscuity cup filled with diced fresh peaches and apricots on vanilla ice cream and topped by an Icelandic volcano of froth. “Is it good froth?” I asked. She nodded. “It is. It is good froth. Very frothy. But then of course,” she added darkly, “froth is froth”.

The bill, at £64, was also a delight – this to include a bottle of surprisingly decent claret at just £14.95, with service at only 10 per cent. And highlighted in pink on your receipt is the cheering news that if you come back, you get 20 per cent off your food and drink: a bientôt, then.

And after, outside in the sunshine, my wife said to me: “So are we going home now, or what?” I could feel my face falling. “I don't know. I can't decide.” “We could go to Regent's park ...?” “I don't know. I can't decide.” “OK – we'll go home, then.” I nodded in humble gratitude: I simply had no choice in the matter.

□ *The exhibition Faber: Art And Design is in Room 74 at the V&A until May 30. Faber and Faber: 80 Years Of Book Cover Design by Joseph Connolly is published by Faber and Faber (£25). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

pure, intense flavours and great individuality – there's a choice at four, £8.25 – £9.95, at Stone Vine & Sun (www.stonevine.co.uk).

Low or no sulphur wines do remain something of a minefield. I've tasted some very odd examples, which I don't want to meet again. Even the best are on the whole short-lived wines, best enjoyed as soon as possible.

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