

MINE was not a musical childhood. I would love to say that instead I was a bookworm – consumed by literature and burned by an unquenchable impulse to fashion deathless prose ... but no. Comics and idleness were more my line: the Bash Street Kids had the drop on Shakespeare any day of the week. Look – my best subject at school was Break. But as to music, well ... I dimly recall that I did enjoy bashing the Bejasmus out of my Sooty xylophone – and of course I yearned for a guitar, but only to hang around my neck so that I could pout as moodily as Cliff, while dreaming of sideburns. There was one boy at St Anthony's, I remember – utterly spoilt, and therefore the subject of terrible envy – who had a bright red Fender exactly as strutted by Hank Marvin, with the all-important little lever thing that bent the notes and made the twang go all Shadowy ... and he didn't even know how to plug it in: tried it once – fused the whole house. Although in his favour, he did pull off a convincing pout, even if his cheeks were still very downy. But but but ... in those days, having no musical aptitude whatever by no means let you off the hook. There were piano lessons – always, always there were piano lessons. It was more of a status thing, I think: parents were in a rush to sign up the nearest spinster in a basement with an upright, for not to do so might suggest that you couldn't afford it. Ah, England ...

My personal subterranean old maid was called Miss-Something-That-Rhymed-With-Custard. I know this because I called her Miss Custard, you see – an early example of the brand of wit and uncanny grasp of wordpower that would one day hold me in such good stead. The task as I saw it was to find Middle C (this was before Where's Wally was invented). And being not an utter fool, I divined that it would hardly be lurking at either end, so plumped for something central. Sometimes I hit it, often not. And then I did – I finally found Middle C! By the next lesson, however, I had invariably mislaid it. She sighed a good deal, Miss Custard, when not jamming her palms to the sides of her ears, and silently weeping.

I thought of all this the other evening while sitting in the

When practice doesn't always make perfect

Just like his childhood music lessons – remembered on a dinner date with concert pianist Leon McCawley – **Joseph Connolly** finds recipes don't always come up to scratch, however much tried and tested



Comparing notes ... Joseph Connolly with Leon McCawley.

Picture by Nigel Sutton

highly regarded Caffè Caldesi in Marylebone Lane, awaiting my guest – the quite absurdly talented and eminent concert pianist Leon McCawley. Although still of tender years, he has played solo recitals as well as with the greatest orchestras all over the world. A teacher at the Royal College, his recordings of Mozart's piano sonatas, Schumann, Beethoven and others are quite peerless – and if you watch some video clips of him playing, his rapture and apparent amazement at the music he is making is both moving and palpable. He had no musical background whatever, though at the age of 10, was perceived by his piano teacher (not Miss Custard, I'm assuming) to possess a rare talent, and from there it was but a series of brilliant leaps to a clutch of scholarships culminating in music school in Philadelphia, where the 18-year-old Leon found himself with a personal

Steinway grand and all tuition paid. His inspiration is Rachmaninov, but of course, and the person with whom he would most like to be stuck in a lift is Julie Walters, thus proving that nobody's perfect (I mean Jesus: she'd gabble and then cackle you to death, wouldn't she?). He has been married to the Korean painter Anna Paik for 14 years – a proper painter, I might say: not in the business of gimmick, installation and commenship like so many of her contemporaries. Crumbs, I'm telling you – there's more talent in this young couple than you could safely shake a stick at.

I got to Caldesi deliberately early, and the first thing I saw was the next door restaurant Le Relais de Venise (reviewed here a few weeks ago) with a queue of people literally stretching around the corner. Now I know they don't take bookings – but on a Tuesday evening in an area far richer than Hampstead in more

than decent eateries, to see such a thing is extraordinary. And apparently Caldesi doesn't take bookings either – not mine, anyway: they had no trace of it. No matter – a good table was found, and I requested a glass of prosecco and tap water. It's a bigger space than you expect – cool and calm, in contrast to the buzz of the terrific bar downstairs – with a wash of wall light and a polished wooden floor. Prosecco came, water didn't. Asked for it again. Leon came, water didn't. Asked for it again. As well as a further prosecco for my guest – which promptly came. Water didn't. Asked for it again. The service is polite, but not at all attentive: the aproned Italian lads do enjoy a good old chat amongst themselves, though.

Leon is quite a foodie and an enthusiastic cook and approached the menu with verve, deciding on warm fillet of beef battuto (which means with the Bejasmus bashed out of it, like a Sooty xylophone)

FACTFILE

CAFFÈ CALDESI
118 Marylebone Lane, W1
Tel 020-7935 1144
Open Monday to Saturday noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm. Closed Sunday
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
Cost: Three-course dinner for two with wine, about £130. Which is too much. Lunch is a rather better bet – or the café downstairs.

with rosemary dressing, rocket and parmesan. This dish is featured in the resident chef's book, Katie Caldesi's Italian Cookery Course, but it's really just a slightly less thin carpaccio with tired and wilted rocket and no detectable rosemary: he liked the melty beef and loathed the leaves. Asked for water again. Didn't come. My starter turned out to be the star of a not very spectacular show: a beautiful mound of orange and creamy tagliioni with warm fresh crab and cherry tomatoes packing it out properly. In common with Leon's starter, my main was fillet of beef and is also featured in the Cookery Course. Though why I can't imagine. What we had here was a large and good fillet steak on a piece of bread, for some odd reason, and capped with asiago cheese which didn't melt as intended but formed a sort of static and unyielding bubblewrap topping. The red wine sauce was rich, too rich – and charged with cranberry, though still very sweet. The whole dish brought to mind three courses of Christmas dinner, all on the one plate. This sauce ultimately became rather repellent, so I concentrated solely on the beef. Leon's veal dish was at least more subtle – pan fried escalopes on mash with chiodini

mushrooms: these – similar to porcini – were succulent and flavourful, the two rather small and mean escalopes so-so, and the mash mash. Leon thought it all underseasoned and underpowered, though extras of green beans and spinach helped it out a bit. As he ate, Leon was marvelling at the fact that the Wigmore Hall had already booked him for 2013. "Is there anywhere you haven't played?" I asked him. "Well I've never played in Hampstead. Although oddly ..." he added, his eyes now wide in astonishment, "I have in Hendon ...". Water came. So amazed I nearly screamed.

The Puglia we were drinking was fruity and spicy and typical and, at £24, no more than four times what you might pay for it at Majestic. As to the food, it has to be said that in the evenings this is a pretty pricey place. Pud ...? Well tiramisu, it turns out, is Leon's absolute favourite, so he had to have it. "I make a very mean one myself – packed with Barbados rum. Although the very best I've ever had, actually, was in Vienna. Tiramisu ... it means pick-me-up, you know. Certainly works for me." And this example ...? "It's light ... it's creamy ... it's good – but the sponge is too obviously separate. I like the trifley ones best." Food, I ventured, is indeed important to him. "Oh God yes," he immediately agreed. "I rate food way above music." Well gosh. "You should be a restaurant critic," I suggested. "I'd absolutely love to do that!" he enthused. And then he looked at me, maybe with a silent pity, as he added with care: "Well ... if all else fails, anyway ..."

Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary* (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

JUST think: if you buy a bottle of one particular brand of Argentinian wine in Ham&Highland, you could help a British woman achieve an amazing challenge halfway across the globe and also support a small, specialist charity much nearer home.

All credit to Tracey Smith for persuading Finca Flichman, whose wines she helps to sell through her job at importer Stevens Garnier, to be a major sponsor as she undertakes a near-5,000 mile voyage as part of next year's Clipper Round The World yacht race.

It's a daunting challenge: despite loving the sea, she's never attempted anything like it before.

She'll sail – as one of an 18-strong crew, on a 68ft Clipper yacht built for speed, not comfort – the leg from Cape Town to Freemantle, across the often violent Southern Ocean.

Argentinian wine reaches its peak

Money she raises towards the voyage cost will be shared with the charity SeeSaw, which supports bereaved children (see www.clipper-ventures.com and www.seesaw-org.uk to learn more).

As a result of her enthusiasm (and my own for sailing, though in very much smaller boats), I tasted the range of Finca Flichman malbecs with her at last month's London International Wine Fair.

I've liked them in the past, and the 2009 vintage keeps up the standard. Also, they score well on the value for money scale.

There are Flichman wines from other grapes, too, but malbec is Argentina's flagship – sorry...

Entry-level Misterio (£5.70-

£5.80, Morrisons, Co-op) is perfumed and fresh; Reserva (£7.20, Waitrose) is warmer but not too heavy; oak-edged Gestos (£8, Majestic) has great purity of fruit and intriguingly is an altitude rather than varietal blend – one vineyard is at 760 metres, the other at 1100. (NB current vintages vary.)

There are also single vineyard wines, Paisaje de Barrancas (760 metres) and Paisaje de Tupungato (1100 metres), with a touch of cabernet and merlot too. Tupungato, black and beautiful, cries out for steak and you can drink it and Barrancas (£40 and £37.50 respectively) at Gaucho in Heath Street,

Hampstead, and the other branches of the London-centred 14-restaurant chain.

Conveniently, that brings me to the tasting of gold medal and trophy



winners in the 2010 Argentine Wine Awards held at Gaucho in Piccadilly. There were some great wines among them – a few monsters, and some seemed more wood

than wine, but plenty more where fruit, oak and alcohol were well balanced. A lot, too, were not greedily priced – almost half of the 44 there should sell at under £12.

But Gaucho's director of wines, Phil Crozier, led me away from the medal wines to show off a rather special "house" wine.

Vina Patricia 2008 is the first vintage from Gaucho's own 6.5-hectare organic vineyard 910 metres up in Mendoza's Lujan de Cuyo region, named after company

creative director Patricia Godik.

The crop from 80-year-old low-yielding malbec vines is handled delicately, with restrained use of new oak barrels, and the resulting smooth and attractive wine has ripe fruit, chocolate and sweet spice notes. The 40,000 bottles mean there is enough to sell retail (click on wine boutique at www.gauchorestaurants.co.uk) at £17.15, as well as in the restaurant where it is £38.50, or £9.65 by the glass.

If you thought 910 or 1100 metres were high for vineyards, check out Gaucho's altitude-informative list and you'll find 3014 is the peak!

LIZ SAGUES