

WHOD be a restaurant critic, eh...? "I would!", I hear you shout – and of course I do know exactly what you mean: there is a considerable upside, no denying it. But at base, you know, it's very much all brickbats and no bouquets, believe me. If you give a glowing review, or if someone enjoys reading it, you never hear a dicky bird. But blimey, should you ever offend a reader by criticising his favourite hangout, said reader will soon let you know about it. If you dare to offend the restaurant itself, letters will be written. Ah well. All this was passing through my mind the other week when my wife and I found ourselves in the lower reaches of Hampstead, just before the point when it abandons its almighty Hyacinth Bucket of a struggle and finally admits to being just Chalk Farm. There is in this bit of Haverstock Hill something called The Legal Café, no doubt dispensing advice amid a selection of iced fancies: tea and sympathy, at a price. It occurred to me that should I go there and review it poorly, they could happily take me to court without even having to leave the premises.

But we didn't go there. We toyed with Ikura, a reputedly sound Japanese restaurant, and then very nearly succumbed to Oliver's, a brand spanking new fish and chip shop. I really liked the look of this, but for some strange reason, we passed it by. The irresistible lure was the blowsy glamour of Sir Richard Steele – The Steeles, to its many devotees – having all the tawdry swagger of a lit-up and bawdy saloon in an otherwise dusty cowpoke town: a right sweet sight to a cattleman parched and hungry from weeks on the trail, and eager too for the flattering attentions of Miss Kitty, all got up as a can-can girl.

Well she was out when we called, I'm sorry to say – but pretty much everything else was present and correct. Okay – there weren't those cut-down louvered doors that you coolly barge into and then they swing right back and biff you in the midriff... and nor did the music immediately cease mid-bar, even as my spurs were jingling on the threshold, the eyes of all the regulars warily upon me. Shame about the music, actually, because what we had here, if you can believe it, was a recording of a

Perfect for cowboys – just silence the drums

With its air of a bawdy saloon, the Sir Richard Steele offers food that will fill the hungriest rancher and soak up the beer – all at very reasonable prices. But **Joseph Connolly** might have to put a bullet in the jukebox



Move over Clint ... Joseph at Sir Richard Steele.

perfectly eternal drum solo – bang bang, rumble rumble bang bang bang, on and on for bloody ever. It is surely known that the only people on earth who appreciate a drum solo are the drummers such as Animal in The Muppets who see fit to inflict it – so who thought this was a good thing to have playing in a pub? As to the regulars – well there weren't any. I'm told that in the evenings,

the joint is really jumping – but on this Wednesday lunchtime the joint had tilted forward its sombrero and hunkered down for a spell of shut-eye.

I was pleased about the emptiness – gave me a good chance to mosey around. The interior is, depending upon your taste, absolutely dazzlingly fantastic, unique and endlessly fascinating (which is my view)

FACTFILE

- ☐ **SIR RICHARD STEELE**
97 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7483 1261
- ☐ Thai Kitchen open Tuesday to Friday noon-3pm, 6pm- 10.30pm. Monday noon-3pm, 6pm-10pm. Sunday noon-10.30pm
- ☐ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ☐ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ☐ Cost: Unbelievably low, at least. All dishes a fiver. And get drunk cheap: you owe it to yourself.

or else a mildewed simulacrum of the Steptoes' front room. The bar is roughish wood and L-shaped – easy to imagine slugs of whisky and foaming beers being whooshingly slid down the length of it – and every inch of the walls is covered in enamel, glass, tin and mirrored old advertising for not just pubby things like Bass and Guinness but biscuits and polish and tea, as well as street signs, bus stops, lots of old books and copper lanterns. On the door of the Ladies is a portrait of the Queen Mum, and hard by it a vintage Ham&High poster reading 'Goldfish Abuse Must Stop'. All this is very well set off by a sub-Michelangelo Sistine Chapel ceiling, stained glass leaded windows and little glinting lights – and on a winter's evening with real fires, and amid the roar of men and women charged with the heat of both wallop and hard stuff, it must indeed be quite something.

For here is a genuine London boozier – that's what they call it themselves, by the way. They further say that they are "flying the flag for good times and revelry", and I utterly believe it. I further feel that Sir Richard Steele

himself – born in 1672, allegedly on this site – would very much have approved. A spasmodically brilliant man – described by Sam Johnson as 'the most agreeable rake that ever trod the realms of indulgence' – he founded The Tatler and, with Joseph Addison, The Spectator. He married a widow, name of Stretch. One year later, she died; at her funeral he met a maid called Mary Scurlock, and married her as well. Ah – young love. And that reminds me – among his plays is one called The Funeral: it is a comedy.

And so to the food... and also to the slow realisation that I wasn't really in the right place for food – and if you are supposed to be a restaurant critic, this is a fairly dumb situation in which to find yourself. They have something called a 'Thai Kitchen' – reminding me of the first time someone asked me "Do you like Thai food?" and I thought they had said TyPhoo and replied that I didn't know, though my wife does swear by PG Tips. So anyhow... what we have here is a laminated card – no starters, no puddings, but quite a few curry, stir-fry, rice and noodle dishes, each with the option of additional chicken, pork or vegetables. And get this: everything is a fiver. Extraordinary, really. A quid more if it's prawns you're wanting. So we had Pak Chow Min – egg noodles with onions, bean sprouts and chicken... and Pad Khing, a stir-fry with pork, fresh ginger, onions, and mushrooms in an oyster sauce. The dishes were brought to the table by the small and very happily smiling woman, maybe Thai, hotfoot from having cooked them. My chow min was quite good – not greasy, with added broccoli flowers, green and red

peppers, chicken a mite chewy but all quite gobbleable... and the pork thing was... well what was it, actually? "Do you like it?" I asked my wife. She considered. "I don't... dislike it..." she replied quite slowly. Left half of it, though – it was all a bit slapdash and spongy, really. She went on to say "I think this is food to soak up the beer", and I don't think the rather clever management would disagree with that. It's all right, and it's great value – as are the ales and ciders they are rather proud of: Bass Premium at £2.30 a pint, for instance. House wine – not too bad – is just £7.50 the bottle: I have never encountered cheaper.

It works hard, this place: every evening there's some sort of diversion – and coincidentally we find ourselves poised upon the brink of something called 'The Steeles Fest'. This free three-day knees-up (September 3-5) promises a dance tent, live music, deejays, comedy, cinema, face painting and (gulp!)... live animals! I can only hope and trust they won't be abusing any goldfish.

So there it is: a tumultuous pub – one man's heaven, another man's hellhole – where the food, though okay, is really neither here nor there. If The Steeles likes this review, or if someone enjoys reading it, I'll never hear a dicky bird. And if not – they can write, care of the editor.

☐ *This Is It (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a comic novel by Joseph Connolly, set in Hampstead. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk, where you may also carp about the ones you don't like, and ignore the ones you do.*

THIS is confession moment. I've been rather devious in seeking the help of a distinguished producer of one of the Loire Valley's most celebrated wines. Savennieres comes from a small area close to Angers and, at its best, is one of the finest, longest-enduring examples of dry chenin blanc.

For years, the wine had the reputation of being impossibly hard to drink until it had aged for close to a decade. So I'd had no qualms about tucking away some bottles from the 2001 vintage. But when I opened one earlier this year, it surprised me: antique gold in colour and, to my taste, somewhat oxidised. Was it over the top, or was I misunderstanding it. I'd ask an expert, I decided.

The Angers wine fair, major showcase of Loire wines, was looming, so off I went with a sample from the bottle I'd just opened. "I'd like you to taste this," I said to Evelyne de Pontbriand, president of the Savennieres appellation, and her son Romuald. "It's not your

The beauty in an aging Savennieres

wine, but I'd like your expert opinion." They looked a little surprised, but agreed. The liquid was poured: "Une belle couleur." Sniffs and sips completed, they declared it a fine, expressive example.

Red-faced, I had to admit that I had failed to appreciate the pleasures beneath the obviousness of age. Once tasted, the instructions came thick and fast: open the next bottle a day before you intend to drink it, decant it, return it to the fridge, then take it out 20 to 30 minutes before the meal – which should be lightly-cooked scallops flambéed in old whisky. (Back home, I did all that. Delicious: thank you, Evelyne.)

By then, I was very much regretting that I hadn't accepted

the previous evening's tempting invitation to a vertical tasting (1987-2007) of the highly-respected Clos du Papillon at Evelyne's Domaine du Closel. But I slightly made up for a lost opportunity on the Closel stand, as Evelyne and Romuald poured two vintages (2008 and 2004) of Les Caillardières, their Savennieres which has a touch more sugar than the minerally-dry norm, and four of Papillon (2007, 2006, 2005, 2003).



But that was only part of the Savennieres experience at Angers 2010. One of the main salon events was a tasting to show off the 'inimitable and extravagant mineral quintessence of the Anjou schist' in which the chenin grapes are planted. Remarkably, 22 growers were represented – where else could you encounter a full two-thirds of so respected an appellation's members?

Most showed their two most recent vintages, but after a single 2005 came Clos de St Yves 1982 from Domaine des Baumards. It wasn't as deeply coloured as my 2001 bottle, and the scents were different, mature minerality but no hint of oxidation. Altogether fascinating, and a great pleasure to drink. And another big step forward in wine education.

There's not a lot of Savennieres on the high street,

though admirably Oddbins has Domaine Laureau Clos des Genets 1999 (£24 or £19.20 in a mixed case). Though from a different grower, it has some resemblance to my bottle – golden colour, lots of apple-y aromatics, a touch of mushrooms, the honeyed character of aged chenin and intensely dry.

Loire specialist RSJ (www.

rsj.uk.com) has two choices of Clos du Grand Beaupreau 2007, from Claude Papin (£14.15) and Vincent Ogereau (£14.75), plus Papin's Clos de Coulaire 2007 (£12.50), and Haynes Hanson and Clark (www.haynesansonandclark.co.uk) has Clos du Papillon 2004 from Domaine des Forges (£12.20).

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