

‘COT?’ I said. “Cot?! You can’t call a chain of bistros ‘Cot’.” A cot is what a baby goes to sleep in. Whatever can have possessed the man?” The man, of course, would be Richard Caring (as it so often is) who not too long ago hit upon the wheeze of bringing The Ivy to the masses. Not quite maybe how he himself might have put it, but nonetheless here is the root of the concept. And it’s not a bad concept at all. Then I learned that we were in fact talking about Côte. With an ‘e’ and a circumflex. The Côte has got his hat on, hip hip hip hooray. Yes well – still don’t like it. The English word Coast would have been better, along with a lot of other stark and uncontextual nouns plucked out at random. Anyway, the only outpost actually by the sea is in Brighton – all the others are inland in highly respectable middle class areas of England such as Wimbledon, St Albans, Guildford, Richmond, Cambridge ... you get the idea. The solid unwavering places, where over a steak frites at Côte, and a glass of something juicy, the steadfast locals can continue to curse the tragedy that on election night Nick Clegg and all his yellow-tied band of lily-livered shilly-shallyers failed to be collectively struck by a jagged bolt of lightning sent down in rightful wrath by the one true God, thus ensuring an overall Conservative majority. It is true that there are other branches of Côte in cooler places like Soho, but as these don’t all chime in with my sweeping and broad-brushstroked summation of the projected catchment, I don’t intend to dwell on them for an instant.

But I shall now dwell on the latest, in Highgate. Here, on the site of the eternally and very tediously lamented San Carlo, as well as the come-and-gone Flutes, is a very stylish and professional addition to the Highgate restaurant scene – and if any restaurant scene in London sorely was in need of such a thing, it is Highgate. One or two gastropubs ... one or two of the more reliable chains ... and that’s it. Caffè Nero, I see, now occupies the historic porticoed premises of ‘The Old Butcher’: shame the old butcher doesn’t. And yes I know that Côte is yet another chain – but could it maybe rise above that? That’s what my wife and I were there to find out. It opened for business on Monday September 20, and the following day at lunchtime, we swooped. I’m always so behindhand with openings and things – so please know that what you are currently reading is no less than a stop-press

A branch of The Ivy comes to Highgate

The loss of San Carlo is still much-lamented in the village. But now Richard Caring has stepped in with Côte Brasserie, bringing stylish pomp and classic dishes – without the West End prices, discovers **Joseph Connolly**



Impressed ... Joseph at Côte Brasserie.

scoop. Can the Pulitzer Prize now be long in arriving?

And I was pleased too, on this warm and sunny afternoon, not to have missed out on all the hurly-burly of the Highgate Grand Prix. Actually, it’s impossible to miss out on the Highgate Grand Prix because although it equals for head-splitting noise and blueish petrol pollution the more famous events at Silverstone and Monaco, say – these little spins are done within a matter of hours. But in Highgate the race is on for 365 days a year, the lovely old buildings on the High Street rattling and grimy from the belching roar of two quite constant lanes of seemingly dementedly determined and uproarious traffic. If only there could be a bypass, to bring down the chequered flag of peace.

Just outside we bumped into my old chum Hunter Davies. He had walked up from Dartmouth Park with a neighbour pal to give the place a road test. I wondered aloud whether we would be the only punters – but no, there were already a few in there, and throughout our meal they kept on coming. It’s a very large and two-tiered space, and so I don’t suppose anyone expected it to be packed at lunchtime on Day Two, but there was a fair old trickle – most of them saying to the very forbearing front-of-house “I remember this place when it was San Carlo, you know ...” “Yes,” she regularly said with care, “I expect you do”.

The interior, as you would expect from the boy who brought you Scott’s, The Dean Street Townhouse and Le Caprice – is

very swish: a high quality fit-out indeed. Florentine gunmetal and white patterned floor tiles, panels of silvery hessian alternating with deep bevelled mirror and darkly gleaming wood. The tables are a mix of white marble on cast iron bistro bases, and more of the darkly gleaming wood. Curvy and strappy chairs have seats upholstered in the same oxblood leather as the generous (but too low, as usual) banquettes. We went for a table by the front window, and soon wished we hadn’t. Have I mentioned the traffic in Highgate High Street? Honestly – you wouldn’t believe the window had even been glazed. This bark and roar was supplemented by a toponote of the maddening beep beep beep of the crossing directly outside, this allowing a match-fit pedestrian

FACTFILE

- ❑ **COTE BRASSERIE**
- 2 Highgate High Street, N6.
- Tel: 020-8348 9107
- ❑ Open Mon-Fri 8am-11pm.
- Sat 9am-11pm. Sun 9am-10.30pm.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Cost: Set meal £9.95 two courses, £11.90 three, from noon to 7pm. Otherwise about £75 for three-course meal for two with wine. Very good.

roughly three seconds to sprint to the other side before the cars and lorries and buses engulf the street once more. So we moved. The very sweet red-haired Irish waitress said we were welcome to change tables as often as we wished. Which was nice. A shame, though, that we weren’t let in on the secret of the open terrace at the rear – welcome on a day such as that.

The menu is classic bistro: a very warming sight. Set lunch is an out-and-out bargain at £9.95 for two courses, £11.90 for three – with a £2 supplement for one of their two keynote dishes, steak frites (though “thinly beaten out”, it says). I had the other one, from the carte: half a cornfed Breton poulet, also with frites, and some fashionable leaves. Terrific value at £9.95 – the optional wild mushroom sauce at £2.25, less so. The chicken itself was very good, but a bit overdone (you’ll get better at The Ivy, it’s true, but it will be nearly twice the price; at the Ivy Club they do the best roast chicken ever – though the cost is rather alarming). I’m jumping the gun, though: starters. My wife had seared scallops with lardons and frisee that she hardly stopped talking about. “Perfect. Three large perfect scallops. So juicy. Perfect – just perfect”.

Perfect, then. And I had moules marinieres – just the right amount for a starter, very good creamy sauce with bits of onion the size of full stops, and every shell had opened properly, which is a rarity: fingerbowl with lemon supplied.

The mains are presented with Ivy-style pomp: a black clad bloke bears the tray over, holding it high, and then the waitress places the dish before you, sometimes even whipping off a silver dome. It all would have been more convincing if they didn’t every time have to check which plate was for whom. And they really must stop asking you every 10 minutes how much, and to what precise degree, you are enjoying your lunch. Imagine during a play, after each soliloquy – a concert, following every solo – a bloody usherette poking a torch in your face and demanding to know what you think of it all so far. The staff are solicitous and the place is new – but they’ve just got to tone that down. My wife’s cassoulet de Toulouse she also adored – duck confit, Toulouse sausage, bacon and of course the nicely swollen haricot beans. “Every forkful is a new and delightful experience” is what she said. “I love it – I just wish it was winter”. You sort of know what she means. And her pud – ‘The Côte Speciality’, a crème caramel – I must say was just about faultless. It’s a good place this, very – and clever too: a brasserie that’s open all day, smart enough for a cool night out, casual enough for brekker. I think Highgate will take it to its considerable bosom.

We staggered back to Hampstead across the Heath. Big lunch ... long walk ... I for one was ready for my coté.

❑ *S.O.S (Faber and Faber £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly about a crossing on a liner from Southampton to New York. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

blended wines from world’s oldest wines

In the conservatory’s rows of vines are some 20 varieties familiar to the specialists, but rather more which have still to be identified or named. Some have potential to add extra character to the existing wines or to introduce qualities such as disease-resistance. Others may well have been forgotten for very good reason. Experimentation with them is on-going.

The value of the work is clear. Two decades ago, the petit manseng variety was saved by similar concern for traditional varieties and it is now a crucial component in some of the best whites of the region.

But Plaimont’s researchers are doing much more than simply

identifying and protecting old vines. A resistivity survey is being carried out across the whole grape-growing area to identify which soils are best for which varieties. In the short-



The 200-year-old Peydebernarde vines.

term, it could, for example, mean that grapes from a particular plot would be better made into rose than red. Further ahead, plots will be divided and regrouped and replanted with varieties most

appropriate to their soils and exposition. There will, too, be the opportunity to identify plots suitable for “grands vins”, says Bourdet-Pees.

But as far as consumers are concerned, Plaimont’s current crusade is to bring the once-lost grape varieties to wider appreciation and to convert single-grape drinkers to the pleasures of multi-grape blends. If you need convincing, try either of these two readily available white wines which should do just that: Duc de Vendome 2008 (Waitrose) and Saint Mont 2008 (Marks & Spencer), both £7. Both combine gros manseng, petit courbu and arrufiac grapes in perfumed, appealing style.

There are plenty more Saint Mont blends from Plaimont available here, both red and white, incorporating the little-known grapes of south-western France.

Try The Wine Society, Portland Wines, Majestic, Nicolas, Corney & Barrow and Adnams, and enjoy the unusual.

LIZ SAGUES

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ On a periodic basis, visually check over the electrical cords on your appliances and plug-in items. Before checking, always unplug it from the mains and check over for any defects and make sure that the cable is not twisted, worn or overstretched. Make sure that none of the wiring is exposed right up to the plug end and the appliance itself.

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