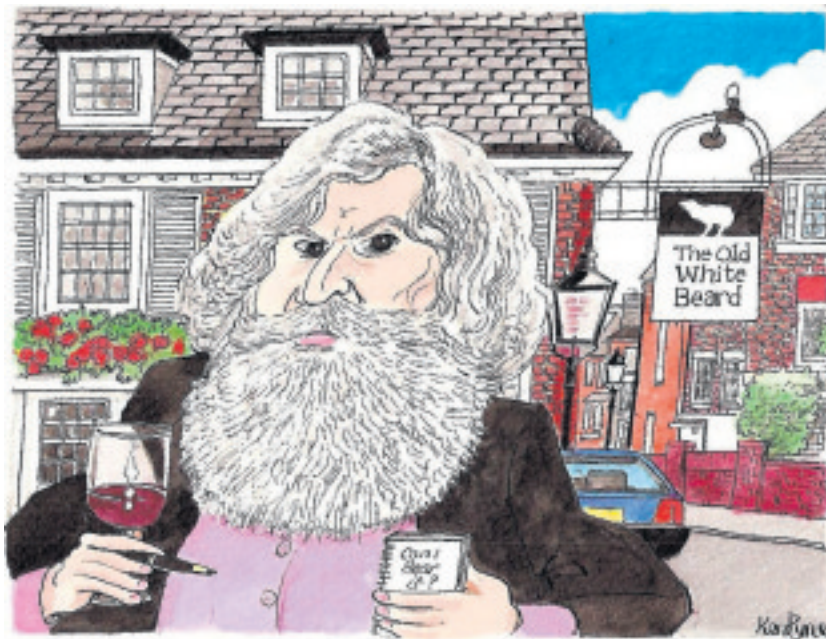


A Bear with a sore head

STREWED worst end of mutton, cabbage boiled to lank and reeking colourless exhaustion – and then, lying with malevolence just beneath the surface, a spirited undertone of Dettol. Though no, here is not a description of the dinner I had the other evening at The Old White Bear, but the pungent memory of an odour that assailed me on the journey down there. They say you can't remember smells or be wafted back in time by them unless they again are storming your nostrils, but that doesn't seem to be true for me – because as I walked past the ritzy refurbished block of luxury flats that once was the New End Hospital, I'd swear this wretched aroma was seeping through the very brickwork and snaking its way right into me.

Opposite is the newly reprieved Duke of Hamilton, until recently under threat of redevelopment into yet more bloody luxury flats: is there really no end to the supply of luxury people to inhabit these things? Anyway, I was having a drink there with Ham&High cartoonist Ken Pyne, who is something of a regular. It's a cosy and traditional pub, this – it makes not even a nod in the direction of the doom to which all other pubs appear to be hurtling, lemming-like. Ken's pint of London Pride was £2.50 – a pound less than at The Old White Bear just one minute away. I asked the barmaid what wines they had by the glass, and she told me they had two: red and white. Awful in one way, very refreshing in another. There is an outside space at the back that anywhere else would be rammed with hanging baskets, umbrellas and heaters – here it is a black and naked stretch of tarmac. There is no music, there are no machines. They don't serve food. Understandable why they never did in the past, of course – what with the hospital miasma before them, and right next door, on the site of the New End Theatre, a mortuary. An habitue was telling me that it's a happy and miserable pub in equal measure, and much appreciated by Hampstead's remaining grumpy old buggers who are given to occasional

Like many village pubs, Hampstead family favourite Ye Olde White Bear has had a modern update. But its dishes leave **Joseph Connolly** cold – not to mention the fireplace spot he finds himself stuck in



delirium. He further told me that prior to handing over his lease, the landlord of 22 years is celebrating in his own very special way by barring any loyal regulars he knows quite well.

We ambled along to The Old White Bear – until its recent revamp a great family favourite, according to Ken. “Packed on Sundays for the roasts, which were excellent. Everyone's idea of a great village pub. Not now, though. Inside it looks like all the others that have been destroyed”. In this he is correct: whereas the beautiful mellow brick exterior, covered in red geraniums, is truly a picture postcard in itself, the interior is all charcoal-olive walls, stripped pine hard and uncomfortable furniture, ugly energy-saving lightbulbs, tea lights ... and that's about it. The huge lantern outside (which remained unlit throughout the evening) still proclaims the place

to be Ye Olde White Bear, but a modern swing-sign alongside has its new and snappier monicker, The Old White Bear – with a silhouette image that is a dead ringer for the logo for Fox's Glacier Mints. And on the menus, the very talented designers have elected to portray the eponymous white bear as a black one, naturally. Ken then said excitedly “That's Sarah Palin behind the bar” – but I have to tell you that it was only someone who looked like her. Which is a real shame because I, the intrepid hack, am always on the lookout for a scoop.

We were shown to arguably the worst table in what is rather an odd set-up. The attractive bar, fronted by a floor of encaustic tiles in much-needed colours, bisects the restaurant – one half quite zippy and happening, the other as barren as a windswept plain with the alleviation only of a coffee-serving station, replete

with Gaggia, and the Disabled lavatory. Which of course is where we were seated. In the fireplace. A very small round table jammed under a mantelpiece and hard by a grate piled up with logs. “You're not going to light it, are you?” I quipped to the waiter. And he said “No”. Then he gave us menus and said “Fabulous!”.

There are, no doubt, attractive-sounding and unusual things here – I thought pea and mint risotto intriguing, but decided on the Italian Plate: parma ham, bresaola, salami, mortadella, parmesan and olives. When I ordered it, the waiter, seemingly triumphant, said “Fabulous!”. The meats were generally good, particularly the parma ham (of which there wasn't much) but I would suggest that nearly 20 olives is going it a bit – even more so when the whole is crammed on to the ubiquitous steak slab, which has them rolling

FACTFILE

- ❑ **THE OLD WHITE BEAR**
Well Road, NW3
Tel: 020-7794 7719
- ❑ Open Monday 5pm-11pm. Tuesday, Wednesday, Sunday noon-11pm. Thursday to Saturday noon-11.30pm
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Cost: About £90 for three-course meal for two with wine

all over the table. Ken wanted what was described as a smoked salmon fritatta – two small cornets of salmon rolled into a warmish cross between omelette and crepe, and swallowed in a jiffy with a shrug. Wine was a very decent Montepulciano (as he poured it, the waiter said “Fabulous!”) though it was a struggle to glug down the tap water because instead of glasses there were these spectacularly horrid miniature vases – thick pressed glass, with tangible seams to test the tongue. And talking of tongue – that's what Ken was eating as his main: salt ox tongue, by name, with beetroot broth and horseradish. “It's tender ...” he said. “Can't find any horseradish. Far too much of this beetroot water, though”. And yes – even when he'd finished, his bowl did look like a bloodbath. I had gone for Scottish rump of beef with green peppercorn, wholegrain mustard and tarragon butter with fondant potato. “I would like it pink ...” I said to the waiter. And he said “Fabulous!”. “Yes ...” I pursued. “Not red, you see – but pink. So medium, do you think? Or medium rare?” “Medium rare,” he decided. “Fabulous!”.

So it came, sliced as if it were Chateaubriand. Which it wasn't – tough as hell. And the mustard sauce was slathered all over it. Which is never wise. And do I have to tell you it was red ...? The

‘fondant’ was just like a boiled spud with a greasy coating: not at all good. And all the time the staff were giggling and seemingly delightedly criss-crossing the otherwise empty space – in and out of the Disabled lavatory, the Lord knows why, and all apparently having a whale of a time. But we weren't. Having one. A whale of a time. No, not us – not Ken and I, jammed into a bloody fireplace in the leper's half of the restaurant. “Everything okay, gents?” beamed the waiter. “Not really, no,” I said. “It's poor, actually.” He stood there – bonhomie frozen to his face, and blinking hard. On the plus side, he didn't say “Fabulous!”.

Among the puddings was a tempting watermelon and mint granita, but I frankly wondered whether the kitchen was up to it. Ken had pannacotta and strawberries – pannacotta bland, but okay, though he was very miffed to have only four strawberries. “I like strawberries ...” he said, quite mournfully. I had blackberry jelly with buttermilk muffin. Oh dear. The jelly was watery in flavour and quite unset – collapsed and was shivering wetly all over the plate (Ken likening it to a monster in Star Trek) – and the muffin more like suety bread. “This,” I said to the waiter, “should never have been served”. “Really?” he queried. “I'll tell chef”. And as is so often the case, chef evidently didn't give a bugger, as it appeared on the bill. Which was £90 for a deeply disappointing meal in a restaurant with presumption, but low on panache and delivery. You could though maybe book our table for 24th December – with your head stuck up the chimney and screaming wildly, you might get Santa to bring you down some food.

❑ *It Can't Go On (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Broaden your horizons with blended wines



IS A blend better than its individual parts? In wine, that's an unanswerable question. Think simply of the two most classic names on any wine buff's tongue: bordeaux and burgundy.

Red bordeaux is a mix of two, three or even four grape varieties, in proportions carefully chosen according to location and the style of wine each chateau seeks to make. Red burgundy is made exclusively from pinot noir, however different the terroir or grower's ambitions may be. The best of both are wonderful wines.

You can carry on the comparisons: the finest wines from the northern Rhone valley are usually from a single grape variety, while further south chateauf-neuf-du-pape can contain as many as 13. In Italy, Piedmont's best are usually single variety wines yet those of Chianti are traditionally blends, as are the newer Super Tuscan.

And champagne strikes a happy

compromise: some styles – such as pure chardonnay blanc de blancs – are from a single grape, others use a mix, with red-skinned varieties vinified to create a white final result.

But this musing has been prompted by a wine rather further down the price scale and from a country which, despite a distinguished history of wine-making, isn't in the same classic league as Europe's great names. De Grendel's grapes grow on cool sites in South Africa's Cape winelands and some of the best go into Winifred, the wine which owner Sir David Graeff names in tribute to his wife.

The blend for the 2009 vintage has changed slightly from the previous year's and I like it much more: almost half semillon, with lesser amounts of viognier and chardonnay. The result is fascinating and unexpected – had I been asked to taste it blind and identify the grapes, I would most likely have

missed them all.

That, though, is the mark of a successful blend, a wine which doesn't shout out its contents but makes its own individual statement. In this case, that starts with great aroma in the glass – there's something of the green asparagus character of sauvignon blanc and the apples of chenin blanc, but a lot more besides.

Start drinking, and it's still hard to describe – there are apricot edges from the viognier, plenty of fruit, a cleanly lingering acidity. Best not to heart-search too much over its complexity but simply enjoy it. I did and it won over a friend who usually prefers red to white. As an aperitif, it's excellent and it survived a tricky food challenge – kedgeree – with elegance. Oddbins sells it at £10.

The simplicity of choosing wine by grape variety is seductive. But blends can be unexpected and exciting and often do add extra

dimensions of scent and flavour.

Here are three more unusual and appealing examples which could help complete a 12-bottle case at Oddbins (20 percent discount on all these prices). White: 3 Amigos 2007 (£13), a complex, lingering Australian trio of Rhone-origin grapes marsanne and roussanne with chardonnay with a touch of classy

oak. Reds: Quinta das Setencostas 2007 (£8.50), which combines four traditional Portuguese grapes to perfumed, rich yet fresh effect; Domaine Cerbier Indiana 2007 (£10) linking fruit, herbs and spice from the classic southern French partners grenache, syrah and carignan.

LIZ SAGUES

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ If you rent out a property or run a business with staff, then it is recommended to have a PAT (Portable Appliance Test) carried out on an annual basis. On completion of this test, you will be given a certificate listing the appliances and each appliance will be given a pass or fail sticker. More often than not, if an appliance fails then it should be replaced. This annual test will give you peace of mind knowing that these appliances are safe for your tenant or staff to use.

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