

Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll

SOME people don't drink wine, you know. Now if you are anything like me, you will surely find this rather hard to believe, but I have it on authority that it's true. Somewhere, beyond my ken, tucked away into hinterlands unknown to me, there are lurking folk who will smugly prefer a nice good strong cup of tea any day of the week – or else they're into real ale, v.large G&Ts, vodka and Red Bull, technicolour cocktails, Charlie, crack, Ecstasy or Evo-Stik. Not me, though – wine remains my drug of choice: almost always red and usually from Italy or France (largely because I'm Old School and idle). Were I fabulously rich I could happily tiddle nothing but Chateau Latour (preferably the 1961), but as this is sadly not my situation, at home I tend to go for Montepulciano at about a fiver the bottle because for everyday quaffing I find that Italian delivers the goods – and also because Majestic Wine always carries a decent example (Grifone at the moment) and they deliver it free to your door, often within a couple of hours of ordering it. I really do think this the most magnificent company – I've been buying from them for decades. If only Majestic were running the country, we'd all be better off (and not solely as a result of being just too smashed on State subsidized booze to even know what day it was). They work with admirable efficiency, the range and prices are unrivalled, there are always great champagne offers (and good stuff too – not the supermarket junk specials) and all the staff are eager, polite and knowledgeable. I hereby declare for the record that Majestic did not pay me for the above. I hereby further declare for the record that obviously I think they ought to.

I used to deal with the Chalk Farm branch, but switched to the far smarter set-up in Loudoun Road NW8 on the day they opened because they were doling out bottles of buckshee Bollinger – but then I'll go anywhere if they're doling out bottles of buckshee Bollinger. There's a wonderful temperature-controlled walk-in fine wine section here,

For **Joseph Connolly**, there's nothing like Majestic Wine for wanton pleasure and stocking up on his drug of choice. Right next door is Café Med – where a former literary editor reveals a secret passion for Hendrix



Choice spot ... Joseph picks a table on the terrace.

which you are free to treat as if it is a porn site. Which it is, of course. The luscious deshabelle of a pouting torn-open case, velvet Pauillaacs winking at you – the teasing glimpse of Yquem tormenting you with the memory of so very sweet a kiss ... and then a big and beefy Barolo which could, quite frankly, put your back out. Yum yum. And next to this temple to oenophile indulgence is a handsome four-square white stucco restaurant which goes by the name of Café

Med. I have spotted it often, and never been. So I went.

The interior belies the rather 'Med' feel of the outside – all very brown and mustardy and dingy – so I went for a table on the terrace at the front. This was lovely – the traffic is not too bad round here, and you are cosily protected by a row of box balls in tall and glossy black pots and a huge red square umbrella. And bang on the dot of one, along came my old friend John Coldstream. John,

Although he retains a bolthole in NW8, he now is based in Chichester – but before that he and his wife lived in a flat right

FACTFILE

- ☐ **CAFÉ MED**
21 Loudoun Road NW8.
Tel: 020-7625 1222
- ☐ Open daily from noon-11pm.
- ☐ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ☐ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ☐ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (for the terrace, and probably the same for the inside in the winter)
- ☐ Cost: About £90 for a three-course meal for two with wine.

next to the Abbey Road Studios, directly overlooking the legendary zebra where excited tourists were constantly holding up the traffic. His bolthole is in the same block and overlooks the Studios' roof where, he says, a family of ducks is nesting. You see? You get out, you meet people – you learn things.

The menu, on a large clean card, covers all the bases: meat, fish, seafood, pasta, vegetarian, light, rich, cheap, not cheap. The prices are actually pretty decent, but an example of not cheap is an 8oz fillet steak at £23.95 – but the beef here is from Donald Russell, one of the suppliers to the Queen, and, the menu tells you, is not just award-winning, but matured for 31 days. So I went for the more modest 6oz fillet at £18.95 – rather curiously the same price as a 14oz T-bone: go figure. And while John was enjoying his starter of chargrilled calamari with sweet chilli jam ("It really is fresh," he said, "and very spicy in an excellent way"), I was indulging in a guilty pleasure: crayfish and avocado cocktail. This was really good – generous with the crayfish, and Marie Rose was gentle with me (she can be such an assertive bitch). The steak was a pleasingly plump little cushion, cooked medium rare precisely as requested, and a very fine piece of meat. As good was the Bearnaise – properly splotchy, and it didn't attempt to strangle me (as some will). John had homemade salmon fishcake with tzatziki (Greek cucumber yogurt with garlic) and he liked it a lot. "Enough salmon, crunchy coating – here is a happy fishcake". We shared a ridiculously large bowl of frites which, although crispy and very moreish, were totally devoid of any seasoning at all; a little ground pepper helped them along.

John was sticking with Prosecco, and I had a glass of Chianti. This was teeny-weeny, and £6.50. "So ..." I said, eking out my Tuscan thimble – "living in Abbey Road, eh? I expect

you're a great Beatles fan." Now I said he was a Dark Horse (official), didn't I? Here it comes, from this apparently most upright and conservative fellow: "Not really. I far preferred the Stones. The Who even more. But my real passion was always Jimi Hendrix". Well blow me down. And there's more: "Between 1975 and 1982 I was the Telegraph rock critic. I saw just everyone from Sinatra to Motorhead. The only ones I missed – and I bitterly regret it to this day – were the Sex Pistols." Well I've only just clambered to my feet – so blow me down again. "I saw Hendrix perform nine times. In one club he gave me his autograph in the loo. Very charming, he was. Then he went on stage and chewed up the guitar. Literally. One evening, I found myself in his dressing room in the Savile Theatre, which was owned by Brian Epstein. There was this girl painting a silver heart around Jimi's navel. And then someone came in to say that Brian Epstein had died. Strange day."

Dark Horse (official) or what? And so to pudding – and John adored his, a raspberry crème brulee. "The best I ever had was in The Grange thirty years ago; this is better. Perfect". My vanilla scoop was so very teeth-jarringly cold, though, it could have been any flavour at all, and the 'hot chocolate sauce' was, alas, as cold as the ice cream. All in all, though – a damned good lunch. John and I parted on the doorstep – he (having received telepathically an impassioned plea for assistance) in pressing need of a telephone box ... and I to mooch around Majestic. Because I'd just worked out that for ten times the cost of my titchy glass of Chianti, here I could buy a whole case. So I did.

☐ **JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY** (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is the latest novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

barrels that nurture the world's best wines

mature tannins to the wine which will go into them.

Back inside the factory, the cutting and shaping process to produce the staves – 30 to 32 per barrel – is carried out to 1mm precision by modern, computer-controlled machinery, which seems wildly at odds with the primeval atmosphere around it. Incongruous, too, but necessary, is the vacuuming system to remove sawdust and the testing for the presence of TCA and TBA – compounds which can infect wood as well as corks and ruin wine. Such problems are rare in new wood, says Juhel, but the checks are essential for buyers' confidence and the modern culture of traceability.

But most of what goes on is manual and traditional. It remains the cooper's skill to bend the damp staves over a burner to the

appropriate curve, to set them in their circle, to hammer down the metal rings which hold them in place, to toast the interior – more flames – to the level required by individual winemakers. Between stages, the barrels-in-the-making wait in regimented rows, like an underworld army of Daleks.

The hole for the tap is cut and cauterised by laser beam, the lid fitted and sealed with a putty of flour, sawdust and water (the flour is soon to be banished in favour of clay, for fear of gluten reaching wine).

Many of the barrels are finished with hoops of chestnut, a burgundian tradition which avoids damage to the earth floors of cellars when barrels are rolled around. But others are plainer, to suit some export markets – and with just over 80 per cent of François Frères' 160-barrels-

a-day production sold outside France, at around 600 euros each, the company is a valuable contributor to the national as well as local economy.

The biggest contrast of old and new comes at the very end, when the finished barrels are ranged high, ready to leave the factory, each individually swathed in layer upon layer of shrink-wrap film. But after all that work, the protection is surely sensible.

Out of respect to Gregory Juhel and his 50 perspiring colleagues, I'd love to recommend wines matured in François Frères barrels. That's impossible, however, as I've yet to see a wine label which names a barrel maker. So just appreciate the devilish skill and effort behind any wine which spends part of its life in a proper, traditionally-made barrel.



Skill ... coopers at work, left, and, above, the François Frères logo.