

'ZULUS to the South East. Thousands of them ...!" So, in the 1964 film, says Lieutenant

Bromhead, as enthusiastically played by a blond and youthful Michael Caine employing a highly improbable upper class accent which – unlike his guard – rather tends to slip. I thought it wise, you know, when faced with the task of reviewing a supposedly Zulu restaurant to get the inevitable references to this iconic film safely out of the way at the very beginning. Otherwise it would be looming, wouldn't it? Forever it would be hovering at the back of your mind: half remembered flickers – black skin and red coat, not to say a drunken Jack Hawkins. I could be chatting away about rump of reebok, say, and you would only be wondering how long it could be before I hit you with allusions to Captain Chard, who went there to build a bridge – and any such procrastination on my part could only ever achieve distraction from the heart of the matter. So I think that here at the very outset is the time to mention that in a film just so jam packed with quotable quotes, my absolute favourite is spoken by the excellent Nigel Green's Colour Sergeant Bourne. He is addressing a frightened young soldier from the Welsh Valleys who, during a brief respite, is slumped behind sandbags in 100 degree heat while he and his ever diminishing band of exhausted comrades are dreading the next quite terrifying Zulu onslaught. "Do your collar up, lad," he says to him quietly. "Where do you think you are...?" Anyway – it's done now. The film has been dealt with: all tucked up for the night. From this moment on I intend to charge into the review with all guns blazing. As Stanley Baker's Captain Chard very memorably has it: "Front rank – fire! Rear rank – fire! Reload ...!"

Right: Stables Market. You can have a high old time here – and you don't even have to buy drugs! It's all very jolly, actually, with its cobbled walkways, coloured awnings and – in tune with all the Stables thing – more lifesize bronzeish horses than I could believe. The shoplets seem to be largely devoted to vintage clothes that appear brand new and brand new clothes very carefully designed to look and feel decrepit. Young people today, eh? Crazy

The call of the wild

Joseph Connolly and a companion head out on safari – to Gilgamesh's new sister restaurant Shaka Zulu. But they find that the novelty of the decor can't make up for the underwhelming game menu



mixed-up kids – what are you going to do? There are also loads of fast food stalls purveying the more obvious elements of just about every cuisine in the world, one or two of which were very tempting indeed. But my chum Max and I were men with a mission: set upon penetrating the Zulu heartland armed only with a pioneer's zeal, appetite and (most essentially, as things turned out) a well-stuffed wallet.

To find Shaka Zulu, you first must fetch up at the corner which houses its sister restaurant, Gilgamesh. I reviewed this Babylonian Xanadu way back in January, and I'm only just getting over it. Shaka Zulu takes up the two (count 'em) vast subterranean cavities beneath it. You descend via a surprisingly modest escalator at a surprisingly modest entrance flagged up by a happy man in dreadlocks – probably not a Zulu, but nonetheless banging very dementedly on a set of

bongos. "How long are you going to be doing this?" I asked him. "Two more hours" he replied – and his grin didn't even falter. So: modest entrance, modest escalator. From this moment on, prepare to see all trace of modesty trampled underfoot by a herd of thundering wildebeest. The domed roof of the escalator alone is a miracle of dark and detailed African carving. You emerge into a simply massive and sprawling underground space where every surface is dense with more carving and applique – uplit in colours, downlit in colours and a long and sinewy bar winking at you a rainbow welcome from about fourteen miles in the distance. A delightful bevy of beautiful women awaits you. These are not carvings – these are the real thing. Not Zulus, but Slavs, Balts, Poles, Bulgars and Hungarians – all of them stunningly lovely and so very accommodating and utterly

eager to please that you wonder for a second whether you're in the right place.

And then down another escalator into the restaurant proper – and here you will have your mind turned into a fricassee from the blow between your eyes. Lifesized elephant heads protrude from the walls, their tusks in glowing pink. Zulu warriors twelve feet tall, armed with spears and not at all grinning like Bongo Jim on the door. Low ceiling and thickest columns alive with granite inlaid mosaic and another raft of carvings. Dear Lord – for once, the word 'awesome' is in order. You are deep deep down in a red and shadowy cavernous chamber. Under you there is but the seething of Beelzebub's Inferno – and yet further below, only a place that is, according to some, even more hellish than that: Australia.

The charming and very able Caroline talked us through the

FACTFILE

- **SHAKA ZULU**
- Stables Market, Camden, NW1
- Tel: 020-3376 9911
- Open every day 5pm-2am
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: There are deals often available online ... but otherwise about £150 for three-course meal for two with wine.

menu. We could have had (at £70 for two) the Shaka Zulu Game Board – but Max said this sounded like *Rorke's Drift Monopoly* – and I agreed that it might prove to be something of a Boer. So as a starter he went for springbok, kudu and ostrich terrine (the only reeboks seemed to be on people's feet) and I had shaved biltong with masai, mara, pepper, pecan, cumin and garlic chilli. And 'elephant foot bread' – not an umbrella stand, as it turned out, but just a lump of bread. The terrine did look pretty – multi coloured glued-together tessera not unlike the surface of the enormous circular inlaid table before us. But it was very cold and jellied and Max just shrugged. My biltong was dry yet fatty and, I remarked, a bit like eating shreds of belt. "Ah," said Max "but is it good belt ...?" I chewed and pondered: no it ain't.

The meats are sourced in Africa, it says. It also says that the beef is from the Sandringham Estate, so there you go. I asked Caroline if the ostrich rump was any good. "Oh yes," she enthused. "It's very tasty." So I had that, with roasted beetroot and shallots, and she was right: it was very tasty indeed. In truth, the only element of the meal that was. Here was a tender, lean and juicy combination of venison and beef, with even an undertone of lamb – I just

couldn't accept that it was bird (but I expect that's just me with my head in the sand). Max had kudu fillet. Kudu is a big antelope, and also the most curious meat I have ever eaten. It looked like a generous veal fillet mignon – but after the first rather floral flavour, both the taste and texture literally dissolved: it went to a milky foam, and then nothingness. He left half of it (and he never leaves meat) because "there's just no point". And the accompanying green stuff, msamba? "Reminds me of wet pipe tobacco". We shared a few bits of cheese (too cold, too mean, and £12.50). By way of relief, suddenly Bongo Jim was by our side, and juggling Panama hats. Later on he was opening umbrellas with bowls of something on the top of them. And then he did bird calls. A diversion from the food, then – as was the zebra-clad Gents, like something out of *Graceland*, flanked by a rudely naked Zulu. Not real. I think. Didn't touch, or anything. You don't like to.

This place took years and millions to create. All the staff are immensely friendly and polite – and there are so many of them, it's bewildering. All of which is reflected in the prices: my bill, with one £34 bottle of Stellenbosch wine, was £142. And on Friday night at midnight, the gigantic bar was empty. In Soho – or even elsewhere in Camden – it would have been rammed. I suspect that in the three or so months since the place opened, people have come here for the novelty, for the spectacle. But what is there to induce them to return? Because, in common with every other restaurant, what Shaka Zulu desperately needs is regular punters. From the North West. Thousands of them ...!

□ *IT CAN'T GO ON (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly about how life is like a pinball machine, if you think about it. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Wise words on the search for star Bordeaux

EVER since I had the privilege – and I count it as one of the most special moments in my wine-writing career – to taste at Chateau Margaux under the guidance of winemaker Paul Pontallier I've loved 2004 Bordeaux. Not all examples, for the vintage is overshadowed by some of the stunners that have succeeded it and not every grower handled it well, but the best wines are lovely, and the efforts of Pontallier's team were particularly successful.

But there are other, more accessibly-priced delights from 2004 – think single or low-double-figure prices rather than the £270-plus of Chateau Margaux. I came across one in a small town wine merchant in northern France recently, costing barely £6, and the pleasure wasn't merely a happy holiday effect. I finished the bottle back

at home, comparing it with a 2006 rival you can buy here at roughly the same price (once duty and exchange rate have been discounted). The 2004 won by many lengths.

That's a silly over-simplification, though, for a region which offers so many very different wines. Vintages do matter, but grower and style are more important – as is your own personal taste, and whether you want a fresh, youthfully-fruity glassful or something savoury with age.

With Bordeaux such a classic Christmas wine, understandably all the stores are currently awash with it, so here's a personal guided tour.

Majestic has one of the bargains of the season, in

Chateau Lachsnaye Haut-Medoc 2002, just £7 if you buy at least two (total purchase six bottles minimum), still fresh, great fruit, gentle tannins – just the right balance. If you want to push the boat out,

Pauillac de Pauillac 2005 (£20, two-plus) and Chateau la Croix de Gay 2002 Pomerol (£30) are lovely.

Was it the vintage, or the wine? But easily my favourite at Oddbins was Chateau Belle Vue 2004 (£20, £16 in a mixed dozen

case), at its peak now.

Among those supermarket offerings I've tasted, Sainsbury's 50 top stores have some interesting older wines – I liked Chateau Lilian Ladouys 2000 St Estephe (£20), with leathery maturity but decent fruit still. For my Waitrose favourite, Chateau

a sound range, with excellent value at the bottom end: a very drinkable ripe-fruited 2009, Chateau Gressina (£7.50), which is widely available.

But for classic wines it does make sense to go to specialists. The Wine Society has some excellent new clarets for Christmas, and again it's a 2004 which tops my list, La Parde de Haut Bailly Pessac-Leognan (£20), stylish with great depth of fruit now maturing elegantly. But up with it is Chateau Belgaud 2000 Haut-Medoc (£32.50), a true treat. And as

a budget buy, Chateau Bourjaud 2007 Premieres Cotes de Blaye (£6.25) is exceptionally good,

with character way above its price.

There's surely no more atmospheric place to drink fine Bordeaux than in Berry Bros & Rudd's historic cellars in St James's, but the wines will sit just as comfortably on a 21st century dinner table – especially the new Berrys' Pauillac 2008 (£18.35), deep and dense but elegant – excellent value – and Chateau Talbot 2004 St Julien, big and very, very beautiful, complex and endlessly lingering. Though it's a much more muscular wine, it could almost displace Chateau Margaux 2004 from the top of my Christmas wish list.

Even so, I suspect most of my own seasonal choices won't be Bordeaux. Read on over the next three weeks and be prepared for some surprises.

LIZ SAGUES

