

HAVE you ever witnessed a chariot race at full and furious tilt in a genuine Roman amphitheatre on the very tip of Sicily, as the scarlet and kingfisher sunset is scented by not just flowers but the spit-roasting of boars, and the air so warm from the breath of Africa? I have. Just one of the wackily memorable experiences that befall a journo who spends his time forever scribbling 'lifestyle' features, as I used to for The Times. This particular no-expense-spared jolly to Sicily was in aid of the launch of a plastic watch, though what the connection with all of the Ben Hur folderol is now quite lost to me; Jesus, it was lost to me even at the time, this very largely due to gallons of the wonderful local Nero d'Avola wine. The most striking element of the evening, however, came as an unscripted moment. All we hacks were merrily eating, drinking and falling over, as is our wont, when all around the beautiful garden strung with coloured lanterns there rippled a palpable frisson. Two men were approaching a vacant table – they ambled in a lordly way, and despite the heat of the night, each very comically had a camel cashmere coat loosely draped about their shoulders. Three steps behind them were four women. The sort of women who make the spoon slip away from your boneless fingers and clatter unheeded to the ground. The sort of women who, should you glimpse them mid-drink, make you miss your mouth completely. The sort of women who, as they move, make audible the raspberry saxophone and throb of drums, to which they are swaying in lazy time. And suddenly, the PR who had organised the trip seemed deeply steeped in one hell of a lather. She rushed up to our table and babbled at us breathlessly. "You see those women with the men?" We nodded, glassily. "Well pretend you don't. Don't dare look. Don't even peek. Okay?" Now this was hard, but we soon saw the point. It transpired that this whole event would not have taken place, but for the blessing of these two men. Nothing in Sicily, I later learned, ever happened without the nod from the due signori. And if you openly admired their women, they would smile, with warmth. Lightly touch your cheek, conceivably. Maybe even kiss your forehead, with open affection. And that, my friend, would be the end of you.

I went to a Sicilian restaurant in Delancey Street in Camden Town the other day, and it wasn't like that at all. Caponata is on the greatly expanded site of the Café Delancey – much mourned locally when it packed up about a year ago, in the way that third-rate old habits always tend to be. I always thought it was pretty useless – but Caponata isn't. Caponata is actually rather wonderful – and now I'm going to tell you why: firstly, the look of it. You walk past an unattractive Lebanese restaurant

Married to this mob

Joseph Connolly has fallen in love with Caponata, a Sicilian restaurant where Cafe Delancey used to stand. Cool and groovy, the dishes are divine – but he's not going to risk a look at any boss's wife



(perversely called le Mignon) and then a very unlovely Greek place and then the positively threatening Camden Snooker Club – it is covered in what looks like a thickish coating of chlorophyll mucus, for all the world as if the entire massive edifice has been newly raised from the sea bed after a century down there (maybe off the coast of Sicily, where it had been sleeping with the fishes). And then there is the sleekly modern façade of Caponata – charcoal brick offset by chic red awnings, and the enticing wink of orange-lined pendant lights within.

My wife and I went upstairs to the Ristorante where, from amid the gloom, a bewildered Latin told us that it wasn't the weekend, which I already knew. It turns out that on weekdays, you go to the ground floor Osteria – and very cool and groovy it is too. Smart white tables, the designer plastic chairs mostly in putty, though with a smattering of olive drab and plum. Then there is a soaring glass-roofed atrium sporting a spectacular thirty foot vertical garden – a really fresh and exciting waterfall of ivy and fern, the watering of which plays merry hell with

FACTFILE

- ☐ **CAPONATA**
- 3-7 Delancey Street, NW1
- Tel: 020-7387 5959
- ☐ Open Monday to Saturday 9am-3pm, 6pm-10pm. Sunday 9am-10pm.
- ☐ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ☐ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ☐ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ☐ Cost: Set two-course lunch £14. Otherwise, about £80 for a three-course lunch or dinner for two, with wine.

the door to the lavatories: it looks as if it has come down with something nasty – blotchy and distended due to leakage, and requiring the might of Samson to heave open. The music is moody jazz and swing – a gentle reminder that beyond the atrium lies The Forge: another great space, sealed off in the daytime ... but by night! All sorts of live musical entertainment, not shy of good stuff, such as classical quartets.

There is a set two course lunch at just £14, but on that day it seemed, rather in the manner of Falstaff, to be mostly belly and cheeks – and so we browsed the carte. Which is neat, and very well planned. I had Sicilian prosciutto, pea shoots and roasted figs with a citrus dressing. Perfect. A great Mediterranean starter, redolent of sunshine – top class produce, and generous. My wife had duck breast – smoked on the premises with Earl Grey tea. Our lovely waitress (I asked her where she came from and I thought she said Holland but in fact she said Poland) told us she loved the smell of the smoking, although it played all sorts of havoc with her hair. The duck – sweetly fanned out on a circular frosted glass plate – was very good, the heavy smokiness well offset by caramelised red grapes and a daring, though successful, raspberry dressing. My wife followed this with roasted aubergine, basil and red onion ravioli in a pecorino romano cream. The nod to aubergine was nice

– Caponata is the name of a Sicilian aubergine sort of stew. The six ravioli came on a rectangular dish which fitted them perfectly – and God, she really did savour them, and sighed quite a good deal. This home-made pasta had true bite – as did my half dozen of lobster and scallop tortelloni in a crab and basil bisque. At £17, this was the most expensive item on the menu – and listen: you've just got to have it. It was quite literally sensational: plump al dente puckered little cushions (not unlike, it bizarrely occurred to me, Sam Cam's Nancy bag for Smythson) packed with flavoursome lobster (the scallop a wee bit lost) in a bisque that you leave not a drop of. Pretty much faultless, and still I dream of it.

And what to drink but a Sicilian Nero d'Avola? Plumbago, it was called, after the flowers that grow at the vineyard. It was fragrant with violet, and intense: I adored it. Crumbs – this is really good, isn't it? Any more to come? God yes – pudding. Actually no ... I'm far too full for pudding. I simply couldn't manage any more. It would only be piggish. So I'll just content myself with just the 'trio of chocolate': a dark, perfectly formed cone filled with a sublime and creamy cassata mousse. Then a passion fruit semifreddo (also semi successful – just a little bit claggy) culminating in the chocolate fondant of your gooiest dreams: giving without, warm and obscene within. So I just had that, and no more.

My wife was so enjoying the music – exactly her thing. "Oh I love this one!" she was suddenly enthusing. "I've got this by Blossom Dearie". Nice to see her so involved – and involved too with her tiramisù with 'George's coffee'. Who George? Well he's just next door in an enchantingly unbuggered up old merchants called Camden Coffee Shop: excellent beans spilling out of great jute sacks at not much more than half the price of anything comparable in Hampstead. So ... a great meal, in a great place. On the way out, a dark and broody fellow sauntered in. Three steps behind him was a woman. Couldn't tell you anything about her. Didn't dare look. Didn't even peek. Okay?

☐ *Joseph Connolly's WINTER BREAKS (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is the sequel to the novel SUMMER THINGS. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

2008 stunners from southern French growers

SOMETIMES, there's a wine which shines out at a tasting, and that has happened several times recently – with bottles which could put smiles on many faces over the festive season. The three I particularly want to share come from vineyards a mere 30 kilometres apart as the eagle flies over the herb-scented hills of central Languedoc.

Two are from Jean Oriac at Domaine de l'Hortus in Pic St-Loup – an appellation whose wines have improved hugely over recent years and are often now among Languedoc's best. But I found them in very different surroundings.

The first, Dolines de l'Hortus (£9.50), was in Laitwhaites' line-up shown at the panoramic top of Millbank Tower, overall

a mixed selection but with some very good wines. The second, Bergerie de l'Hortus Rouge (£12), was poured deep in the cellars of Berry Bros & Rudd, where it was in very distinguished company. Stock may be short, but BBR has several other fine l'Hortus wines.

Number three was from another rising star Languedoc sub-region – Montpeyrour. La Pimpanela, Domaine la Jasse Castel (£9.75) is one of The Wine Society's new winter wines, showcased in the functional setting of RIBA's headquarters.

All three are 2008 vintage, a year somewhat overshadowed by 2007 and 2009, but one where good southern French growers made stunning wines. All contain a lot of syrah, which gives them



a particularly haunting perfume and silky fruitiness which sits alongside a herby and slightly

rustic (in the most flattering way) character so gorgeously evoking the place where the grapes grow. There's grenache, too, and, varying from wine to wine, a touch of carignan, cinsault and mourvedre.

But while this trio is special, there's plenty more pleasure from their suppliers. Try these to fill a case (though you can buy in any quantity at Laitwhaites at Vinopolis, London Bridge, and from BBR, St James's).

Laitwhaites: very moreish touch on modern white rioja, Altos de la Guardia 2009 (£10); unusual but very Italian cherry-edged blend, Xamperino Lazio IGT 2008 (£8); bargain light yet serious Spanish red, Pico de Aneto tempranillo paraleta 2009, Comontano (£7); posh white burgundy treat, Maison

Roche de Bellene Premier Cru Les Referts 2008, Puligny-Montrachet (£38).

BBR: alternative Pic St-Loup, great ripe fruit and excellent value, Chateau de Lancyre Coste d'Aleyrac 2008 (£10); immensely stylish Roussillon white, La Deveze Vieilles Vignes 2007 (£18); fine chianti classico, long and delicious, Badia e Colibuono 2008 (£13.50); sublime, fascinating top valpolicella, Monte de Ragni Classico Superiore 2006 (£39).

The Wine Society: meadow-flower scented and wonderfully characterful Kiwi white, Millton Te Arai Vineyard chenin blanc 2007 (£13); superb Cotes du Rhone, extraordinary value for money, Brezeme Chateau de la Roliere 2007 (£9); another bargain, oozing Italian style,

Biferno Rosso Riserva, Camillo de Lellis (£7.25); Californian pinot noir that sings discreet quality, Joseph Swann Cuvee de Trois 2007 (£25).

Before I stop, here's another star, from a new web merchant with a sense of humour but also a very sound buying policy. Customers at Findwine.co.uk simply choose style and price bracket, to be offered "brilliant, delicious and interesting wines you may never have considered before". The wines I've tried have matched that claim, especially Conan The Barbera 2007 (£14), splendidly rich and sophisticated while bursting with fruit. And there's a great white bargain, the very stylish Monte Schiavo verdicchio 2009 (£5).

LIZ SAGUES