

**J**ESUS. Which is the name of a college at Cambridge University, as well you know. The porter there is terribly pleased now that Christmas is long behind us, because at that festive time the phone just never stops jingling. "Is that Jesus?" the caller enquires. "Yes ..." sighs the porter – and then he holds the receiver well away from his ear so as not to be deafened by the joyously bawled-out rejoinder: "Well Happy Birthday ...!". I know all this because although I am not myself an alumnus of this very august and ancient college, my chum Pluto is, and recently he invited me to a top table dinner there (and that's when I got chatting to said porter). Pluto – short for plutocrat, in that he is a highly discerning gentleman who seems to own most things one can think of, including, as far as I can gather, Sussex – has graced this page before as a lunching companion, and a meal in his company is always an entertaining event. So I said yes please to the invitation – not least because it must be 30 years since I'd been to Cambridge, and I was eager to see if it had changed. The good news is that it hasn't: the pedestrian still paramount, everything human in scale, a very good mix of proper shops and eating places, and all so perfectly punctuated by the honey and ochre splendour of the colleges.

The dinner on top table in the superb hammerbeam vaulted hall – before the gowned undergraduates and amid the gowned dons – was fine, memorable, and involved quite serious claret. And perfectly piggishly, the following day we went to the city's two-Michelin-starred Midsummer House restaurant for a touch of lunch. This is a place I very much recommend – a pleasingly old-fashioned and actually quite Pooterish little villa on the edge of a green peopled by the smart and self-conscious waiters common to every Michelin-rated joint, and serving very fine food indeed. The set lunch is extremely good value too: £35 for three courses, this to include five (count 'em) freebie teasers, the culmination of which were perfectly warm and molten madeleines, cosy in a napkin. So after such grand and typical largesse on the part of Pluto, the least I could do was to take him to lunch in London, no? So I did: we went to Marylebone – long now a foodie haven. The High Street, actually, does rather put me in mind of Cambridge – the same rather brilliant balance of

# Marylebone earns a masters in fine dining

After a top table dinner at Cambridge with an alumni chum, the London enclave turns out to be the ideal place to return the favour – with its balance of shops and restaurants emulating the university city's air



Graduating with honours ... Joseph at Café Luc in Marylebone High Street.

shops and so on (this a deliberate policy of the de Walden estate which owns it) and lots of good places to eat. If only Hampstead High Street were anything like its Marylebone counterpart, then Hampstead people would never have to venture farther for groceries and restaurants, not to say style and other essentials: as it is – well we do, don't we?

Café Luc, at the Conran Shop end of the street, is – to quote from its own puffery "A stylish and vibrant European Grand Café. The classic brasserie menu references French and mediterranean dishes, drawing on seasonal and local produce". And do you know what? All of that is perfectly true. In common with most of the premises on the High Street, it is disproportionately deep when compared to its frontage (which, if you are a restaurant, is a good thing). One

is amiably greeted alongside an attractive bar hung with hundreds of amber glass globules (I know not why). They have a proper ticketed cloakroom – by no means always the case with a brasserie; more often than not you are invited to sling your coat and hat on to a bentwood stand, that being the last you ever see of either thing. The loos are a surprise though, for so large a restaurant. The Gents (Kitchener moustache on door) becomes rammed with just two people in it, and I can't imagine that the Ladies (Marilyn lips on door) is much different.

Eau de nil walls, black tables and very stylish chocolate leather banquettes make for a civilised and gently racy atmosphere which actually dovetails quite ideally with the menu. There is an extraordinary bargain going in the set lunch: £15.50 for three courses, one of the mains on

offer being steak. Elsewhere are all sorts of things that you truly want to eat: moules marinière, partridge, boeuf bourguignon (I bet that's quite something – very nearly ordered it) and a cheeseburger, of which – from regulars – I have heard very good things. I eventually went for supreme of black leg chicken in champagne with wild mushrooms, bacon and papardelle: this, I have to say, looked absolutely gorgeous and tasted quite as good as it sounds: flavourful chicken (though the champagne you really have to take on trust), thick al dente papardelle – a sort of broad tagliatelle – and the mushrooms really coming through in a creamy sauce studded with sweet and weeny onions. I preceded that with a beautiful cylindrical tian of Cornish crab set on wafer slices of radish, topped by half a quail egg and a blotchlet of

## FACTFILE

### CAFÉ LUC

50 Marylebone High Street, W1  
Tel: 020-7258 9878  
Open Monday to Friday noon-11.30pm. Saturday to Sunday 9am-11.30pm  
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆  
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆  
The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆  
Cost: Bargain set lunch £15.50 for three courses. Otherwise about £85 for three courses for two, with wine.

sort-of caviar, the plate smeared red and green with tomato and avocado. There might have been more white meat in relation to the brown, but the flavour was good; would have been even better if not so thoroughly chilled – an eternal problem with pre-prepared starters, these days. Same story with Pluto's terrine of jambon persille and mushrooms a la greque with a grain mustard dressing. This was part of the set lunch, and he really enjoyed it – apart from that overall chilliness. He had ordered to follow a fillet of gurnard with potato and leek in a shellfish stock – though gurnard, it transpired, was off that day and replaced by halibut: no bad thing. He liked this very much. I know because I finally got him to tell me. Pluto, you see – although he dines out every day – never talks about food. If it's anywhere between acceptable and mind-blowing, he pronounces it 'good'. "Give me more than 'good', Pluto!" I exhorted him. "Come on! Let it rip!". He thought for a moment. "A nice slab of halibut, only slightly overcooked. Halibut really has no flavour, but this is delicate and fine, the sauce not overwhelming". You see? He can do it if he tries.

We glugged a decent Cote du Rhone 'Les Abeilles' 2009 as he told me about Glynedebourne. Wine, by the way – served in elegant Georgian-style goblets – can be pricey: there is a bottle of £18.50, it's true, though most are comfortably over £30 (ours snuck in just under the bar, at £29.50). Anyway: Glynedebourne. He is a friend, or a member, or whatever term the inveterate recidivists go by, and each year you have to fill in your application for the coming summer. "I'm attending a good few things," he said, "though not Meistersinger, I fancy. Kicks off at 2.35 ... winds up seven hours and ten minutes later". Jesus.

I couldn't go a pudding, but Pluto – still pursuing the three course set lunch – went for a bitter chocolate mousse. As he spooned it up, I looked at him, eyebrow raised. "Good," he said. I continued to look at him, eyebrow raised. Pluto sighed, and took a run at the thing: "It's bitterish, but not bitter enough. The coulis ... and these pieces of fruit around it ... are very pleasant. Might be apricot. Could be orange – too cold to tell, really". Particularly good espresso came in those very nice and chunky Apico cups – black with a gold rim – while the rough hewn chips of sugar were presented in a shapely footed silver bowl. They're very good on food, and they're very good on detail: the bill arrives with a card attached by means of a paper clip fashioned in the form of their house-style capital L: very nice. I like the place a lot. And what does Pluto think ...? "Good", he said. "And," he added quite firmly, "that's all you're getting. I just eat. I leave all the arty stuff to you". Jesus.

Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY* (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## of fruit from the wines of Burgundy

and Wine of Burgundy – both alongside running the eponymous family domaine, whose history stretches back to the mid-17th century.

First stops, not surprisingly, were with women growers. Sophie Cinière's Macon-Fuisse and Pouilly Fuisse Cuvee Classique, both from the excellent 2009 vintage, were ripe and concentrated yet also subtle. Two cuvees of Bougogne Vezelay, again 2009, from Sophie Willez at Domaine La Croix Montjoie demonstrated perfectly Anne's argument that Burgundy is about pleasure within the diversity.

Continuing, Chantal Michel Tortochot's Gevrey-Chambertin premier cru Lavaut Saint Jacques

2007, a step up the classification level, had wonderful freshness and purity of fruit, and there was attractive richness in the Beaune premier cru les Montrevenots 2009 from Christine Gruere Dubreuil, of Domaine Dubreuil Fontaine.

Sadly, the wines of both Sophies and Christine are not yet available here – though they might be soon, for they must have impressed buyers attending the tasting. But Chantal's are, the Lavaut Saint Jacques £30 a bottle at [www.waterloowine.co.uk](http://www.waterloowine.co.uk).

The future of Burgundy is with the young, said Anne – proving it very convincingly with a boys-only experience: Bacheys-Legros, where the Legros brothers Lénia and Samuel

poured splendid wines, especially several from Santenay with concentrated depth, supple fruit and excellent balance (lots of stockists – enter Bacheys-Legros on [www.wine-searcher.com](http://www.wine-searcher.com)). But mother Christiane remains chief winemaker.

The Billingsgate day marked the end of the main jamboree of burgundy tastings, dedicated to the new release vintage, which fill trade diaries each January. The choice is overwhelming, but one I always enjoy is Louis Jadot's – the wines are great, span a huge range of appellations and allow the diversity to shine through within a single house style. The biggest choice is from a small importer in deepest Dorset, Will Grafton

([www.wills-burgundy.com](http://www.wills-burgundy.com)), but Jadot has an impressive presence on the high street and on the web.

Of the 2009s, stars for me included (whites) Pernand-Vergelesses Clos de la Croix de Pierre, Meursault les Gouttes d'Or and Puligny-Montrachet Les Referts, and (reds) Beaune Boucherottes, Volnay Clos des Chenes and Nuits-Saint-Georges Les Boudots. If you find currently available vintages of these, buy and enjoy. The various 2009 beaujolais, from Chateau des Jacques (Clos du Grand Carquelin Moulin-a-Vent especially, are also delicious, a lot cheaper and should be available either now or very soon.



Expert ... Anne Parent on the Billingsgate Burgundy tour.