

Sardinian spot is all at sea

I DON'T want to go to Sardinia, and for a grossly stupid reason: when a child, I simply loathed sardines. Cold and slimy – what was there to like? Well I'll tell you what there was to like, actually: opening the tin with the key. I say 'opening', though I never actually quite got that far. My mother would say "Here – give it to me. You messed it up last time. You always mess it up". "No no – I can do it! I'll do it! Let me do it!". So I slip the slot in the key over the flange gizmo, start to twist, and all initially goes well – the horrible fishy pong telling me I have broken the back of the thing. At that point, invariably, things – most notably the key – took a turn for the worse. Either the lid would start peeling away at a jagged and terrible angle, or else the little tin tongue would ping right off and I'd simply be too exhausted by the sheer effort involved and always the oil would be all over my hands and dripping out on to the floor and my mother would snatch it from me and get the oil all over her hands and dripping out on to the floor and then she set to plucking out the broken bits of beastly little fish with a pair of tweezers. Yes well – that's why I don't want to go to Sardinia.

And never mind the fact that these days most of the world's sardines – pilchards, actually – largely hail from Morocco. And the Balkans, India, Portugal, Spain, Turkey – even Cornwall.

But I had heard that in Gloucester Avenue, in that calm if ghostly oasis that is sort of Primrose Hill and sort of not, there lurked Sardo Canale, a Sardinian restaurant worth the journey: it's not surrounded by water, as is Sardinia proper, but by way of making amends, it has a canal down the side. Sounds prime, I thought – so my wife and I beelined off there for dinner. The Engineer is a famous pub, where I've never been, and I must say it did look very fine and welcoming on its handsome corner site – warmly lit and inviting. Sardo Canale didn't. It's more or less opposite, and the name of the place is painted in black on a concrete wall beneath a rather vile block of presumably flats, the whole thing resembling a small car park – this feeling appreciably accentuated by the fact that you approach the entrance down a cemented and dimly-lit ramp that could easily be leading

Looking for a taste of the Mediterranean island, **Joseph Connolly** dives into Sardo Canale in Primrose Hill. But the restaurant's dark depths are distinctly uninviting and some of the dishes are drowned in salt



In the spotlight ... Joseph in the semi-basement room at Sardo Canale.

you into the bowels of Hades. But the welcome is cheering from a friendly manager and staff (I said I had booked, gave my name, and they called me Mr Canale. They also said I looked like Giuseppe Verdi, which makes a bit of a change from Karl Marx). We were shown to a table in a small square semi-basement room – slate floor, exposed brick walls, no pictures, lots of busy spotlights and what is meant to be a view over a tiny terrace sporting an ancient olive tree, but because of said busy spotlights one sees only one's own rather bewildered face reflected starkly in a very large sheet of cold black plate glass. The restaurant, I think, is a warren of rooms – I had been told that there were cosy old brick arches about somewhere overlooking the eponymous canal, though I had the feeling we had been dumped in the overflow annexe (although at this point the place was not so much overflowing, as empty). Which made the too-loud Muzak rather intrusive. It was the sort of stuff they play to you when you phone an emergency plumber and are left on hold to a call centre in

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Rangoon: it's meant to calm you down, wash all over you – and it makes me homicidal. I asked them to turn it down, and they turned it off: so that was the end of that.

The menu is long, and suitably rural and earthy-sounding. There were a few specials – a lamb shank in red wine sauce, ravioli stuffed with ricotta (for the real meat deal, head down the road

to the splendid Marine Ices) – though I thought the taglia al ragu di cero (venison) sounded, if not particularly Sardinian, rather attractive. The thing was, I was also drawn to the *salsiccia Sarda* – homemade charcoal grilled aromatic sausage with stewed shallots marinated in white wine balsamic. With vanilla mashed potato (not typically Sardinian either, I shouldn't have said). This mash cropped up recently on Professional MasterChef, actually – and in the words of Michel Roux Jr "It doesn't work". But I ordered it anyway, with the promise of a smaller 'starter' portion of the venison taglia to kick off with. My wife was having *moscardini alla cagliarantina* – baby octopus in a white wine and tomato sauce with pine kernels. This looked rather lovely – golden and reddish in a big white bowl, delicate and frondy, like an octopus's garden, in the shade. This was more or less enjoyed, though I found it overtly fishy and oily. But as for my tagliatelle ... well. It looked gorgeous – al dente ribbons, thick and intense ragu ... and it tasted of salt. Nothing else – just

FACTFILE

- **SARDO CANALE**
42 Gloucester Avenue, NW1
Tel: 020-7722 2800
- Open Tuesday to Friday noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm, Saturday and Sunday noon-11pm.
- Food: ★★★★★
- Service: ★★★★★
- The Feeling: ★★★★★
- Cost: About £110 for a three-course dinner for two, with wine.

mouth-puckering salt. So I sent it back. The manager said "We'll do you another, and avoid salt completely". I looked at him. "Well," he amended, "Maybe a little bit". A very rum comment, I thought. When the replacement arrived, he solemnly advised me not to have parmesan grated over it, as this would add saltiness. "A gem of gastronomic insight for you", he tacked on. Beyond rum, that – perfectly ludicrous, actually, not to say extremely condescending. It didn't matter either way as this dish was only very marginally less salty than the first mess, so I abandoned it. Instead I ate excellent black olives and bread that looked like madeira cake. I dropped my napkin, and a beady-eyed woman who had been eyeing us like an invigilator – immediately replaced it with a fresh one. We were still all alone, so maybe she was bored. Later on, when I went to the lavatory, I placed the napkin on the table – and upon my return, this too had been replaced with a new one. Maybe she was very very bored indeed. The Sardinian red we had ordered was okay – but it was a 2008, not the advertised 2005. "Oh but I much prefer the 08", the manager blandly assured me. Mmm – it's that sort of place, really: they're having a bit of a laugh. The lady prefect who kept on eyeing us would constantly swoop to fill our wine glasses right up to the bloody brim, while our water glasses – and the jug – remained empty. Attention all of the wrong sort.

And so to the mains. The restaurant had filled up a bit now – we had Americans to the

left and right of us, both parties talking about restaurants they loved in Bawston, Nork, Peeris and Rome Iddaly: you now had to shout to make yourself heard. My wife's fillet of pork was a few small slices fanned out with a sauce incorporating myrtle leaves (typically Sardinian and aromatic in theory, though not in this case) and lightly spiced Savoy cabbage. Except that nothing is done lightly here: the cabbage was very hot one mouthful, and absolutely nothing the next. The pork was dry, chewy and cruelly overdone. My sausage was curled like a Cumberland and very dense – a bit like *boudin blanc*, but without that subtlety, and once again, the spices came in waves. The vanilla mash – with clods of pepper – was, predictably, disgusting. So I left most of all that as well. We had ordered saute potatoes on the side, though maybe they thought I said 'salty potatoes' – because that's what they were: inedibly so. And the Americans next door, I overheard, were also complaining about the salt: absurd, in a restaurant of any pretension at all. We shared a *so-so* semifreddo – with which came yet more sodding napkins. Dear God – if only they paid as much attention to the cooking as they do the linen, this joint's name would be up in lights. As it is, it isn't. All the food I either sent back or left on the plate was charged for. My 'starter' portion of the inedible taglia was £10 instead of £10.50. The olives and bread on the table came in at an extra £3, a fact never mentioned on the menu, bringing the total to £107. I said to the manager, on leaving "This wasn't good". He nodded. He knew. "I'm sorry", he said – and then, oddly, he tacked on: "what do you do ...?" Well, I told him, one of the things I do is review restaurants. And because so long has passed since this deeply disappointing evening, I think by now the manager must have concluded that I was kidding. And now he knows I wasn't.

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

thanks to Wine Relief and Fairtrade bottles

15. The Cape sparkling rosé at £6.50 is a happy bargain. The other supermarkets are keen, too – Waitrose and Sainsbury's have six each, for example – and good online sources include www.vintageroots.co.uk and www.traidcraftshop.co.uk. Total sales here are soaring, up from £1.5million in 2004 to more than £18.5million last year.

I have just tried a rather unusual Fairtrade wine – the first, to my knowledge, from a major world wine brand. Spain-centred Torres has long had impressive environmental credentials. But its Chilean winery now carries fair trade accreditation as well, investing profits into community

projects as well as paying its workers a sustainable wage.

Santa Digna gewurztraminer 2010 (£8, closest stockist Partridges of Sloane Square – hopefully it will soon gain wider availability) is a graceful, perfumed wine, with an extra lemony freshness from the tiny amount of riesling included. The logo isn't the familiar one – it's Fair for Life, from a Swiss-originated movement which considers environmental aspects as well as social ones.

Moving on, Wine Relief owes its existence – and continued success – to Jancis Robinson SW and her restaurant critic husband Nick Lander and so far has

contributed more than £3.6million to the overall Comic Relief pot.

This year, again, major retailers including M&S, Waitrose, Majestic, Wine Rack, Laitwhaites and Virgin are supporting the initiative with some 80 selected Red Nose wines. Until March 18, 10 per cent of the price of each bottle goes straight to supporting Comic Relief's projects in the UK and Africa. The M&S choice is particularly generous – all South African bottles over £5, more than 30 wines in all – and Majestic has some tempting choices, especially whites.

There are events, too. Log on to www.jancisrobinson.com and

search Wine Relief to learn more and to see how Jancis rates the Red Nose wines.

Finally, tomorrow sees the launch of the the Smartphone app of the first guide to Italian wines published exclusively by the Slow Food initiative. Slow Wine 2011 takes "a new approach to evaluating wine that looks beyond just the liquid in the glass to take into account ethical and environmental values as well". If you act quickly you can go to a tasting tomorrow evening (March 11) of wines from 50 listed growers at the Royal Horticultural Halls, in Victoria. Tickets are £20 from www.eventbrite.com/event/1318964057.



A happier future ... workers' children in the playground at Fairtrade South African winery Stellar Organics.

Picture by David Brazier/Fairtrade Foundation