

Restaurant review

There'll still be change left over for charity

Joseph Connolly finds Belsize Kitchen is the perfect place to take the Royal Free Charity's CEO – a place where the savings you make will mean that you'll have more to give away

I have always assumed that patronage on my part could extend no further than the realm of restaurants: heaven knows I have been patronising restaurants for as long as I can remember. But now, wholly to my bewilderment, I find that I am in addition a patron of the Royal Free Charity. Perfectly extraordinary – how on earth could that have come about? And what, while we're at it, is the Royal Free Charity? And why should they require a generally indolent scribbler and restaurant critic when they've already got proper patrons, such as Esther Rantzen? I'm sure you share my need to know – and because I haven't a clue about any of this, I thought I'd ask the CEO of the Charity to lunch, so that he could explain to me face to face how an apparently level-headed and highly capable man such as himself could be guilty of so wild and preposterous an aberration.

Chris Burghes is the man we're talking about – tall, whipper lean, bright blue-eyed and with an enthusiasm for his very uphill task that does I think for once truly merit the adjective boundless. The last time we met was at a very spruce reception put on by the Charity in St James's Palace – you might have read about in the *Ham&High* a couple of weeks back. All sorts of eminent people told us about the marvellous work the Charity already carries out, as well as its far-reaching aspirations – all in the presence of many local philanthropists, the Royal Patron (HRH The

Duke of York) and the Peasant Patron: me. The current ambition is to raise £22M to build an extension to the hospital devoted to yet more groundbreaking research and development in the realm of immunology, this to build significantly upon the Royal Free's already very high international reputation for pioneering work. One of the latest Charity-funded innovations is apparently unbelievably realistic computer simulation of operations with which students may interact, cutting out (among other things) the risk of actually killing somebody. Chris has been in charge of making all this happen for just a year: the Charity receives no government funding, and is wholly reliant upon benefactors – one of whom you might therefore care to become. "Basically," he says, "we set out to make the difference. If the NHS buys a chair, we seek to provide the cushion."

Village feel

Yes well – the chairs in Belsize Kitchen could have done with a few of those: pretty hard, you know. I'd heard about this place, and I'd liked what I'd heard. It's in Belsize Village, and very villagey in feel it is too – echoes of the Coffee Cup, if not nearly so pretty. The décor is plain – scuffed and mismatched bare tables, wooden floor – but with nice and unexpected touches such as a counter crammed with beer bottles and home-baked cakes, jet black drippy glass chandeliers and a single



■ Joseph with Chris Burghes, the Royal Free Charity's CEO

white freesia on every table. Larger than it seems from the outside, it's the sort of place where locals sprawl with laptops and the *Ham&High* – secure in the knowledge that the very good, properly and freshly cooked food is an absolute steal. The lunch menu is divided by price – ranging from £5.50 to just £8.50, this latter getting you a steak sandwich with rocket, onions in red wine and chips with aioli! There is also a large and deeply seductive breakfast menu – and as they seemed quite happy to serve this at lunchtime, I thought that's where I'd go. So I had smoked chicken Benedict – never heard of it before, though they had the more usual ham and smoked salmon versions as well. The eggs were poached just so – gorgeously runny – and the hollandaise, though pale,

packed the proper flavour. The chicken was generous, and went surprisingly well – though the base of thin toasted bread was impossibly hard and cold: a warm brioche would have perfected this dish.

Chris ordered chicken and mushroom fusilli (they're the ones that look like little corkscrews) with sage and parmesan: a huge and steaming porringer that he enjoyed very much, the mushroom flavour well to the fore. Here was praise, because when Chris isn't giving his all to the Charity, he enjoys to cook – and Italian especially. "I commute daily to and from Hampshire, three-and-a-half hours round trip. Cooking relaxes me". And is much appreciated by his fiancée, who works for a homeless charity: pretty charitable couple, hey? Chris's last job was at the Fire Fighters'

Charity – and I asked him at what point did English firemen become American fire fighters...? "It's not that," he said. "There are about 63,000 fire fighters in this country – and 10% are women". Crumbs: who knew? I had a glass of the house Italian red, and Chris didn't. "There's a total ban on alcohol consumption at the Royal Free: they'd send you home". Which made me think two things: (1) that's rather a comfort, isn't it really? And (2) aren't I pleased that I don't work there?

Delicious puddings

The puddings are practically the same price as the mains (around a fiver) but here is money well spent. My large crème brûlée was exemplary, and Chris's warm chocolate fondant with vanilla ice cream did make him go "mmmm" quite a lot. I

asked what else he liked to do apart from cooking...? Two things: tending his allotment, and running marathons. "I did the Chicago marathon a couple of weeks ago. It's one of the top five, with London, Berlin, Boston and New York. I've run them all. It's marvellous – you should try it." Which was, quite incontestably, the very best joke I have heard in many, many years. "But Chris – I've just remembered: you still haven't told me... why me as a patron? Because I'll be honest with you, I don't appear to have twenty million quid about my person..." "Well," he said, "all we'd like you to do is turn up to one or two things a year... and just chat." Oh well that's all right, then – I've wasted most of my life turning up to things and just chatting.

Belsize Kitchen is quite a find – though I suspect that many have found it ages ago. The staff is young, happy and polite... the place is easy to be in... and the food is real home cooking, at very low prices. I liked it a lot – and though I left the place filled with the contagion of Chris's gusto for all good work, I was also filled with food... so maybe totter back to the house for a little bit of a siesta, yes? After all – charity begins at home.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- BELSIZE KITCHEN
68 Belsize Lane, NW3
Tel: 020-794 6957
- Open daily 8am-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆
- Cost: Ridiculously reasonable. More in the evening, but still very good.

Wine Liz Sagues



A revolution in South America means bottles that are more food friendly

Whatever are the producers of rich, heavily-concentrated red wines to do if the lingering Indian summers continue, reducing the appeal of warming casseroles and pot roasts? Make wines which are friendly with lighter food, if the example of one leading Chilean grower is followed.

It isn't changing weather which has persuaded Marcelo Retamal, winemaker at De Martino since 1996, to alter the style of the wines he makes. In London recently, during a fascinating tasting which spanned all but two of the vintages he has worked on, he admitted he no longer liked the wines he made in the early years of the 21st century. "Horrid" was the word he used.

The bottles he opened – all pure carmenère – came from De Martino's Altos de Piedra vineyard in the Maipo valley, planted in 1992. Then, though, the vines were thought to be merlot – a common confusion in Chile, still sometimes happening today. By 1995, the vines were properly identified and, a year later, the 1996 was the first Chilean wine to be labelled carmenère. From 1998, Altos de Piedra has been tended organically.

The tasting, Retamal told members of the Circle of Wine Writers, demonstrated "the evolution of the Chilean wine industry". There was certainly major change: moving picking dates by several weeks to have riper grapes able to give richer,

jammier, far more alcoholic wines, winery practices to emphasise those characteristics and more and more use of new oak barrels to add toasty, caramel edges to the wines.

By 2009 and 2010, the brakes were going on: slightly earlier picking, less intervention, a shorter time in new oak barrels. But it's the 2011 wine which will show the biggest difference as French barrels have been abandoned in favour of Austrian oak casks almost 20 times larger.

The new approach isn't commercial suicide, Retamal and Sebastián de Martino emphasised: the wines go largely into restaurants, and will be better with food than their predecessors.

That distribution does mean, though, they're hard to find on retail shelves. Best source is The Wine Society, where the 2009 Altos de Piedra is £15 and there are other wines from the family, including the Legado Reserva 2010 carmenère at £8.50. If carmenère is Chile's special red selling point, across the Andes in Argentina that slot is taken by malbec (though both grapes originate, and do still grow, in France).

Bordeaux-born Hervé Joyaux Fabre was the first to make single varietal Argentinian malbec, at Fabre Montmayou, the winery in Mendoza he built in 1992. Three years ago, to remarkable award-winning success, he launched Viñalba, investi-

gating new vineyard sites, grape varieties and blends.

His wines are concentrated, with plenty of fruit sweetness, oak and alcohol, but the components are balanced and the results attractive – the most frequent comment from friends who joined me in tasting several examples was "smooth".

Most recently, Fabre has returned to his origins with Bordeaux-style blends and the wines prove the point that blends often are more interesting than their constituent grapes alone.

The Viñalba Reserva cabernet sauvignon/malbec/petit verdot 2010 (Majestic, £12, £10 if you buy two or more) has serious dark flavours with an attractive touch of spice and is crisper



■ Marcelo Retamal, winemaker at De Martino since 1996

on the palate and drier on the finish than the alternative, slightly softer, more blackcurrant Viñalba Reserva cabernet/malbec/merlot 2010 (Sainsbury's, £10). There are several more of Fabre's wines in Majestic, including magnums of Viñalba malbec reserva 2009 (£18), and Waitrose has Viñalba cabernet sauvignon 2010 (£9).