

Good Gallic grub but served at a snail's pace

For those who take expert advice to avoid 'unhealthy' food with a pinch of salt, a French brasserie is just the right dining destination

Are you scared of food? Is the enjoyment you derive from eating eternally at odds with the fear that what you are putting into your mouth is in some way 'bad for you'? Well stop it at once. There's no mileage in it. And the 'scientists' and 'dieticians' whose job it is to keep coming up with fresh and ever more ludicrous 'evidence' to worry us witless are anyway constantly at loggerheads with one another. At the moment, milk and eggs are considered to be a good thing, though we all remember when the reverse was true – and it wasn't long ago. The University of California (where else?) has recently announced that sugar is a 'lethal toxin': Something to mull over as you stir that cube of Tate & Lyle into your morning PG Tips. Red wine is good (in moderation!) and chocolate is good (in moderation!). Which wholly misses the point. People who like these things are not, as a rule, awfully good at moderation. One small glass a day ...? Easier and better to have none at all. And just a single square of good-quality chocolate...? Yeah, right – I mean, dream on! That's like trying to have just the one crisp – which, they will tell you, is more than enough to kill you 10 times over. Until, that is, crisps are discovered to be the latest 'superfood'.

So in the light of all this tosh, it's really very reassuring to go to a French brasserie, the hallmark of whose menus is that they are rammmed with all the scoff that sane and healthy human beings have always most enjoyed. The Brasserie Meribel has been in existence for only a couple of months, while very much giving off the air of having been around for ages: there is a swagger in the décor, a confidence in the welcome. And it's only a little way down from Parkway in Camden Town, but just you try telling my minicab driver that. He was from Bulgaria. I know this because he told me repeatedly, almost as if he imagined I could give a damn. The journey was extraordinary in its all-encompassing ambit: At one point I swear he was well on the way to Heathrow – all sorts of streets and then boroughs that were wholly new to me. I then thought I was beginning to recognise the outskirts of Reading, while soon becoming quite convinced that the man's true intention was to drive all the way home to Bulgaria, bringing me with him by way of a particularly awful example of all that in London he had been expected to endure.

My guest was Geoff Martin, the editor of this very organ, who in days of yore



■ Brasserie Meribel

Picture: Polly Hancock

used to be an omnivore who then became a vegetarian (he's not entirely sure why). But now he eats fish, and although he admits to being sorely tempted by the thought of a bacon sandwich (and I have told him there is only one way to deal with temptation) still is not quite ready to resume his carnivorous habits. So I make up for him. We were ready to order, but had to devote a little time to the décor: The place is set into the side of Camden Road Overground, and so the ceiling is barrel arched like a tunnel and rather gorgeously covered with a multi-coloured patchwork of art that could easily be a collaboration between Andy Warhol, Zandra Rhodes and Liberty Prints. There is a long counter fronting the open kitchen, the obligatory bits of bare brickwork, Gustavian bleached furniture, a very groovy long and skinny gas coal fire surmounted by a serious copper canopy ... and pendant lights made up of staggered rows of cut crystal decanters, whose bases have been cruelly sliced

away, these suspended from old bent steel girders (or else a priceless artwork by Sir Anthony Caro, who could actually say?).

Meat duty

The 'catch of the day' was merlin, which you don't often see – so Geoff was having that. I was on meat duty, so ordered 'a cut from the sirloin', which sounded fabulous. Before that, French onion soup for Geoff, and six escargots for me: All a very good test of a French brasserie, I think you'll agree. It's just as well that Geoff is such entertaining company, because the first course took one hell of a while to arrive: Not much shy of 40 minutes. And then two great slabs of olive wood were set before us, each shaped like a Goliath's distended kidney. On top of Geoff's was a large copper saucepan with the handle sticking into his face, and next to it a ramekin of grated Gruyère. Now this is an odd approach, I thought – and so it proved. "The soup is pretty good," he said, "but not

hot enough". And of course, dumping not much grated cheese into not-hot soup will signally fail to create the great and gloopy sticky strings of it that are integral to this dish. My snails, however, were perfect, and served with the proper gear to clutch the shell and winkle out the chewy little devils: The garlicky sauce was spot-on.

We sipped red wine (in moderation!) – from Valencia, actually: odd in a French place, yes? Geoff's idea – nothing to do with me (and it was actually very good). And then sipped a bit more as a further age elapsed before there was any sign of more grub. Geoff's stomach was rumbling most terribly ... oh no, hang on, it wasn't that: Turned out to be the oppressive thunder of trains directly overhead. Yikes! My sirloin was on another lump of wood, though Geoff was awarded a real live plate. The merlin was baked, with tomato and parmesan – rendering the wedge of lemon redundant – and served

with steamed broccoli and new potatoes. He enjoyed this very much ("sort of like swordfish ...") though the size of the tranche did seem small when compared to this steak of mine. Truly enormous: Thick, juicy and really bloody good (while remaining medium rare). Bearnaise? So-so, and rather sharp. And the frites...? Absolutely lamentably awful. Pale, foldable sticklets bearing traces of peel. Geoff took matters into his own hands – rather, I feel, as Clint Eastwood would have done: He strolled across to the open kitchen and said to a chef "Can we maybe talk about these chips...?" The man was covered in apology – which, though, is never really the point – and soon brought a replacement bowl: Only marginally better. Amazing, isn't it? Superb sirloin, and hopeless chips after two attempts. Zut!

This is a comfortable and pretty well-run place – although they've got to cut the waiting times – and I am sure that in the evening it looks glorious and is truly hopping. Geoff then said he had a hairdresser appointment. I said I had had one of those in 1972. Then I went home and ate a single square of good-quality chocolate. Really lovely. As were the successive nine.

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

FACTFILE

- **BRASSERIE MERIBEL**
47-49 Camden Road, NW1
Tel: 020 7267 7360
- Open Mon-Fri noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm, Sat-Sun 10am-11pm
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Fairly pricey brasserie. About £80 for two-course meal for two with wine.

Rather as Clint Eastwood would have done, Geoff strolled over to the kitchen and said: 'Can we maybe talk about these chips?'

that it's not only Old World vintages which stand up to such scrutiny

potential it presented in Chile if growers and winemakers could rise to the challenge of optimising what nature has offered in terms of locations and growing conditions.

The classic Old World grape was, he said, "the cornerstone of the future for the Chilean wine industry", with the best wines unique and very fine, quite different from cabernets from Australia, California and Bordeaux itself. As for Casa Real, that was a "classical example of the best of traditional Chilean cabernet".

There is a huge choice of Chilean cabernet here, but I've rather missed out on it in recent retail

tasting experiences – there seems to be a lot of focus on emerging varieties such as pinot noir and syrah (Croser also emphasised how Chile had an amazing matrix of climate conditions and soils, opening up "a wonderful range of opportunities" beyond cabernet).

Cabernets

I have liked these cabernets, however: At Waitrose, 2009 Torres Las Mulas organic 2009, Central Valley (£9), Cousino Macul Antiguas Reservas Cabernet Sauvignon 2008 Maipo Valley (£10); at Majestic: Errazuriz Max Reserva Cabernet 2009 Aconcagua Valley (£10 if you buy at least two bot-

tles), Anakena Indo 2009 Cachapoal Valley, £9.

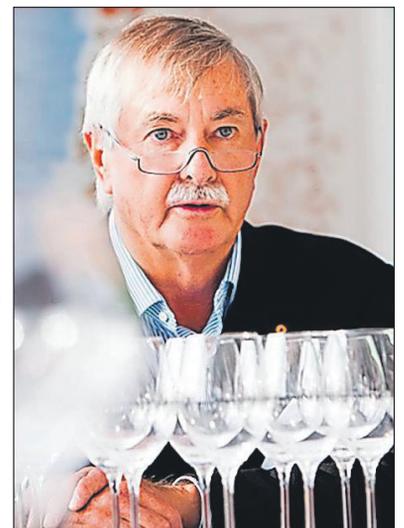
Looking beyond cabernet and conventional high-street sources, the Wine Society (www.thewine.com) last year carried off the International Wine Challenge award for Specialist Wine Merchant of the Year for Chile for the fourth time, and its range of cabernet starts at less than £5, expands generously in the £7-£10 range and has several temptations at £10-plus before you reach the heights of Casa Real. Putting a case together should be a pleasure.

A small independent with a big Chilean choice is Taurus Wines

(www.tauruswines.co.uk) – I tasted a very pretty pink sparkling pais (the grape which makes Chilean spirit pisco) from the range before Christmas. That has sold out, but there is much more of interest, at sensible prices (£10 delivery).

Stone, Vine & Sun (www.stonevine.co.uk) has a good choice from Anakena, whose wines I've enjoyed for a long time – try the dry riesling (£9) or the sweet late-harvest viognier, nutty and perfumed (£7.50, 50 cl). SVS has plenty from the ever-good Errazuriz, too.

All these prove how much more there is to Chile than bargain-basement own-brand wine.



■ Brian Croser at the London masterclass