

In a useless world One08 is a very notable exception

There is nothing trivial about this restaurant which has a reputation for being pretty good, proud of its locally sourced ingredients, fine food and excellent staff

Useless information: some eskimos use refrigerators to keep their food from freezing. Grapes explode if you put them in the microwave. The world's largest KFC is in Beijing. In the last 24 years, at least 37 people have died as a result of shaking a vending machine. I could go on. You probably hope I shan't, so I shan't.

I only mention it at all because last week my guest for lunch was Noel Botham, who is known for very many things, though one of the more notable was around 12 years ago when he and the late great Keith Waterhouse formed The Useless Information Society. I – alongside such as newspapermen Richard Littlejohn, Mike Molloy and Bill Hagerty, the actor Ken Stott, the chef Richard Corrigan and Suggs from Madness – had the signal honour of being one of the 20 founder members. Oh what happy days! We would congregate for dinner in Soho every couple of months, and at Armagnac time we would stand in turn and deliver a piece of useless information. Each of which had to be unknown, pithy, amusing and completely and utterly useless. Our Beadle – the musician and arranger Kenny Clayton, in tricorne hat – would strike the floor with his mace at the first intimation of tedium or usefulness.

All this merry idiocy spawned *Noel's Book Of Useless Information* (quote on the cover from Keith Waterhouse: "This book is totally bloody useless") and last month he published the seventh in the series, this one devoted to royalty. Example: Richard the Lionheart was a homosexual. Combined, the books have sold millions in more than 30 countries – proof, if proof were needed, that the entire planet is by the second becoming more and more useless.

We were in One08, the annoyingly dubbed restaurant in the hotel of the same name in Marylebone Lane (number 108, wouldn't you know). I reviewed this place about 18 months ago and thought it pretty good – but since then they've got a new chef and new menus, while remaining very proud of their fine local suppliers: Ginger Pig butcher, La Fromagerie (one of London's very best) and others. It has to be said that all the ingredients here are very good indeed, as is the execution. The room is hotel-neutral, though with flashes of elliptical mirror and red Venetian glass, while the service is eager and attentive to the point of parody: I was asked three times by three different people whether "everything is all right" – and this not just before I had ordered a single damn thing, but before even my guest had rolled up. And when roll up he did, he said to the waiter: "Large gin, slimline tonic, lots of ice, no lemon". And the waiter said "gin and tonic ...?" Whereupon Noel very patiently repeated his order. And – rather to my astonishment – it arrived exactly as specified.

Generous

He was having John Ross smoked salmon with capers, red onion and mixed leaves. The portion was generous, and evidently unfatty and rather fine. "Excellent," Noel pronounced. "Unusually succulent. Love the capers." I was having beef carpaccio with a mushroom and truffle oil dressing. This was very sweetly presented as six overlapping and gossamer discs: fine, but would have been so very much finer had they not been icy cold. The dressing was smooth and mercifully subtle, shavings of parmesan doing their thing.

Noel has been a successful and



■ Joseph Connolly and Noel Botham at One08

Picture: Polly Hancock

high-profile journalist for much of his life, kicking off on the Surrey Mirror and soon progressing to the Daily Herald on Fleet Street. His big break came in the form of an indiscreet servant to Princess Margaret: the resulting series of revelations he sold on a freelance basis all over the world, and coloured a tidy sum. During the course of his 30 or so books, he has occasionally returned to the Royals: his last was called *The Murder Of Princess Diana* (Noel is not known to pull his punches) which has been filmed. One night he was awoken at 3am by a phone call from Britney Spears, who wanted to play the part. Ah – dear Britney: what can one say? Noel's best friend was Hughie Green of *Double Your Money* and *Opportunity*

Knocks renown ("he taught me how to fly a plane") and it was only on his way to Hughie's funeral that Noel decided to disclose in the course of his oration that Hughie was the father of Paula Yates – then Bob Geldof's wife – and not Jess Yates after all. The fallout was considerable.

I nearly went the "Ginger Pig rare breed Longhorn dry aged for at least 28 days" route, though settled in the end for roast corn fed chicken breast with autumn vegetables (in April) creamy mash and tarragon sauce. This was extremely flavoursome and meltingly tender, the sauce just so. The mash was just mash, though – not especially creamy at all. Noel's tuna steak arrived just barely seared, as requested, and elegantly sliced.

The colours were beautiful: the ruddy pink of the tuna and the murk of balsamic, then a niçoise salad brought alive by the zingy yellow of a quartered hard-boiled egg. "Just as tuna should be," he said. "Very, very good."

And did I mention that Noel, along with his wife Lesley, owns and runs The French House in Soho ...? One of the most famous, unspoilt and much-loved pubs – more like a club than anything, though open to all. Lately there has been filming there for the upcoming biopic of Paul Raymond (variously called the Porn Baron or the King of Soho, who is being played by Steve Coogan). And talking of the movie business, Noel's son Guy is a producer based in Hollywood, currently working on the SFX for the next James Bond, and a new film called *Snow White and The Eight Dwarfs* ... yes. In which, apparently, the faces of such as Bob Hoskins and Peter O'Toole will be magically grafted on to the bodies of actual dwarfs and ... oh look, I could fill the whole paper with all of Noel's wonderful anecdotes. Such as when he seriously contemplated forming AAA: Anti Alcoholics Anonymous, the idea being that if anyone out there was panicked into needing an early night, one of the team would rush round immediately and persuade them to stay up late and for God's sake have a drink.

We'd had a really good lunch at One08. Noel's next book, out in May, is called *Catch That Tiger*: the true wartime story of how Churchill ordered the capture of a German Tiger tank. The daring ploy succeeded – and on TV soon, by way of plugging the book, Jeremy Clarkson will be driving the actual thing (and how would he resist?). "Did you know," said Noel in passing, "that the man who founded the Commandos was a cross-dresser ...?" Useless information. Maybe not though, if at the time you just happened to be a commando.

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

FACTFILE

- **One08**
108 Marylebone Lane, W1
Tel: 020-7969 3900
- Open seven days, noon-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆
- Cost: Usual higher end hotel prices. About £115 for three course meal for two with wine.

among them and at prices which will be pleasing to the pocket

lovely mouth-hugging length, Le Claux Delorme 2011, Valençay, £8.95; two Kiwi chardonnays to challenge burgundy, The Society Exhibition 2010, £12.50, and Mahi Twin Valleys 2010, £14.95; pure pleasure in elegant, dry Vouvray, Le Haut Sec 2010 from Domaine Huet, £14.95, and a close challenger, Chenin des Rouillères 2011, Anjou Blanc, from dedicated organic grower Frederic Mabileau, £10.95. In the reds: that intriguing

three-way blend I've already mentioned is Collection, Fiefs Vendéens Mareuil 2010, an appealingly summery wine from the innovative Jérémie Mourat, £7.50; great too is Domaine du Cros Lo Sang del Pais 2011, Marcillac, £7.95, from one of south western France's little-known local grapes, fer servadou, which manages to combine sweet fruitiness and food-friendly dry length, balanced and appetising. There's another rare grape, Juan

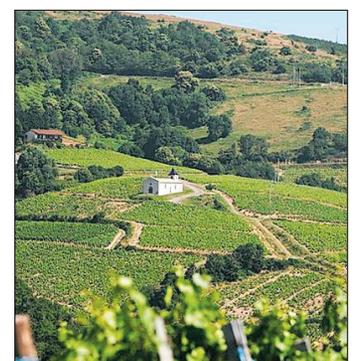
Garcia – for once not a synonym for tempranillo – in Abadengo Crianza 2006, £8.95, from Arribes on Spain's western border, close to Salamanca. If more of the region's growers use it as well as Bodegas Ribera de Pelazas does in this perfumed, attractive wine, encounters with Senor Garcia could become much more frequent.

Classic stars include Cotes du Rhone Villages Génération 2009 from Domaine Jaume, £7.50 – the

wine which as much as any made me think of the smiley emoticon – and L'Appel des Sereines 2009, Domaine Villard, £11.50, pure syrah from the northern Rhone with that savoury yet floral character which you find in fine expressions of the grape.

And a final frivolity: sweet froth without stickiness in Moscato d'Asti 2011, just £6.75. Bring out the strawberries...

■ www.thewinesociety.com



■ Beaujolais: a pretty place for pretty wine
Picture: Inter-Beaujolais