



Push the boat out for that ideal gift

December already: but at least there's still time to think outside the conventional festively-wrapped box for memorable presents for friends and family who love wine. And why not think big?

One of the stars of the pre-Christmas press tasting from Stone, Vine & Sun – a small but beautiful independent merchant whose wines are excellent, and excellent value – was a silky, perfumed old vines southern Rhone red, rich and ripe but with a food-flatteringly dry finish. Alongside the standard bottle of Domaine Le Couroulu Vacqueyras 2009 (£17.95) were two more which prompted this chain of seasonal thought.

Both the magnum (£37.95) and the curvaceous jero-boam (three litres of joy, £75) come dressed for partying, the golden wax sealing their corks repeated in spiky sunburst decorations above the curlew-themed label. Think what an impression either would make on the Christmas table, and the wine inside would leave a long and happy glow.

Don't panic if you can't find them on the SVS website (www.stonevine.co.uk). There is stock: just phone 01962 712351. But don't stop with Le Couroulu. The list covers all festive needs, from happy party wines – try El Tesoro vedejo 2011 and Borsao garnacha joven 2011, both £5.95 – to a generous choice of dinner delights at under £12 (delivery is £5.95 for one case).

These are some of my favourites: smart, lingering Aba de Trasmunia Rias Baixas albarino 2011, £11.50; complex, flavour-



■ Family tradition at Domaine des Forges: Claude Branchereau and son Stéphane

filled Vina Toen 2011 from Monterrei on Spain's border with northern Portugal, £9.95; Domaine Fontanel Cotes du Roussillon Blanc 2010, impressive, unusual southern French white with herbs, spice and a salty tang on the finish, £11.95. Reds: pure, approachable yet serious Domaine du Joncier l'O 2011, £8.95, from young vines which will soon carry the Lirac denomination; Fattoria San Pancrazio Chianti 2009, £8.95, bargain-priced but authentic.

At the helm

Then push the boat out with these two: Yann Chave Crozes-Hermitage 2009, true northern Rhone syrah with wonderful perfume and style, £16.95; and a champagne to cherish: Thomas-Hatté Brut, £22.50.

The Crozes-Hermitage would be the perfect toast to mark this year's 10th birthday of SVS, for Chave's 1998 vintage was on the company's very first list, at £8.30 (sadly, wine price inflation has outstripped the retail price index). There are plenty more suppliers who have also been there through the decade and one which SVS has deservedly cherished is Domaine des Forges in the heartland of sweet Loire wines.

The Branchereau family has made fine Coteaux du Layon for generations – Stéphane and Séverine are the latest

at the helm – and there are excellent dry wines too. Domaine des Forges Anjou blanc l'Audace 2010, £9.95, shows how chenin blanc can marry stylishly with delicately-handled oak. It's not a burgundy taste-alike, but would be an imaginative, enjoyable seasonal alternative. And to finish the meal, there are two levels of Coteaux du Layon: fruit-concentrated St Aubin 2010, £11.50, and Les Onnis 2009, £19.50, indulgently luscious – yet, like all good chenin blanc stickies, with cloy-counteracting crispness.

I'd planned to write about several more excellent independent merchants here, but there is room only for a quick focus on one, Lea & Sandeman (shops in Chelsea, Kensington, Barnes and Chiswick, online at www.leaandsandeman.co.uk). They sell fine burgundies and plenty of smart bottles from very carefully-chosen growers through Europe and beyond, but there is also wonderful value in the likes of these two fragrant, tempting whites, Domaine les Yeuses vermentino 2011, £6.95 and Vina Laguna 2011 malvasia from Croatia, £9.95, or Domaine Jean Royer Le Petit Roy, £13.75, Chateaufeuf du Pape in everything but name and a truly happy wine.

Delivery over £100 is free, and there's a case discount (even if you mix your own) of approximately 10 per cent.

Testing art of food in unusual caravan

Art. How tiny and plain a word it is, for something so utterly limitless and chock-full of mystery and light. A bit like sex, in that sense (and others too, I suppose). Art, though – this word these days is not just tiny and plain, but dirty too. Art has got itself a pretty bad rep, just lately. The Turner Prize adds greatly to the jollity of the nation, of course – this annual beanfeast which allows everyone to have a damned good laugh at all these serious and ugly men and women who will, in pursuit of their passion, pile up dung, release the butterflies, unload the maggots, confront us with rude bits, or else just invite us to contemplate nothingness. Though, are these po-faced people not really laughing up their sleeves (and down to the bank) even louder than we are uproariously jeering their tedious offerings? It is moot.

'Trashy old hall' look

Anyway, these days in King's Cross we have a seething hotbed of artists of the future: St Martin's, the revered college, has taken over a vast and handsome old granary. To say that Granary Square, as the area before it has been named, is merely windswept is to severely underrate the ferocity of the seemingly permanent gale that could lift you bodily and within a trice deposit you at St Pancras International. Students were battling their way through the impending tornado to reach their alma mater, and many of them, I mused, will already be accomplished painters and draughtsmen, talented people of taste, discernment, originality and a very high level of skill ... but nothing that three years of art school can't utterly devastate, so the future of

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■ Joseph and the *Ham&High's* deputy features editor Rhiannon Edwards at Caravan

Picture: Polly Hancock

the Turner Prize is perfectly secure.

My quest, however, was not for art, but grub – and within the granary is a very new restaurant called Caravan. Why Caravan? Oh God – don't ask me: I've given up trying to work out why people call restaurants the things they do. Inside it resembles a makeshift evacuation centre – the sort of trashy old hall into which during the war whole families were rapidly transferred when all of the nice places had been destroyed. Exposed everything: brick, plumbing, wiring, aircon, incipient sin – tables made of floorboards, pendants made of tin: you can see why it's the coolest of cool and regularly packed out. I was

there with Rihanna, a highly successful Barbadian recording artist best known for the risqué videos in which her booty ... oh no, hang on: I'm wrong – it was Rhiannon I was there with, the Yorkshire lass in charge of features on this very newspaper: an easy slip to make.

She had already been to the parent restaurant in Exmouth Market (foodie central) and was pretty impressed. "There were lots of interesting combinations that you wouldn't do at home," she said, "so you really knew you were out, and having dinner". Not sure it's quite like that here – all of the 14 "small plates" (there are some large ones as well) seemed to have

too many ingredients: you're okay till half way through reading about them, and then comes a slew of stuff you don't like. Anyway, Rhiannon ordered a mackerel fillet with avocado, coriander salsa and probably much else besides, and I had a deep fried duck egg with baba ganoush (aubergine puree), chorizo, cumin ... oh, on and on. The egg was rubbery inside, claggy without, the rest okay. The mackerel was apparently terrific – and very generous for a starter. Rhiannon had also ordered a Bellini to get her going, though when this classic Harry's Bar cocktail of white peach puree and prosecco was served to her, the waiter said "we've run out of peach, so this is lychee – is that all right?" Good grief. And was it all right ...? "Looks like dishwater," said Rhiannon. "Tastes like those cans of sugary tropical stuff you get at the Notting Hill Carnival. They're fifty pee." Hm: this was a fiver more.

'Bog-standard Hampstead'

By the time the mains were served, the place was rammed. We had been inserted between a pair of bald and enthusiastic homosexualists and a speaker booming out Brubeck, Dusty, Dino and then the 007 theme. Who else is here ...? Well, according to Rhiannon: "bog standard Hampstead and Highgate families, trendy art students bankrolled by their parents, oldies and half the staff of the Guardian". She speaks as she finds. Her lamb tagine came with almond couscous, chickpeas, sumac labneh (a tartly spiced yogurt), pomegranate and very possibly sheep's eyes, tongue of newt and a couple of Weetabix. She thought it good – no more than good – and not (in terms of temperature) hot enough. I had ordered a roast baby chicken with salsa verde, hazelnut stuffing and broccoli. This came as a faintly obscene-looking platter, the chicken jointed so that the plump little legs were suggestive of the comfortably recumbent position of a cheery and accommodating trollop. There was some careful and accomplished seasoning going on here, but the chicken itself was disappointingly dry ... and so I was surprised to discover, close to the bone, some parts which were decidedly red. I pointed this out to the self-same waiter who had asked whether everything was all right before either of us had actually sampled a mouthful. He said he would tell chef ... and chef said that it was fine because you didn't want to overcook it, see, and so here was a "compromise". And more arrogant twaddle than that I have seldom heard.

Over a decent Italian (Negromaro) we chatted of this and that. Rhiannon

continues to relish the thrills and spills of the *Ham&High*, is learning Japanese (though not, I suspect, in order to become a geisha) and has recently moved to Hackney. "Ah," I said knowingly. "Edgy. Cool. On trend". "Not really," she replied. "It's just cheap". She had a butterscotch caramel pot with salted shortbread, though was disconcerted to find that this latter comprised shortbread over which had been sprinkled a fair deal of salt. The pot was "okay" – as was my chocolate berry trifle with espresso jelly and madeleines. Not a trifle, really – more a mousse with fresh raspberries. I expected more of this "espresso jelly" because they make great play of their 100 per cent Arabica beans that are dealt with in the "roastery" at the back of the restaurant, which is a machine the size of a three-bedroom semi in Golders Green. And the madeleines ...? Alas, no: these really have to be newly made and warm, and these were neither.

The lavatories are unisex, though not in a swish way as in Ally McBeal. On two of the cubicles someone had scrawled on torn off and Sellotaped scraps of paper the letter F (presumably for "female", though you never can tell). One other featured a broken bolt, while the whole mean room with salvaged taps and butler's sinks resembled the sort of latrine where in old black-and-white films concerning either slums or public schools, some unfortunate's head would be rammed into a bowl. And so here you have Caravan: possibly it is an allegory. Mmm, yes ... but is it art?

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk. Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *ENGLAND'S LANE*, is published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook.

FACTFILE

■ CARAVAN

1 Granary Square, N1
Tel: 020 7101 7661

■ Open Mon-Tue 8am-10.30pm, Wed-Thu 8am-11pm, Fri 8am-midnight, Sat 10am-midnight, Sun 10am-4pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: It's not geared to the three course meal – grazing on little plates and glugging cocktails is more the thing. Reasonable then, if you're not a drunken pig.

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