



Time to ring in an old year

It's worth returning to the 2005 vintage – when the harvest was fine indeed

I'm trying to remember what happened in 2005. My lack of memory may have something to do with a reluctance to relive the year's catalogue of disasters, natural and man-made, which the internet recalls more quickly than my little grey cells can oblige. But it may not be helped by the fact that I've just been drinking two very fine examples of wines from that vintage.

Not to excess, mind, but enough to confirm that in these two parts of the wine world the results in 2005 were very good for growers who produced fine quality raw material and handled those grapes with due respect once they left stems for cellar.

The contents of both bottles confirmed, too, the benefits of patience. I doubt they would have been unpleasantly raw or gangly in childhood, but as maturing adults they truly begin to show their character. And no doubt they would have continued to develop into wise old age, had I not had the temerity to pull their corks.

Quality

The white was Hugel Jubilee Riesling 2005, made by Etienne Hugel, 12th in the family's unbroken line of wine growers, and the fruit of vines growing on the steep Schenenbourg slopes above the Alsace village of Riquewihr. Through the centuries of upheaval which have seen this region toggle between French and German rule, the Hugels have maintained their steady tradition of quality, none more so than Etienne. "I want to firmly establish Alsace wines in the club of the world's greatest wines and restore our region to its former glory," he emphasises.

The wine is almost too pretty to drink, pale golden in colour and with a haunting minerality behind the honey and spice aromas. Seductive style and flavour instantly banish any hesitation – this is a wine which falls very solidly indeed into my "want to drink" category. So many complimentary words bounce



■ Vines and the village of Riquewihr – home of the Hugel winery – under snow

Picture: Conseil Interprofessionnel des Vins d'Alsace

to mind, but harmony and balance are perhaps the best.

The bad news, though, is that this particular Hugel Jubilee Riesling is now only a happy memory on fortunate palates or a pleasure to come from private cellars. 2005 was a splendid vintage in Alsace, but those which succeeded it have been pretty good, and growers with the respect for quality which Hugel demonstrates will do fine things every year. So off to the Wine Society (www.thewinesociety.com) for a range of vintages – 2007 (which I've tasted and can confirm is another very stylish example) and 2010 at £23, 2009 at £22. Choose all three and that would make a vertical tasting to remember.

As Hugel says of the 2005, "it will improve for years and keep for decades", these are wines to buy now and tuck away.

Wine number two was suggested as a "picnic" wine. It's hardly one to pour on a soggy English outing – a winter

Sunday roast lamb lunch indoors would be much more appropriate – though it would be in its element served with spit-roast kid at the smart modern picnic site set above the vineyards from which it comes.

Viña Real Gran Reserva 2005 is from Rioja Alavesa, from a vineyard and spectacular modern winery which form part of CVNE, another wine company still in family hands, though with a two century shorter history than Hugel – back merely to 1879. Dark and dense, it has a happy balance of classic rioja character with concentrated fruit. The vintage is still available, £17 to £20 at www.hailshamcellars.com, www.welovefinewines.com, www.slurp.co.uk.

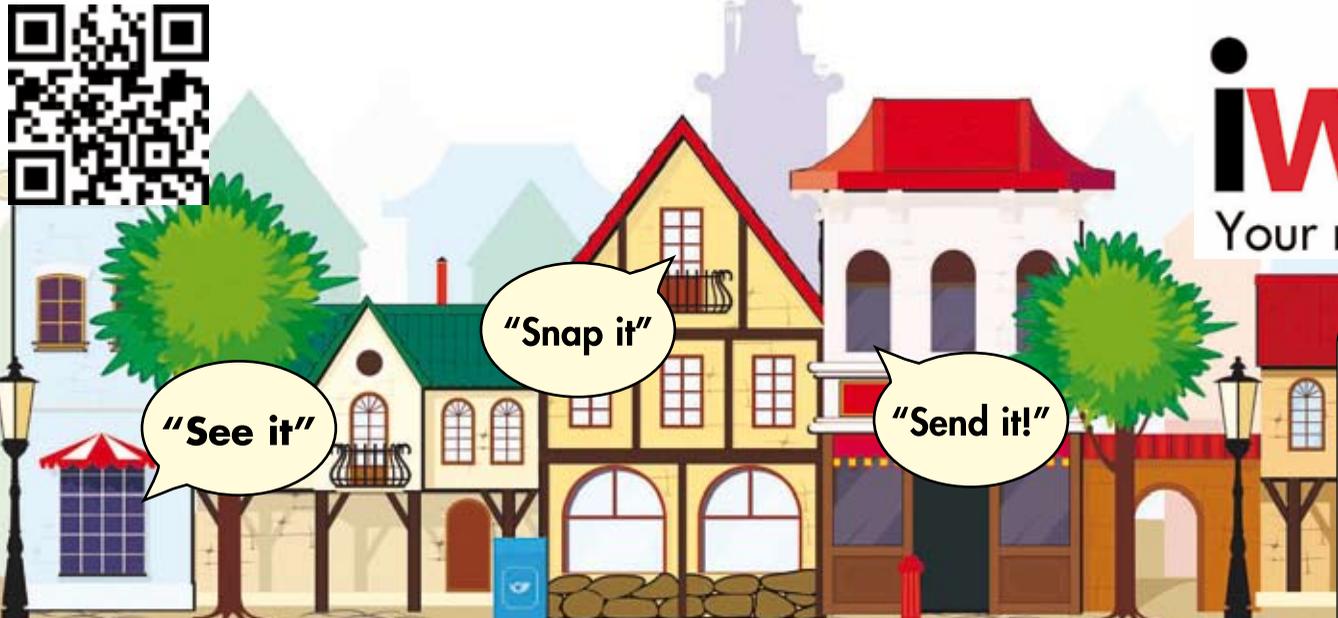
Perhaps surprisingly, I found it worked rather well with camembert – the oak retreated and the acid moved to the front, nicely countering the ripe butteriness of the cheese. Confirmation, yet again, that wine rules are made to be broken.

Only red left is on face of the boss

It was time for somewhere ordinary. Sometimes you want that, don't you? Not awful – not cheap and nasty, but just somewhere comfortably ordinary. So where more ordinary than Café Rouge ...? I have, en passant, often dismissed this hapless chain without ever actually reviewing it – and this is because occasionally in the past I have been foolish enough to have visited several branches, while always afterwards wondering why. I once had an omelette in the Cambridge outpost ... well – I say I had an omelette, but I couldn't actually eat it, or anything. Then there was the steak in that one just behind Harrods: ho ho, very amusing. Desperate Dan might, I suppose, have managed to chomp his way through, but it was way beyond me. The thing is, Café Rouge always looks so very seductive: this wonderful red and gold and twinkly pastiche of the Parisian brasserie that only ever really existed as the backdrop to a Gene Kelly musical, but continues to excite the British with its spurious evocations of choucroute and escargots and grenouilles and bavettes and calvados and absinthe and all sorts of other things that they never actually eat or drink.

Makeover

The Hampstead High Street branch – long ago the Bird in Hand pub, more recently the Dome – has recently had a makeover, and this didn't surprise me in the least: because Côte has arrived, has it not? And Côte does it properly – the nearest you're going to get to an authentic mid-price brasserie. So has Café Rouge at last seen the writing on the wall? Will they – in addition to the red and gold – finally provide the grub? Bravely, I went along to find out, dragging my wife along with me. The first thing I observed was that they've got rid of most of the red and gold. It just ain't rouge any more, not really. The iron balustrade above is rouge, the awnings are rouge, and the

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■ Joseph at Café Rouge in Hampstead High Street

elements in the outdoor heaters, they're very rouge indeed. But inside and out, the walls are different shades of grey – okay, not as many as fifty, but still one or two all the same. The interior is rather good, though –

airier, bits of blue mosaic, an attractive bar with lit-up wine bins and narrow shelves supporting artfully arranged collections of mirrors and nondescript pictures (because to actually hang such things on the wall is

these days irredeemably naff). Trendy Tom Dixon brass and Broom crystal pendants – some chairs coming with arms and upholstery, though still there are plenty of damned uncomfortable wooden ones. It's a long restaurant, with more seating upstairs – but on this lunchtime, still pretty empty, and yet bloody noisy: the deep bass drone of persistent non-music, the violent shriek and then hiss of the coffee machine, the clank of cutlery and the relentless stomping of the manageress's teetering heels on the inevitable hard floor. Actually, she's a dream, the manageress: glamorous, smiling at everyone, so very eager to please – looking and sounding very French (I'd already mentally christened her Fifi). Turns out she's Turkish, and adores her job. "I adore my job..." she said (see: told you). "I love to make my customers happy. I was running the St John's Wood branch ... but now they have given me my dream: Hampstead ...!"

Erratic

Actual service, though, is at best erratic. The lady at the next table said to a waitress "five times now I have asked for a jug of water ...!" – whereas seconds after menus were placed on my table, someone came over to ask if we were ready to order. And order, eventually, we were ready to do. So I looked about me. Raised the eyebrows and wagged them hopefully. Stuck a finger into the air. Eventually Fifi came over. "Are you ready to order?" "I am indeed" "Brilliant: I'll just go and get my notepad". So – my wife wanted moules mariniere followed by duck confit, and I was having saucisson with pork loin, and then a steak frites – all good brasserie staples, I think you'll agree. White paper napkins (not even rouge) with cutlery placed atop them: this is standard now – it is up to the punter to place the fork and knife where they are supposed to be.

The moules were okay – but there was far too little sauce, and what there was completely lacked the kick: more garlic required, and a slug of white wine. My thin sliced pork loin (like Serrano) was also okay, the saucisson inedibly fatty, and tasting rather old – and I said so. Fifi agreed. "I know. We are trying to find a new supplier". Mm, yes – but in the meantime they shouldn't be foisting this rubbish on to the paying customer. She brought me a taster of hot pork and lamb sausage by way of amends – very nice, and, as it turned out, the best thing we were destined to eat. Because the duck was dense and sinewy, in a bath of melted plum jam, while the accompanying pommes dauphinois were greasy, molten and not nice at all – nor even a distant relation of

pommes dauphinois.

My steak came on a ludicrously huge rectangle of slate set into wood, the gaps between the two being just perfect for collecting the oozing of ages that can never be properly cleaned (A plate! A plate! My kingdom for a plate!). The sirloin did not look like a sirloin, being thinner than a (thin) slice of bread, and was well done: I had ordered medium rare. Fifi whisked it away in a flurry of apology (my, was her face rouge ...!). "I'm so, so sorry – I should have noticed. We are trained to notice. I have a wonderful chef downstairs – he will be so upset". Oh dear God: where on earth do you begin ...? The replacement was half raw, the Bearnaise (£1.25 extra) quite awful in its absurdity: separated and acidic and wholly industrial. The frites were good, though (phew!). Oh – and I'd ordered petits pois a la Francaise, which normally is a total wonder: this looked like a dredged up sample from Hampstead Ponds, though alas without the crayfish. Had a frog leaped out of it, it would have been the only authentic French thing in the room. The peas were bitter, slimy, maybe tinned, maybe processed, but anyway wholly nasty.

Asked for the pudding menu. Got the breakfast menu. Oh dear God – on and on. My wife had a 'coupe rouge': a mass produced sundae just like the Fruit Parfait you used to get in the Odeon for 1/6d. So there we have it: the brand new Hampstead Café Rouge. The manageress – though truly a Turkish delight – seems to believe she's working in Mon Plaisir or the Ivy, or somewhere. She ain't. Oh well: I did say it was time for somewhere ordinary...

■ 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

■ CAFÉ ROUGE

38-39 Hampstead High Street, NW3
Tel: 020 7435 4240

■ Open for breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner, seven days.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (mainly down to Fifi)

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: Set two course lunch £9.95. Main dishes a la carte too expensive, because they're not good.

“The petits pois a la Francaise looked like a dredged up sample from Hampstead Ponds, though alas without the crayfish. Had a frog leaped out of it, it would have been the only authentic French thing in the room

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