



Down Under still unrivalled

Australian wine sales grow six-fold in 20 years and are set to continue rising

Saturday is Australia Day, and what better moment to reflect on how our love affair with Australian wine has burgeoned over the last two decades. My musing has a foundation in fact: it is prompted by something I found as I cleared out my office in a short-lived resolve for a tidier new year.

That was an article from The Guardian's finance and economics section published in 1993, headed "Australia passes its grape expectations" and carrying a strapline starting "even the French are worried by the success of wine exports from Down Under".

That suggested concern was soon to be proved right: within a decade those upstart Australians had displaced France – traditionally biggest supplier of wine to the UK – at the top of the retail wine sales league, and every year since they have confirmed that lead. Much more revealing, though, were some of the statistics quoted – which, thanks to Wine Australia's UK director Yvonne May, I can partner with their present equivalents.

Soaring sales

The total quantity of Australian wine imported by the UK in the year to May 1993 was 38 million litres (a 70 per cent increase on the previous 12 months, and overwhelming growth since 1985, when just 540,000 litres reached our shores); in 2012, the figure was 256 million litres. Among other markets, only the United States came anywhere close, taking 194 million litres.

Back in 1993, Australia's world-wide wine exports totalled 101.6 million litres, worth 285 million Australian dollars; now they are 721 million litres, valued at 1.85 billion Australian dollars.

That sounds an awful lot of wine, but Australia's share of the world's wine production is only 4 per cent, though that proportion has more than doubled



■ Wine from Australia's vineyards remains the UK's favourite

Picture: Wine Australia

in the last 20 years. And the total sold beyond its shores is less than half that of the largest exporter of them all, France, from whose vineyards 1.5 billion litres depart to other nations.

In 1993, three-quarters of the Australian wine sold retail in the UK was in the £3-£5, bracket; today, two-thirds is between £4 and £6, but – surely worrying for a country where the focus is on profitability and emphasis increasingly on regionality and quality – almost a fifth remains in the £3-£4 range.

A more relevant change, in terms of consumer enjoyment, is in how Australian wine tastes. The big, sticky, oak-heavy styles – the type of chardonnay, for example, which prompted the ABC movement – have quite largely given way to leaner, more elegant wines. There has, too, been productive inter-action between Australia's winemakers and those of the old world. Both have learned valuable lessons, and wine drinkers

have profited.

The Voyager Estate wines I recommended a fortnight ago are good examples of the "new" Australia. Here are three more, from two of the UK's soundest retailers, in a rather lower price bracket but one which still allows quality in the bottle.

First, two wines from the Wine Society's excellent Exhibition range, Tasmanian chardonnay 2011 (£15), restrained yet full of character, and Victoria Shiraz 2007 (£16), whose power echoes the past but in a balanced and fresh way. The third is a bargain at Majestic, where all Oz bottles between £5 and £20 are reduced by 20 per cent if you choose at least two in your six-bottle minimum purchase. DB Reserve pinot noir 2011 is an example of De Bortoli winemaker Steve Webber's love of the red grape of burgundy, and is a very serious wine for £8 (after discount) – it is pale and pretty with more than a hint of French style, a happy wine with which to toast Australia's successes.

Discovering the delights on Bond's doorstep

Impressed by first visit to Queen's Park and the food it has to offer

I was born in Hampstead, and apart from a few years' exile in a boarding school in the middle of a field, have lived here ever since – and yet I know pitifully little about the wider environs of this massive and wonderful city. There are vast tracts of it – some newly trendy, many best avoided – that not only have I never visited, but I wouldn't know even vaguely in which direction they may lie. Because that old line about London being a series of villages is, of course, perfectly true, and fairly early on one learns one's beats, and tends to stick to them. So Hampstead I know backwards, quite naturally, and I'm pretty good on Soho, the West End, St James's, Covent Garden, Chelsea ... oh God, I'm running out now. Other parts I'm on nodding acquaintance with: south of the river (but only the bits with good restaurants), Clerkenwell (but only the bits with good restaurants) and – closer to home – Camden and Kentish Towns. But Kilburn I haven't been to for, well ... decades. Because why would you? Tricycle Theatre? Yes, okay. Anything else? Nothing I could put a finger on without laughing quite hysterically.

Pubs are true Irish

I passed through it the other day on my way to a place I have never before been: Queen's Park. And Kilburn hasn't changed: lots of 99p shops, Cash Converters, Cash & Carry, Cash Your Pay Cheque and Citizens Advice Bureau. Outside one of these – just as three white vans chock-full of policemen sired its way down the High Road – stood a queue of people, blank-eyed and miserably soaked from that morning's quite ceaseless deluge. The first bit of advice to these citizens might be to have enough sense to come in out

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■ Joseph at Penks in Queen's Park

of the rain, but anyhow. The pubs here are Irish. Not Irish themed, you understand – not all Gaelic calligraphy and harps and diddly-diddly music and limericks and the Craic, no no: just Irish.

Queen's Park is only a bit further on, though a greater contrast it would be hard to imagine. In Ian Fleming's novels, James Bond lives in a discreet square off the King's Road, Chelsea – but Daniel Craig, the current pretender to the throne

(because oldies such as myself know that Connery is the one and only) elects to live in Queen's Park. And in Salusbury Road we have an independent bookshop (best of luck to them), Gail's bakery, a decent wine merchant and quite a few inviting restaurants. One of which my wife and I went to: Penks. This is directly opposite a rather glamorous looking place called The Salusbury: brasserie, off-licence and pizzeria spanning

three handsome frontages whose fascias are in black glass and deco silver, with claret coloured awnings. Penks is a rather more modest affair, though with a comfortably informal interior made up of sort of Parisian bentwood chairs, chunky tables, a red wall here, a cream wall there, a potted palm, 1930s opal glass pendants and some large paintings that are a bit like Gauguin, but quite a lot not. This place has been on my list for ages, but then they stopped the lunchtime service, so I rather went off the idea. Now they have resumed it ... and so here I be.

Whether they will think again about opening for lunch is, I'm afraid, likely: the place was empty, the polite and friendly waitress quite resigned to the situation. The menu is short, but offers a few attractive propositions – although I was miffed to see that the roast rib of beef is on offer only on Sundays. Well it was already Tuesday, but still I just didn't think I could wait

that long, so – from a choice of just five main courses – I went for the nearest thing: grilled loin of pork with a warm salad of potato and pancetta and a pepper sauce and salsa. So nothing like rib of beef at all – but at least it was a lump of meat. My wife was having “luxury” fishcakes with a sorrel and champagne sauce with salad. But before all that there were starters to be dealt with. There are eight small dishes that can be “tapas” size small or “starter” size small (which is a bit less small: i.e. marginally on the bigger side). So I said to the waitress that my wife would like the salad of lentils, pear, Stilton, walnuts (a winning combination, always) with rocket and a port dressing ... while I would be having prawns done in pastis and lemon with cherry tomatoes. And when the dishes arrived, the waitress said “Who's got the salad ...?” which I found just perfectly maddening, you see, because I'd already bloody well told her. (And don't get me on to the “who's got ...” part of it).

Decently presented

The prawns were excellent: five, large and juicy, warm, and the cherry tomatoes nicely softened – though the skins were an irritation I could have done without. The lentil salad, though colourless, was decently presented. “Very good,” my wife said. “Lovely cheese and walnuts ... but far too much”. She finished it, though. I had a glass of Bergerac, she a glass of Sauvignon: generous size, and around a fiver each. And when the mains arrived, the waitress said “Who's got the pork ...?” and I gripped on to my chair and chewed a napkin hard, else things could well have become messy. Anyway – that pork dish, it could have been very fine: it had all the makings. Warm potatoes, nicely crushed, a sound pepper sauce – piquant, not just wilfully hot – and a decent chunk of meat with the inevitable blackened criss-cross markings (because these days “grilled” so often means “griddled”) ... but so very cruelly overdone. And you know pork when it's overdone – it just is tastelessly dry, and

textured in quite the wrong way. Shame. I relayed some of this to the waitress later on after she'd asked me if “everything was all right”, and she said she'd tell chef. Whether chef either heard or cared I couldn't of course tell you. The fishcakes – three, plump and crispy – were very damned good indeed: moist and flaky within. And while the champagne sauce was tip-top, it always makes me smirk a bit when I see it on a menu: is there really champagne in it, as opposed to white wine or maybe Cava? Is this sauce a bit Bollingery? A tad Kruggy? Does it truly smack of the Widow? Well no – never.

My wife rounded off with a strawberry and basil sorbet, which she loved. “Mm,” she murmured. “Basil really subtle, hardly more than an aroma” – which is more than Sybil Fawltly ever said. The technology was down, so the waitress wrote out the bill by hand ... whereupon I informed her that she had undercharged by nearly twenty quid: for which she was truly grateful. It was pouring when we left ... and I reflected that the queue of poor citizens in Kilburn must by now have been drowned, and washed clean away.

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

COME AND HAVE LUNCH WITH JOSEPH. IT'S STILL NOT TOO LATE. EMAIL HIM (DETAILS AT THE END OF THE PIECE) AND TELL HIM WHY YOU WOULD LIKE TO DO THIS

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