



■ The Villa Maria Marlborough winery

Great year but yields are down

In around a month's time, the first grapes from the 2013 New Zealand sauvignon blanc harvest will be picked. What will the vintage be like? Pretty good, no doubt, as the Kiwis are consistently fine growers and winemakers. But with another cool spring limiting potential fruit, quantity could be a problem.

For the moment, though, it is the 2012 vintage which is the centre of attention. It wasn't an easy one – the weather had been cool and wet until a few weeks before harvest – but a lot of excellent wines were made. The doubt is over whether there will be enough to go round: some growers reported that their crops were as much as 30 per cent below 2011's generous yield.

What does that mean for consumers? Inevitably, prices are rising and discounting will decrease. New Zealand has never been a cheap place to make wine, and its bottles stand at the top of the price league here, at a retail average of £6.38

(against just over £5 for all wine). For everyone who loves what wine writer Tim Atkin MW has so perfectly described as its “intense bungee-jump-into-a-gooseberry-bush style of sauvignon blanc” that's something to face up to, and accept. And there are still fine examples below £10.

'Extraordinary'

Atkin's quote was specifically about Marlborough sauvignon (read the full article at www.timatkin.com/corktalk?681). That region at the north-eastern tip of South Island is synonymous with the grape: it is by far the largest wine-growing area in New Zealand, and produces 90 per cent of the country's sauvignon blanc (which is, in turn, the country's major grape by a very, very long way – pinot noir comes next, its vineyard area only a quarter of that devoted to sauvignon).

And to think it was only 40 years ago that commercial wine grape growing began in Marlborough...

Still, enough of statistics.

What of the 2012 sauvignons? I can do no better than quote again, this time from Pierre Mansour, who is responsible for the Wine Society's Kiwi choices.

He describes the vintage as “extraordinary” and continues: “The relatively cool year produced naturally low yields of fruit full of outstanding flavour, intensity and power, backed by a fine line of refreshing acidity. Importantly the harvest produced grapes rich in the classic tropical fruit flavours that we all love about good Marlborough sauvignon blanc.”

That mouth-watering description pretty well matches two of the wines I've tried from the society's current Marlborough sauvignon blanc offer. Stoneburn (£7.25) is at the lighter end of the spectrum, with a touch of tartness on the finish which I like – one suggestion of a food match is crumbly Lancashire cheese, which might be just right. The Society's New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc (£8.95) is

made by Villa Maria, one of the biggest – and most reliable – names in the region, and it's a flavoursome, value-for-money classic.

These two are joined by four others in the society's current offer; open until Sunday – see www.thewinesociety.com. Cloudy Bay was originally included, but there's none left. The upmarket alternative, to my palate just as good yet cheaper, is Greywacke (£14.95) from Cloudy Bay's founding winemaker Kevin Judd.

There will be plenty more good 2012 Marlborough sauvignons on the high street. I missed the New Zealand Winegrowers preview of many of them, but these I caught up with at recent tastings are recommended.

Majestic has multibuy offers on Ragged Point (£8-£6 if you buy two), the always-appealing The Ned (£10-£7.50 if you buy two) and Invivo (£12.50-£10 if you buy two) Waitrose also has The Ned, and the pure and polished Ara Single Vineyard (both £10).

Tapas fails size test for a big plate eater

A piquant little nibble to soak up the booze is conquering the planet, but our critic is not happy

Possibly because I so frequently encounter professionally cooked food, I have turned against all the ninety-seven thousand television programmes devoted to the subject. I say all, but there is just the one and glittering exception, and she is called Nigella. I love her genuine enthusiasm – not to say her rather miraculous face – and also the fact that she speaks in intelligible English. Jamie Oliver just simple drives me crazy, and a little of the bucolic and mimsy double act that is the Hairy Bikers goes a very long way indeed (and anyway, as everyone, knows, you can't possibly trust any man with a beard). Nigel Slater is good for reading, but not for looking at. I used to love Delia, of course, because it is both rude and unpatriotic not to: it would be like turning on your own mother. But what I absolutely can't stomach any more is any variation of *MasterChef*. The only one ever worth watching was the Professionals, but I can no longer bear the sight of the pimply stubbly chefs sloping into the changing room wearing hiking gear and



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■ Joseph at Jamon Jamon in Belsize Park

a duffel bag. I can't bear them telling us that it's the chance of a lifetime and that they are living the dream and in it for the long haul and cooking is in their blood and they'll be gutted if they're sent home and dead chuffed, not to say over the moon, should they make it through to the next round. I can't bear bloody Monica Galetti widening her eyes to camera when someone makes a botch of dismembering a poussin. I can't bear Greg Wallace's lip-smacking greed and non-existent vocabulary. Michel Roux Jnr is good, though – oh yes, he's all right: but as a chef in a kitchen. Not strutting about and interrupting practically hysterically

nervous wannabes with questions such as "So how much do you want to win this competition?" to which they invariably reply "More than anything on earth – it means the world to me", just before slicing off the top of a finger.

Restaurants are for going to – and chefs aren't really for watching. And on television, there are no aromas, and nor do you get to taste the stuff – so what's the point, actually? Do these programmes encourage people to prepare from scratch proper three course meals and eat them at home around a lovingly prepared dining table? I severely doubt it. That very concept, indeed, is fast

disappearing from the new and fashionable restaurants: it's all about small plates, grazing, no decoration, and kitchen paper to blot your slavering mouth. Soon they'll dispense with tables altogether, and we can all hunker down on the floor, occasionally dipping a mitt into the communal trough, our attention impaled by a flatscreen. Yes – and I blame tapas. Tapas is what started it all – originally a piquant little nibble to soak up the booze, but now a way of eating that is conquering the planet. There are versions of tapas in every major national cuisine, and I'm getting mighty fed up with it. I like big plates: I'm a big plate man. Why have a small plate when a big one will do? Yes well – my daughter was over from her home in Ireland, and she said she wanted tapas. And so – kind, loving and indulgent parent that I am – that's what she got.

Frontage

There are a few Jamon Jamons in London: one in Soho, one in Camden Town ... and now this recent addition in Belsize Park, where we headed. It's actually on the site of the old Tapeo, and has a very similar bright yellow frontage – but now it's called Jamon Jamon, which means Ham Ham. Which of course is bloody bloody silly silly, but who these days gives a damn damn?

The egg-yolk exterior, with ketchup awning and lanterns, is the only cheery thing about the place. Inside it is dismal beyond imagination: a long and arid room, hard floor, fake Jacobsen chairs, exposed aircon (but of course) from which dangles a red and spindly thing which is either a priceless Calder mobile or else merely a protrusion of broken wiring.

There is a wall of mirror to reflect the dullness, as well as a monochrome mural in which maybe is detectable a nod to Miro, though rather more Heath Robinson.

On an A-board on the pavement is the offer of paella for two with a bottle of wine for £26.95, which I suppose is good value – depending upon the paella – but there were four of us, so we thought we'd go the tapas route. The waitress was so very charming and helpful and didn't laugh once at my atrocious Spanish accent as I ordered a board of Serrano ham and chorizo to get us going, and then tortilla (potato omelette), gambas a la plancha (grilled king prawns) ... look, I won't translate it as I go – here it is in English: fried potatoes, green beans with onion and ham, grilled lamb chops, chicken wings in a barbecue sauce, deep fried mushrooms with aioli and meatballs made from pork and beef. Think that's it. I said to the senorita: "Is that too much ...? Too little

...?" and she said "I think that's perfect" which truly stunned me, so I said "Really ...?" and she said "Oh yes. And I'm a very honest person".

So how was it all? Well – just about okay, I suppose. The last time I had tapas locally was at El Parador in Camden, and that was superb. This wasn't. The tortilla was a bit bland, the chicken wings tasted of fish – honestly, they tasted of fish – while the pork and beef meatballs (and we were all agreed on this) were just like lamb. The prawns were terrific, and I wished I'd ordered more, the mushrooms were very good – crunchy, then juicy – and the potatoes and the bean thing perfectly all right. Lamb chops ...? Well I can't tell you if they tasted like pork and beef because they were impenetrable. Like a bouncy castle, but not nearly so colourful. The ham and the chorizo were fine, but you expect that.

I finished a decent house Rioja to the strains of a Spanish lady singing her heart out – heavy with the agony of life, and probably yearning for Zorro. That was on the speakers, of course – but every Wednesday night they have live flamenco ...! Which strikes me as impossible and appalling in broadly equal measure. They had run out of coconut ice cream, so my wife had crème caramel: the usual little milky and nippleless breast, with three bold squirts of aerated and ersatz cream. The son had Spanish doughnuts: five very greasy and undercooked hoops of dough that looked very disconcertingly like calamari rings, with a microwave-zapped bowl of dipping chocolate sauce – which was pretty good until it started to congeal.

And there was Jamon Jamon. Not good good. Not bad bad. Just very very so-so.

■ 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

■ JAMON JAMON

177 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7483 4242

■ Open noon-midnight, seven days.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: There's a two-for-one lunchtime deal, and most tapas are £5-6.



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