



■ The new winery at Chateau Cheval Blanc, between the villages of Saint-Emilion and Pomerol in southwestern France

Mixing it with the best

How about this for an exceptional wine experience? I've just blended the latest vintage of one of the world's most famous and desirable wines, Chateau Cheval Blanc.

Sadly – as I did like the result – it's not what will be in the 2012 bottles, for which collectors and consumers will probably pay well over £600 each.

For one thing, it didn't have the essential complexity – wines from just six of the chateau's 44 plots were available to include, and two of those six weren't of the required quality for the chateau's top wine.

But that opportunity, here in London last week rather than at the spectacular new winery behind the modest mid-19th century chateau which has long been one of the two Saint-Emilion icons, was unique.

Never before, explained Pierre-Olivier Clouet, Cheval Blanc's technical director, had samples of the unblended wines for the latest vintage been shown in this way outside France, poured in a very special masterclass to illustrate something of how top bordeaux is created.

To simplify things, Clouet

focused on just two of the four major elements giving each plot's wine its character: grape variety and soil. Even without the others, age and rootstock, the diversity was patent.

Cheval Blanc is unusual. It is sited at the edge of Saint-Emilion territory, next to Pomerol. Thus there are no classic limestone soils; instead the vines grow on sand, gravel and clay. And there is a high proportion of cabernet franc in the blend.

Sixty per cent of the vineyards are planted to this, "the world's best grape", in the firm opinion of Clouet. The rest is merlot, which generally predominates in Bordeaux's right bank wines, and there is no cabernet sauvignon, so important across the river, nor any of the now minor grapes such as malbec or petit verdot.

Gravel and clay

The six glasses in front of each one of us held examples of unblended 2012 merlot and cabernet franc from the three soil types – baby wines, turned out of their nurturing barrels after only two months instead of the customary 15 to 18.

Remarkably, they didn't smell or taste of that expensive oak at all – a characteristic of the

vintage, said Clouet.

Use just three words to describe each one's aroma, and another three for the taste, he urged – this certainly focused attention.

The differences were clear: gravel and clay giving more complex, dense, often elegant and opulent results, the wines from sand heavier and earthier.

No wine from sand-grown vines goes into Cheval Blanc grand vin; instead it helps form the offspring, Le Petit Cheval, and the third wine.

I loved the cabernet franc, and my blend of roughly 70:30 cabernet/merlot, combining the samples from the gravel and clay soils, was very appealing.

Comparisons weren't over, as we moved on to the 2004 and 2010 vintages of Cheval Blanc and Le Petit Cheval, and then the finished 2001 cabernet franc and merlot blends and the Cheval Blanc they became, all three matured in the same way.

But the blending story is never finished, as Clouet said: "In all the history of Cheval Blanc, we have probably never found the right blending of the first wine." Don't be put off.

The superb, barely ready 2001 is available from the Wine Society, £349. See www.wine-searcher.com.

Truly delicious ending to a tale of three courses

The Foundry's interior gives one no great expectations, but it hit the spot after a trip to the Dickens Museum

So I'd read Clare Tomalin's recent biography of Dickens, and I'd been dipping into the *Collected Letters* and only just come to the end of Judith Flanders's *Victorian City* – all about London in the time of Dickens. Consequently, was I ready to visit the newly refurbished Dickens Museum in Doughty Street, Holborn? Why of course I was.

This is one of many of the great man's addresses in the capital, though most of them are now long vanished. More than £3million has been spent to restore the place to how it might have appeared when it was actually his home – where he wrote *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations* and a goodly chunk of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

It's a modest building, as Georgian terraces go, but very charming and homely. Being so intimate, however, it hardly lends itself to the infestation of tourists that was there when my wife and I added to their number: Germans taking notes, Americans photographing every square inch ... and the British – in search of the lavatories, and maybe a tea room.

Nor was the atmosphere helped a great deal by the constant stridency of next door's burglar alarm, which no one seemed inclined to stifle.

But there is much here to quicken the heart: the velvet covered lectern, built to Dickens's own design, and from which he delivered his legendary public readings. His ivory-handled cutthroat razor and hair brushes. A brass-buttoned court suit which he wore when presented to Queen Victoria ... and best of all: his writing desk, from which all the wonder flowed. I broke the rules and lightly touched its surface: it simply had to be done.

His chair was meant to be there as well, but it wasn't – no one appeared to know why. The whole adventure is quite pleasingly amateur, though it has to be said that God only knows where the three million quid went. The gift shop is tiny and generally tasteful, with the possible exception of the £10 Charles Dickens Action Figure, which comes with poseable limbs, hat and "removable quill pen".

And following culture, I always require food. There's not much in Holborn – a reasonable wine bar called Vats, and Cigalo – an overrated and overpriced

Over 50,000 rugs to choose from
Traditional to Modern



www.erug.co.uk info@erug.co.uk
24 Aylmer Parade, London N2 OPE



Fitness VIP

New YEAR New BODY in 12 weeks
get into the best shape of your life

Mat Pilates Class

book now Pilates Class
(every Saturday 11am)

no membership

Personal
Training

FitnessVIP.co.uk Personal Training Studio

14 Englands Lane, NW3 4TG | 0792 1928 125

by appointment only



■ Our reviewer in the garden at the Foundry restaurant

Spanish, both in Lamb's Conduit Street ... but I didn't fancy those.

So we made our way to Camden Town – where Dickens also once lived, when still young and penurious, and where too he installed the family of poor old Bob Cratchit, in a dark basement that now might quite possibly fetch what it cost to refurbish the Dickens Museum.

The Foundry in Delancey Street used to be Caponata – very favourably reviewed here about 18 months ago. The décor is unchanged – still quite quirky, and oddly appealing. The basic structure is extremely unpromising: concrete pillars and ceiling and a plate glass window.

But we have acid yellow bar stools, red lined pendants and an eclectic selection of sploidy pictures on the walls that would not look out of place in that long and silent shiny ground floor corridor in the Royal Free Hospital: Sunday painters' paradise. It's all rather as if someone has been given the brief to quickly jolly up a miniature underground car park.

The piece de resistance, however, is a tall vertical indoor garden, predominantly ferns, and a skylit rear room flanked by massive planked doors that would not disgrace a fire station: in the evenings, these open to reveal the famed venue for live music – the

actual 'Foundry' that now is the name of the whole caboodle.

The restaurant is still Italian owned and run, but the menu now is rather looser: It's a damn good menu, though – and everything is freshly prepared on the premises, as the very friendly waiter and waitress were eager to indicate.

There is still the signature caponata (aubergine) as a starter, though I was going for linguine with swordfish, cherry tomatoes and mint: interesting, and quite piggy for a starter, no? And my wife was going for burrata (a rather superior mozzarella) with Parma ham, tomatoes, leaves and a balsamic reduction. And while

we were waiting for that lot – and sipping large and peary glasses of Prosecco – the waiter came along to tell me that chef regretted he could not serve me the linguine, as there was no swordfish.

So I invited chef to let his imagination rip: they had the linguine, yes? So why doesn't he surprise me? The waiter seemed to like the idea, and beetled off to apprise chef of this latest wheeze. And chef came up trumps: how would it be with salmon marinated in whisky and dill, cream and cherry tomatoes...? Sounded sublime – and Lordy, it was too. Really rather sumptuous, and – although generous for a starter – fatally moreish, as well as visually delightful: a medley of glowing pinks and reds.

Seafood reductions

My wife's equally large starter was gobbled with relish: ample curls of perfectly dry Parma ham and very fresh leaves ... the burrata, though, not quite so obscenely yielding and oozy as it ought to be.

We parted from the strictly Italian with our mains: my wife had the day's special – sea bass in a crab bisque. I thought that would be a very good bet, for I remembered from my last visit here that they are rather good at seafood reductions: crab, lobster, prawn – as well as smoking their own fish.

She was not disappointed: firm fillet, and a heady bisque. I was having – at £19.50, the most expensive dish on the menu – fillet of venison with Parma ham and wild mushrooms en croute, with a chestnut puree and green beans: a venison Wellington, in short – this reminding me of the last time I had ordered such a thing, in the now mercifully defunct Walnut in West Hampstead: it had been entirely inedible.

This, however, was a sight to behold – and worth the maybe 40 minutes we had been waiting: a perfectly golden crusted lozenge – the pink fillet shyly winking within, the wrapping of ham and finely chopped mushroom just

so. The beans were bright and al dente, the chestnut puree nuggety and creamy. Now hand-cut chips are all very well ... but God, I do wish places would take the time to hand-peel them as well. They seem to think of potato peel as earthy and rustic whereas all it is is an age-old and vital ingredient of pigswill.

My wife wasn't going to have a pudding ... and then she saw vanilla macaroon and chestnut cream served on a chocolate rock with vanilla custard ... and rather thought she was going to have a pudding.

I was intrigued as to what a 'chocolate rock' might be, and idly reached across for a taste. It sure looked igneous: misshapen and craggy. Then you hack off a chunk, put it into your mouth ... and heaven simply engulfs you: just terrific. The macaroon was so-so ... but the chocolate rock...! The consistency of Aero, but coldish – before it floods the palate with lascivious wonder. Had I been young and thin and needy-looking – not something of which I have recently been accused – I might well have summoned the waiter and begged him humbly: "Please sir ... I want some more..."

■ 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.

FACTFILE

■ THE FOUNDRY

5-7 Delancey Street, NW1
Tel: 020 7387 5959

■ Open Monday-Thursday noon-3pm, 5-10pm; Saturday 10am-3pm, 5-10.30pm; Sunday 10am-3pm, 5-10pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Not at all bad, for the quality. Three-course meal for two with wine – about £90.

GET SLIM GUARANTEED

THE LAST WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAMME YOU'LL EVER NEED

"21 ways to lose weight" FREE BOOKLET

Achieve And Sustain Your Weight Loss Goal Guaranteed

- Learn what you need to do to start losing weight
- Eliminate cravings and gain control over your life
- Your guide to tasty, healthy food
- Personalised plan to suit your lifestyle

Visit our website for everything you need to gain control over your life in 2013.

Get expert advice, tips, recipes, planners, a FREE booklet and your January special offer to get you started in the New Year.

0207 858 2241
ask@get-slim-guaranteed.com
www.get-slim-guaranteed.com/january

Dog lovers wanted:

Enjoy the company of a canine guest!

Open your home to a friendly dog his holiday. Whilst owners are away dogs get the love, exercise and companionship of a loving home.

To find out more about becoming one of our carers contact

Wagging Tails

Gary Spencer-Todd
Tel: 020 8248 1137 / 07930 558128
Email: n@waggingtailsuk.co.uk
www.waggingtailsuk.co.uk/n

A franchise owned and operated under licence by Gary Spencer-Todd

王 *Silks & Spice*
府 **Yum Cha**
井 *Restaurant, Bar & Karaoke*

FREE DELIVERY
020 7428 0565
FOR ORDERS OVER £15 WITHIN 3 MILES
DELIVERY FROM 17.30 UNTIL LATE

Yum Cha Silks & Spice
is an **Oriental restaurant and bar with 4 karaoke rooms**
We specialise in Dim Sum and also Far East Asia cuisines.

50% off Dim Sum
Every Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday after 5.30pm

Yum Cha Silks & Spice
27-28 Chalk Farm Road, London, NW1 8AG.
Table Booking and General Enquiries: **020 7482 2228**
Deliveries and Takeaway Orders: **020 7428 0565**