



Now Greece is the word

Have you booked your 2013 holiday in the sun yet? If not, go to Greece. That was the impassioned plea in London earlier this month from a man who knows far more than most of his compatriots do about their country's wines. Konstantinos Lazarakis is the only Greek to have passed the very tough examinations to become a Master of Wine, and is also the author of a classic book on the product of his homeland's vineyards.

"Now is the best time to come and spend your euros in Greece," he said. "We have great wine and great food at great prices." He certainly proved the point about "great wines" in the tasting he offered to members of the Circle of Wine Writers, a remarkable tour through unfamiliar grapes, rare bottlings and old vintages. Given that you'll find it pretty near impossible here to buy the wines he poured, if you want to share the experience you need to go to Greece.

Vinous views

But why not? Not only are a lot of the wines very good to drink – and a world away from retsina – but there will also be remarkable vinous views for any first-time Hellenic holidaymaker.

Take those on Santorini, for example, that windy, exposed volcanic island where normally grown vines would simply collapse and die. The solution of the ingenious Greeks is to twine the vine stems into a basket shape, solid and protective of the grapes inside. If that wasn't picturesque enough, after a decade or two the stems are too old to be usefully productive, so they're cut right back and replacements allowed to grow. The more often this is done, the more gnarled and ancient the



■ Konstantinos Lazarakis at the London tasting

base of the basket becomes – some can be up to three centuries old, said Lazarakis, likening these vineyards to the *Jurassic Park* of viticulture.

Their yields are tiny, around the same as those in Sauternes. But these are normal juicy grapes for dry wine, not those which in Bordeaux are shrivelled into ultra-sweetness. The results which Lazarakis chose were from Santorini's flagship grape, assyrtiko, which, especially when harvested before there's any hint of over-ripeness, has a lovely lemony freshness which lasts even in five or six-year-old wines.

There was a fine sweet version, too, including just a little of another of the Greek island grapes, aidani, alongside assyrtiko and made in a similar way to vin santo – harking back to the long period of Italian (or, more particularly, Venetian) influence over Santorini's wines. There, too, the characteristic acidity remained, even though it was a blend of nine and 10-year-old vintages.

The tour began on another island, Cephalonia, with a honey and flowers scented robola,

its vines pushing their roots through rock impenetrable by the nasty vine louse phylloxera (Santorini, too, is phylloxera free, so these are truly historic wines). But there were mainland locations too, one of them the very appropriate – for a Greek experience – region of Drama, another the men-only enclave of Mount Athos. It was a revealing and rewarding tasting.

Greece has close to 60 defined wine districts and a wealth of original, enjoyable if sometimes hard to pronounce grapes. Though Lazarakis's choices aren't on the high street, there are other possibilities.

Mary Pateras, whose Eclectic Wines imports a fine range, points buyers to the Wine Society, which even has the impressive, food-friendly Hatzidakis Assyrtiko de Mylos 2009 which Lazarakis included. That's £23, but the rest are below £11. Both Marks & Spencer and Waitrose have dipped their toes into the Greek wine sea, the latter's choice including 2011 Hatzidakis assyrtiko (£11), and there are treats too at Theatre of Wine in Junction Road, Archway.

Blind date could not see herself getting through the rack of lamb

When our reviewer celebrated his 200th column for the *Ham&High*, he and his guest bit off more than they could chew

I just know that most of you will not have been able to sleep for excitement – can have been thinking of little else in the whole wide world – but now and at last, here it is, folks! My 200th restaurant review in the *Ham&High*: O frabjous day! And my little way of involving a reader in this extraordinarily significant event was to invite you all to write to me, if you fancied a spot of lunch. And write you did – though all those who failed to, I should like to report to my study at the conclusion of this piece in order to present to me a plausible reason. The responses (and heartfelt thanks to all) were in the ratio of

one male to every nine females: what can this mean? That ladies like to lunch, I can only assume. And the unfeasibly fortunate winner (do your own drum roll) ... is Lesley Malnick, an avid reader of the *Ham&High* ("I always turn to your page first" – bless you dear, even if you're lying) who has lived in Highgate for the last nine years. "Before that," she says, "I was in Essex. Which was disgusting." Oh yes – she speaks as she finds, does Mrs Malnick.

I had selected 1 Blenheim Terrace, which for a year or so has been on the site of a defiantly mediocre Italian place and is now pretty spiffy and owned and run by a chap called Ed Shaerf. Ed has

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■ Joseph Connolly takes Lesley Malnick out to lunch at 1 Blenheim Terrace

Picture: Nigel Sutton

form: he used to be head sous chef at the Ivy, and he brought along his junior there, Stuart White, who now is the main man in the kitchen. And the result is 'British with a twist'. 'Twists', of course, are generally to be avoided – but Britishness is celebrated here by the flying of a Union Jack, and 'the twist' by another flag sporting the cheeky features of Chubby Checker (all true – except for the last part). Right next door is L'Aventure, a very self-satisfied and overpriced French restaurant, and opposite is Pizza Express ... which is a Pizza Express. The interior is airy and spacious – odd, because it's really quite small. The tiny lobby has a glass cupboard full of wine, and a few steps down is a cosy little bar with room for maybe up to two people, if they both squidge up. Whiteness is relieved by bands of aubergine and orange, a vast gilt rococo

mirror and the soothing croon of Frank Sinatra. Tables are well spaced and crisply clothed, with first-rate and sparkling stemware.

Understated

The menu is understated, and immediately interesting: the 'British' – faggots, kedgeree – spiked by the 'twists': steak and chips wherein said steak is wagyu (together with kobe, reputed to be the finest in the world, and £32 to prove it) and lobster mac and cheese. Well my guest adores lobster, apparently, so went for that as a starter ... while I had wild mushroom porridge (both British and twisty all at the same time). We then sipped a decent Fleurie as I, being a blind date, set to finding out just whom I was lunching with. Well Lesley is very engaging and amusing company – and clearly a busy lady who has always been in a hurry to achieve just

everything. At one point she was approached by an Arab who owned Rothmans cigarettes and asked to form a new cosmetic company (sort of thing that happens all the time). So she did that, and came up with a scent called 'Lesley' – can't imagine why – which was successfully launched in the Middle East and was just about to debut in Selfridges when along came a lawyer called John who proposed to her within two weeks of their meeting, and – if I've got this right – they were married by lunchtime and had a couple of sons just before it was time to turn in for the night. Those sons are now in their twenties – one being the religious correspondent for *The Sunday Telegraph*, the other working for Foxtons in Heath Street. Which, yes, makes him an estate agent. But still I am convinced he is a very fine person. My mushroom porridge was

actually rather gorgeous: deeply and warmly comforting goo, a true mushroom flavour packing a wallop. But – as with risotto – a little went quite a long way. Lesley, meanwhile, was chasing the lobster tail that was supposedly in her dish. She eventually found two small pieces, the rest of the plate given over to what looked like a Scotch egg. The crunchy breadcrumb coating gave way to reveal ... rather dry penne within. Mac (for macaroni) and cheese is often on menus these days, and there are really only two things you should know about it: it bears no relation to either McDonald's or raincoats, and you really mustn't order it, ever. Having left most of that, my guest was eagerly looking forward to rack of lamb – only available for two people to share ... so I was too. It took rather a while to arrive – and we chatted. Lesley, who loves to cook and eat out, is currently a secret shopper – a bit like me with restaurants, I suppose. She also is a voluntary worker for all sorts of noble causes: helping drug addicts and teaching French (her first language actually, as from the age of four she went to the Lycée Français, where she also learned Italian: as her English is naturally exemplary, all that annoyed me quite a bit). She also teaches children with difficulties to read, as well as reading to older people. In her youth, she drank only tomato juice: Essex changed all that. "You have to drink in Essex. You'd go mad otherwise."

Filled with apology

The lamb arrived ... and things went badly wrong. Generous chops, nicely pink ... and as tough and chewy as the toughest and chewiest thing you can imagine. "I can't," regretted Lesley, "eat that. Literally." Well quite. Ed was filled with apology as he removed the dishes – and I felt quite sorry for him: I suspect he would be infinitely happier hidden and creating in the kitchen, rather than being front of house. So Lesley was now having the wagyu (which translates as 'Japanese cow', each one of which has lived a far better life than

you have) and I was going for fish and chips. She now was buttering bread as it was 2.45 and she hadn't actually had any lunch. Oh dear. Anyway – the steak was quite superb – large and lean, juicy, tender and with a buttery touch of sweetness (well of course I tried it) and the accompanying Béarnaise horribly acidic and half separated. Thick duck-fat chips were almost lovely, but not quite crisped enough. My 'fish and chips' was a nice fresh roasted little tranche of haddock, with rectangles of 'chip' standing cheekily erect. The twist? Soft and gorgeous quail eggs. Then came palate cleansers – 'liquid popcorn': cool, delicious and intentionally disorienting in a very Heston sort of a way. Decent banana crepes in too much caramel and a very scrumptious Valrhona chocolate mousse. Then a discovery: the four things Lesley never eats are the four things I never eat: offal, coconut, ginger and marzipan. Spooky, no ...? Main courses were not charged for, so the restaurant recovered well: It really is a pretty good place. Could have ordered another bottle, and chatted on ... but then I thought, look: blind date I may be, but I don't have to be literal about it.

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

FACTFILE

- 1 BLENHEIM TERRACE NW8
- Tel: 020 7372 1722
- Open for lunch Wednesday-Sunday noon-3.30pm. Dinner Tuesday-Saturday 6.30-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
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