



How paying £2 more for a bottle can be worth it

In this bargain-hunting, winter-sale time, I'm going to do something rather odd – advise you to spend more on wine. But there's a sound reason why.

Take a look at the graphic with this article. It shows that if you increase your spending on a bottle of wine from £5 to £7.50, the value of what you're drinking – the wine-red level in the graphic which rises far more steeply than the price – is 13 times greater. Go to £20 and the wine content should be 75 times better.

This is not the work of some anarchic imbiber with a disdain of supermarket wine shelves and a hatred of governmental tax-grabbing. The graphic comes from Primrose Hill-based Bibendum, one of the most respected UK wine importers.

Happier and healthier

Bibendum issued it before Christmas with a plea from managing director Michael Saunders for less over-indulgence in cheap wine in favour of the happier, healthier experience of smaller quantities of decent stuff. It's a message worth remembering throughout 2013.

The breakdown of where the money spent on a £5 bottle goes explains why the constant advice to wine buyers to trade up is sensible. It's not about profit for the wholesaler or retailer – if Bibendum's figures are accepted, that remains the same proportion of the bottle price. There is some green logic, too – there need be no difference in packaging or handling costs between a £5 bottle and a £20 one. So the wine really should be better if you pay more.

Of course, like all such



■ Bibendum's price breakdown of the contents of a wine bottle

exercises, this one is too simplistic. What, you might ask, about the cost, transport and waste implications of those smart and very heavy bottles which some producers favour when a lot of cheaper wines are shipped in bulk and bottled here in the thinnest glass practicable? Or the extra that goes into the growers' pockets as they're paid more? But while aspects like that may tweak the message, they do not devalue it. What is clear from Bibendum's graphic is that you don't have to spend a lot more to have much more value in your glass.

So I will recommend some treats which I enjoyed in recent months but was unable to slot into 2012 columns.

First, from Australia's Margaret River region, a trio of wines from Voyager Estate – 2005 cabernet sauvignon-merlot, 2008 chardonnay and 2009 shiraz.

They're classic cool-climate Oz

wines, restrained and splendidly pure examples of the grapes within, handled with respect and skill. They fall into the £20-£30 price bracket (London stockist is Justerini & Brooks, or you can buy online at www.winedirect.co.uk) but their quality proves the pay-more-get-better-value argument perfectly.

So does this fine winter pair from the Torres family, whose empire spans Spain and Chile: Fransola sauvignon blanc 2010 is a world away from sherbetty, fruit-bomb styles, elegantly smoothed in oak and deserving partner to posh fish, shellfish or chicken; Cordillera carignan 2008 is dark, rich and concentrated yet finishes fresh – a modern, excellently structured red.

Buy both at www.vintagemarque.com, £115.25 and £79.66 for a case of six respectively, delivery £4.95, free if you spend £100 or more.

The good, the average and the downright nasty

2012 RESTAURANT ROUND-UP

Come and have lunch with me! Come on, don't be shy. It's a new year, and you're not so foolish (you can't be) as to be on a January detox and diet. No, of course not, so look, come and have lunch with me. All expenses paid, and the review of this never-to-be-forgotten occasion printed on this page, with a picture of the two of us: truly one for the album. I've made this offer before in previous years, but this time it's special. On the last day of February, I'll be publishing my 200th restaurant review in the *Ham&High*, and I want one fortunate reader to be a big part of it – such a celebration as will render last year's Jubilee and Olympics as no more than shabby and slight. So, email me via my website (details below) and tell me why you'd like to join me. We might even go somewhere terrific – though do feel free to make suggestions (as I haven't reviewed the place before). If you could manage it within the next fortnight, it would aid me greatly.

Now to my round-up of the places I went to last year. In addition to the 50 restaurants that I reviewed, I have also eaten in some more out of the way places. A train (Orient-Express – as good as cuisine and service get when on the move), a boat (the moored HMS Belfast – one of the worst dinners with the poorest service



■ Joseph in patriotic party mode

I can remember) ... though mercifully no plane; I wouldn't mind if I never again saw the inside of an airport. I've also eaten in a few private members' clubs – and one never reviews these because clubs, unlike restaurants, abhor publicity: and anyway, non-members can't go to them. I think I'm allowed to say, however, that I ate extremely well at The Garrick, Whites, The Athenaeum, The Savile ... and rather less so at Buck's and Brooks's. The Chelsea Arts yo-yos: sometimes great, sometimes not: whenever they latch on to a brilliant chef, he's headhunted for elsewhere. And then there are my favourite restaurants where I return fairly frequently: The Wolseley, J Sheekey, Wiltons, Le Relais de Venise (in Marylebone). So what with all that and the 50 restaurants I reviewed on your

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“ Just one place received an unprecedented score of zero. Zilch. Nul points. I didn't manage to actually eat any of the perfectly repulsive 'food' that was quite appallingly served to me

behalf, it's amazing, isn't it really, that I had time to do anything else whatever. But I did, of course. Obviously. I just can't at the moment, um ... put my finger on exactly what.

Anyhoo ... of these 50 restaurants (and the reviews may be read in full on the website) I see I have awarded (for food) eight stars out of 10 to 15 of them, and seven stars to a further 21. This means either that I have erred on the side of kindness and generosity, or I was unusually fortunate in my choice of eating places. But let us start at the very top of the pops (Look: I'm not Alan Freeman, I'm not Tony Blackburn – I can't do countdowns). LE GAVROCHE achieved 10 stars for food, service and 'the feeling' – but if a two-star Michelin with a very famous chef and sous-chef that has been established for nearly 50 years cannot muster the full 10 stars, then who can? Only one restaurant managed nine stars ... and, very strangely, not to say ironically – it's gone. Deceased. It is an ex-GOLDFISH. For that was the name of it – in Heath Street. Truly good, and now no more.

Scoring system

So to those with eight stars. Now it must be understood that any sort of scoring system can be rickety, in that one isn't comparing like with like. If somewhere such as the terrific CHICKEN SHOP in Kentish Town scores eight, and so do THE DELAUNAY in Aldwych, the MILL LANE BISTRO and the great Italian BRICIOLE in Marylebone (as they all did) it doesn't mean that they are equal: simply all very good at what they do. Also scoring eight were such disparate places as ST PANCRAS GRAND – which

is reasonably grand – and the MAGDALA in South End Green, which decidedly isn't. Other quite humble places that achieved an eight are THE NEW INN in St John's Wood, GIOVANNI RANA – very high-quality Italian at very low prices – and SIMPLY FISH, a newish place in Camden Town. Another great fish place is BONNIE GULL SEAFOOD SHACK in Fitzrovia (and very trendy, to boot), while Marylebone – always a marvellous and ever-changing resource – offered up a further four: COTIDIE (designer Italian, and rather expensive), IL BARETTO (ditto) and HARDY'S: English, more or less – relaxed, reasonably priced and serious about cooking. Then there is ONE08 – a hotel restaurant, quite formal and very good indeed. The final scorer of eight is BRASSERIE MERIBEL in Camden Town ... and that too has now perished: shame, it was good.

Seven stars were notched up by a vast array, tending to the everyday: THE VINE, PANE VINO and THE OXFORD, all in Kentish Town, HARRY MORGAN in St John's Wood, TIP TOP THAI and LA GAFFE in Heath Street, WATERWAY, VINO TECA, Camden Town's HACHE, THE BULL in Highgate, the WASHINGTON in England's Lane ... and the most everyday of all: YE OLDE SWISS COTTAGE: still a bit of an old man's boozier, with cheap decent grub and beer. More upmarket are QUI in Crouch End, VILLA BIANCA (which has scored higher in the past), BRASSERIE ZEDEL, SIX CLERKS off Fleet Street, and a couple of Chinese: WENG WAH HOUSE in Belsize and the rather ludicrous ROYAL CHINA in Baker Street. The weird one was PROUD CABARET in Camden Lock (the nosh being better



■ Joseph Connolly with guest Jullien Gaer at Villandry in Great Portland Street

than it needed to be) ... and then there were a couple of cool ones: SHRIMPY'S in King's Cross and DACH & SONS in Hampstead.

Below seven stars, you tread with care: six were awarded to WAGAMAMA, VILLANDRY, the ENGINEER in Primrose Hill, the SPANIARDS INN and the fashionable CARAVAN in King's Cross. I gave five to two old-established Hampstead pubs: THE HILL and THE OLD BULL AND BUSH. Just four to the rather lamentable FISHWORKS in Marylebone, KARPO in King's Cross, and the absolutely risible MIA in Swiss Cottage (and four

was too generous, believe me). The GARDEN CAFÉ, actually in Regent's Park itself, scored only three: lovely place to be, but do bring sandwiches. Nowhere scored as low as two or one ... but one place, just one, managed an unprecedented score of zero. Nothing. Zilch. Nul points. In that I didn't manage to actually eat any of the perfectly repulsive 'food' that was quite appallingly served to me: THYME, in the Premier Inn in Haverstock Hill. God, oh God, oh God ...

So when I come to take my lucky, lucky, oh Lord how lucky guest to lunch in February, it will

be somewhere immeasurably better than that (as how could it be otherwise?). So what are you waiting for? Write to me. Go on. Don't be a stranger. Tell me all your news. Do it now. Then maybe ... you can come to lunch ...!

■ Send all emails to the Contact the Author page at www.josephconnolly.co.uk, where reviews of all the above restaurants may be read in full (along with all the others). Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *England's Lane*, is published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook.



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