



Now it's time to get real

This month the spotlight is on wines made with minimal additives

One topic more than any other is guaranteed to prompt passionate debate – and equally passionate disagreement – among wine professionals. Over-use of oak? Big-brand wines? Premature oxidation? Heavyweight bottles? Excise duty? No, none of these. The contentious topic is natural wine.

If the discussion has passed you by, you may in all innocence suggest that surely all wine is 'natural'. To an extent it is, being the product of fermented grapes. But if wine producers were forced, as their food colleagues are, to list every ingredient on the label, you could be justifiably surprised, and perhaps even deterred from buying wine in future.

I'm not going to tell you what's in there besides grape juice – already, there's quite enough discussion going on about what exactly we're consuming, and it could take all of this column and several to come. Instead, this is the moment to experience the alternative wine culture.

March is Real Wine Month – the descriptor is deliberate, to avoid some of the argument and because, in the view of the people behind the initiative, it is simply a better description of the wine they think we should all be drinking. The central focus of the activities is the Real Wine Fair, a two-day celebration on March 17 (for consumers and trade) and 18 (trade only) of the funky, quirky, outrageous (choose almost any adjective you like...) and simply delicious.

Last year's event, held in a cavernous Holborn basement, offered experiences as challenging as the products of foot-trodden



■ One of the Georgian growers at last year's Real Wine Fair

grapes matured in huge clay pots by Georgian monks (a valuable addition to my wine knowledge, but perhaps not an everyday drinking pleasure) or as memorably splendid as wines from the black volcanic slopes of Mount Etna and the red soils of Istria.

I met a man who reckoned the longer time he spent tilling his vineyards with horses meant he understood the developing grapes better than anyone rushing about on a tractor; another who named one of his wines after his Jersey heifer, a woman whose leg bore a

tattoo of a bunch of her favourite grape variety; an academic who kept his vines free of parasites by immersing them in sound waves. And those were only four of the more than 150 growers represented, a number likely to be pretty nearly matched this year.

Doug Wregg of Les Caves de Pyrène, a principal instigator of the event, sums them up thus: "Small wine growers who work organically and/or biodynamically and intervene as little as possible in the winery to make wines that taste true to themselves, true to their grape varieties and true to the vineyard and region."

Artisanal producers

This year, you'll need to journey a little further to meet them, to the Victorian warehouse of Tobacco Dock in Wapping (one stop on the DLR from Bank). It will be worth the journey. You won't go hungry, as there will be food from a selection of similarly artisanal producers, plus refreshment in the form of beer from Camden Town Brewery and spirits from the Sacred distillery in Highgate.

Advance tickets are £15 (plus £1.55 agency fee) or you can pay on the door (£20).

But if Wapping is a place too far, Real Wine Month stretches the experience into wine shops and restaurants, with tastings and by-the-glass offers in loads of London locations – those in Ham&Highland include the Old White Bear in Hampstead, the Bull & Last in Highgate, Highbury Vintners and Bottle Apostle, Crouch End, with more joining – catch up with the lists and buy wine fair tickets on www.therealwinefair.com.

Don't be shy, experience the unusual, and – naturally – you should be very pleasantly surprised.

Gallic cock rules the roost where brasserie food's done brilliantly

At Balthazar the menu is authentically French and so are the waiters – though they are far more jolly than their Parisian counterparts

What does the word Balthazar conjure up for you? Possibly the name of one of the gold, frankincense and myrrh-bearing magi...? Or, conceivably, the second volume of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*...? If you are a restaurant-going foodie, however, the word will resonate with Kevin McNally's hugely famous and popular New York brasserie – opened 15 years ago, and still one of Manhattan's very hottest tickets. And now there is one in London – superbly positioned on the site of the old Theatre Museum bang on

the Covent Garden Piazza, and opposite the flank of the Opera House. It has been opened under the umbrella of Richard Caring's harem of terrific restaurants – Caprice, J Sheekey, the Ivy, the Dean Street Townhouse, the Côte chain and, oh ... lots of others ... and guess who was there a couple of weeks ago on opening night...? You're right: moi. Moi and the missus, actually. We had just come from a reception at the House of Lords in aid of a cause very close to home: the Royal Free Charity, of which – somewhat bewilderingly – I have the honour to be a patron.

The Lords is a pretty wonderful place, but guests very rarely

“So – six escargots for me and for my wife a lobster and black truffle risotto – deeply lobstery and fragrant, utterly creamy and pretty much perfect. As were the garlicky snails, still in their shells and gorgeously textured

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■ Joseph at Balthazar in Covent Garden, with its magnificent, warmly lit interior

get to see the best bits ... that evening being no exception. All your possessions go through an airport X-ray, then you go round this corner, turn left, turn right, past the coat pegs, past the loos ... and there you are, in a long, thin, covered portion of the famous terrace: a sort of tented ceiling seemingly made up of somebody's bedsheets and hung with brass chandeliers and heaters that roasted you (I swear some flunkey was about to emerge with a baster and rashers of streaky bacon to place across our breasts) which then were turned off, so that everyone was instantly f-f-freezing. But the speakers were inspirational: eminent professors

and surgeons who are determined to make the Royal Free Europe's preeminent hospital, while pushing back the boundaries of research and pursuing the art of the possible. In the field of immunology, it is already a world leader, though many new and exciting plans are afoot. If ever a charity were worthwhile, then surely this one is – so if you have a spare few million sloshing about, or even a smidgen less, you might consider bunging it their way.

The first sight of Balthazar is very warming: soft and orangey lighting luring you in, yearning to embrace you. And there on the pavement is the greeter: Balthazar himself, it could be – certainly

he's a wise guy. A honcho from the Bronx: "Hi – how you doin'?" in that unmistakable accent that can only be at its honking best if you have a conk to rival Jimmy Durante's, and our man on the door was no slouch in that department. You last saw him not just in *The Sopranos* but every gangster movie ever, from Cagney to de Niro. He invited us in: it was an offer we couldn't refuse.

The interior is magnificent: the Paris/Vienna/New York luxury brasserie of mirrored pillars, a stunning bar and a melange of fin de siècle and art deco to which we now have become accustomed, this very largely due to Jeremy King and Chris Corbin of Wolseley

fame (the original that set the ball rolling). The greeting was friendly beyond belief – and something of a reunion of old chums: waiters I knew from the Groucho and the Ivy, overseen by the great general manager Byron Lang, whom I have known since his early days at the Wolseley, and most recently in his role as maitre d' at the Savoy Grill: the carousel of the upper echelons of London dining never ceases to revolve.

Do you like French brasserie food...? Then get down here without delay. Every one of the starters and 20 mains is French, with the exception of duck shepherd's pie. The wine? Enormous list – all French. This is rare, and – to me – very welcome and refreshing. And refreshment was just what I needed, so a bottle of Givry was ordered fast from the very charming waiter (French) who, in common with all his colleagues (French) was not just dressed in long white apron as if from a Lautrec poster, but smiling with delight at simply being here – and you ain't never going to get that in Paris, matey. The place was rammed, as I suspect it always will be – for very soon it is to become a morning-to-night operation. It's clattery, it's noisy with buzz, and it's a hell of a kick to be there.

Juicy steak

Fresh bread from their own boulangerie next door (echoes of Pont de la Tour), good butter on a marble slab. So – six escargots for me, and for my wife a lobster and black truffle risotto – deeply lobstery and fragrant, utterly creamy and pretty much perfect. As were the garlicky snails, still in the shells and gorgeously textured: slight hit of chilli, which worked very well. To follow, I was tempted by the Balthazar cheeseburger – got to be good at £16, I thought ... but then I saw steak frites Bearnaise at just over a quid more. This was tenderloin – unusual cut, and fabulous (if it's fabulous). So I went for it. My wife wanted duck confit with roast potatoes, cipollini onions, wild mushrooms and a frisée salad. This was a large leg and breast portion, the meat

suitably yielding and delicious, the skin as crisp as crisp – though she thought it might have been a tad salty. My steak was one of the best I've had in a long time: truly juicy (the whole point of a steak, really), totally lean and really tasting of quality beef. The frites were pretty good, the sauce less so: too liquid, too tart.

And before pudding, our waiter suggested, peut-être un peu du fromage...? Bien sûr: Liverot, largely, which I love. Then a crème brûlée and profiteroles (ordered because everything here is made on the premises). But these were icy cold, and so was the chocolate sauce: apart from the Bearnaise, the only black mark – because the crème brûlée was excellent. The level of cooking did not surprise me – the head chef here is Robert Reid, whose wonderful food I fondly remember from the Michelin-starred Oak Room, a beautiful but bafflingly empty place that used to be in Le Meridien Hotel in Piccadilly.

We had a tremendous time at Balthazar – and you will too. We have here theatre, as befits its location, and it is up to both staff and diners, I think, to make the drama work. And so we left: the goodfella wasn't on the door any more. Well – it was very late: maybe he was sleeping with the fishes.

■ 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

- **BALTHAZAR**
4-6 Russell Street, WC2
Tel: 020 3301 1155
- Open: at the moment just for dinner – soon from early morning to late night.
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: You pick, you choose. But if you want three courses for two with wine ... about £100.



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