



Mixed-case temptations

Some club plans give option of swapping chosen bottles for others

They're so tempting, those mixed-case specials that try to convince wine drinkers to sign up to a case a month or similar plans. Until, that is, you study the wines carefully and discover that while perhaps two-thirds of the bottles match your palate, the rest are something you'd rather do without.

I've never succumbed, but I have now been pleasantly surprised by the flexibility some plans offer, though perhaps not in the introductory case. How about one which, after a first near-half-price case, allows you to substitute several, even all, of the chosen bottles for others you'd prefer? Of course, there are cost considerations – top burgundy instead of Chilean pinot won't be on – and changing the choice takes away the simplicity of the pay-your-money-and-receive-the-box formula.

But if you're picky, yet want regular deliveries without the effort of choosing every bottle, read on.

The occasion which prompts this column was a press tasting of the bottles in the Discovery Club cases offered by Virgin Wines. There were some delicious wines among them – in fact, I'd happily drink very nearly all of them. Then managing director Jay Wright started explaining how, if club members weren't happy with the choice offered when they were told the content of the next case, they could choose substitutes. Sounds almost too good to be true, but that's how the plan works. Interestingly, the wines that are most frequently rejected are chardonnays!

A similar offer applies with the Laithwaites' regular selections (hardly surprising, given



■ Harvest with Andre Brunel's team in the Rhône Valley: Virgin offers three Brunel wines

that Virgin – although run independently – is part of the massive Laithwaites/Direct Wines set-up).

The Discovery Club, offering a quarterly case of 12 plus a festive selection for Christmas, comes at two price levels – the standard at £90 (£7.50 a bottle) or first class for £100 (£8.33). I haven't tasted the choices for March, but the most recent selections had some real stars. Most are still available, so for anyone signing up who has reservations about any of the bottles offered, these are great alternatives (non-club prices in brackets):

At first-class level, whites: Famille Perrin Luberon blanc 2011, fruit, minerals, herbs – a "I want another glass" wine (£10); La Multa Bianco 2011,

wonderfully different (£10); Kirriemuir Reserve Old Vine Single Vineyard Barossa Semillon 2012, restrained and well worth keeping (£12); Domaine Saint Hilaire viognier 2011, nutty, rich and aromatic (£10); Irius 100ft Somontano gewurztraminer 2011, perfumed yet fresh (£11). Reds: Les Arbousiers Reserve Coteaux du Languedoc 2010, dark and enticingly meat-friendly (£10); Les Hauts du Mont Côtes du Rhône Villages 2009, cherry-rich and very drinkable (£12); Les Trois Cles Reserve 2011 Coteaux du Languedoc, smartly fruited (£12).

Standard level, white: Woolundry Road Margaret River Riesling 2011, classic New World style with splendid length (£10); red: Cuna de Reyes Rioja 2010, clean, ripe and modern (£9).

Quarterly cycle

There are two initial cases for new members before the regular quarterly cycle swings in, a welcome case which can be tailored, and a fixed first case (£55). The two wines I've tasted from the latter are Arika Reserve 2012 sauvignon blanc from Chile (£9.50) and Les Grands Chemins old vines carignan 2011 from southern France (£8.50) – both easy, fruit-led and enjoyable, but less exciting than some of those to come.

Virgin also has a rather neat way of encouraging customers to build up some credit towards their future non-plan purchases – the WineBank, where for every £5 "invested" (in regular monthly payments, initial minimum £25) there's an instant interest addition of £1.

Obviously, there's small print to read, and £8 delivery is charged on orders under £150 – see www.virginwines.co.uk for more details. But the wines, certainly, are tempting.

M's secret's out - café owner has great all day dining going on

Breakfasts until 3pm, a scrumptious lamb shank and a warm welcome makes our food critic a very happy diner

Primrose Hill is an area I am enjoying to stroll around more and more every single time I come to visit. The Hill itself is a good deal to do with it, but the atmosphere in Regent's Park Road is always rather energising – I think because it's a real and cherished local street with real and cherishable local people who all seem to know one another. The shops are rather more chi-chi, of course, than your average run-of-the-mill parade – excellent kitchen equipment from Richard Dare, an entire block of cafés quite literally cheek by jowl, an independent bookshop (long may it live), a Nicolas wine emporium, a pet shop and a couple of much-loved restaurants: Odette's and Lemonia.

It's also very well endowed with original telephone boxes. A pair of the very earliest type stands proud just outside the Queen's, and there is a further rather later example further down the road. In the 1950s, these bright red beauties were always, but always, occupied – and usually outside there was a queue of people (simmering or soaked) the first in line tending to rap impatiently upon the glass with one of the four large pennies that were necessary to make a phone call (Button A and Button B forming part of the national psyche). Then in the 1960s they were generally empty because they had all been vandalised. Now, the few remaining are empty because everyone carries their own phone, and so they have been given over utterly to a cluster of

“ The proprietor of the Greenberry Café is known as M, I learn locally, though is far more cheery than the head of the Secret Service of the same name

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■ Joseph outside Greenberry Café in Primrose Hill

advertising for rentable floozies, their jolly little cards bursting ripely with both pictures of beautiful deshabelle women and very headily beguiling promises ... neither of which will ever be met.

Slap bang

And this very telephone box happens to be slap bang opposite where my wife and I were going to lunch: the Greenberry Café. The site has history – it used to be Troika, the hearty Russian joint as red as a telephone box that I rather liked for its boisterous audacity, horrible pictures and big, fat food. But the proprietor of the Greenberry Café has much more history than that. She is known as M, I learn locally, though is far more cheery than the head of the

Secret Service of the same name. She is actually called Morfudd Richards (Welsh, you think? How could you tell?) who came straight from Gwynedd to being duty manager at Joe Allen, manager of Harvey's (when Marco was cooking there), this followed by a stint at the Ivy and Le Caprice in the glory days of Jeremy King and Chris Corbin's ownership. Then she opened her own very popular restaurant in Islington – Lola's, which she ran for ten years. I asked her at some point whether she missed the old place, and her eyes said it all. "It's now a Jack Wills ..." was all she had to say. From super grub to preppy duds: it's the modern way.

The Greenberry has a pea green frontage, the doorway framed by

a pair of bay trees. The name of the café is painted on the glass ... and so is the entire menu, in a selection of fluorescent pastels, this introduced by a florid howdydoo: "Hello Primrose Hill!". The interior could not be more different from Troika – where there was clotted blood, now there is vanilla: it used to be Moscow Hot, and now it is Primrose Cool. They have retained the pleasing and sturdy tables, however, each with a central pillar recalling Hoffmann, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mackintosh ... you get the idea. One is welcomed by the very amicable and energetic owner herself, this casual friendliness and bustling efficiency setting the tone. She regretted the scruffiness and faintness of the Xeroxed

single sheet menu ... but I was eager to see what was on it, because the chef here too has pedigree: Pratap Chahal, who has cooked in Galvin Bistrot de Luxe, Cinnamon Club and the legendary Chez Bruce. Well good.

It's an all-day set-up, with breakfast being served from nine in the morning until (get this) 3pm. Highly unusual – and, I am sure, very popular. In fact, a couple at the next table were happily digging into sausage, eggs, mushrooms ... it looked marvellous, but then a cooked breakfast simply always will. There is a "traiteur" section with pickled things and smoked salmon and so on, and this was going down well with the singletons perched upon the Z-shaped stools at the bar. My wife was having soup of the day, which was artichoke and something I can't remember ... but it turns out not to matter because at 1pm there was no more soup of the day. So instead she went for wild mushrooms, roast onions, goat's curd and toasted hemp seeds – and was very pleased that she had. "I just think that mushrooms and onions are meant to be together," she said. "This is lovely. I don't actually like goat's curd – but with this it's great. The seeds are wonderful – very nutty". I had Morecambe Bay potted shrimps – a modest quantity, maybe, for £7.50, but a good and meaty flavour which would have been even better had it been warm.

Maddening hiss

I liked the proper linen napkins, didn't like the water in the Kilner bottle – it had about it the whiff of paddling pool. And another thing I wasn't enjoying: the absolutely maddening hiss and thunder of the Gaggia machine – they've become a law unto themselves, these things. Then there was pulled pork bun (a lot of chefs are on the pull, these days) with apple puree and a coleslaw side for my wife ... and I was going for the day's special: lamb shank braised with spices. "Not merely chilli hot ...?" I checked with M. "No – just nicely spiced". So it proved: expertly spiced, actually,

and wondrously huge and yielding and utterly scrumptious – as was the totally unfatty rich and silky gravy forming a gratifying swamp of mash and shredded cabbage, which I scooped up eagerly with a spoon. First rate. As was my wife's excellent brioche bun and brilliantly flavoured and textured pork, into which the apple puree had oozed and dissolved. She drank an American beer with that: Magic Hat, with pork-complementary apricot nicely to the fore. And M – was she now resting on her laurels? M was not. M was outside in the freezing cold, up a ladder and happily writing with her highlighter pens a selection of new dishes all over the window. She's very hands-on, dedicated and professional, this lady, and deserves the success I am sure she will enjoy here.

My wife rounded off with roast and raw pineapple with pain d'epice and a coconut and lime sorbet. This was syrupy in a good way, both flavours singing in the sorbet. The pain d'epice reminded me of gingerbread men, which as a child I tolerated only in order to attend to their ritual dismemberment: I left the eating of them to others. As we left, I spotted in the telephone box a similarly red bespectacled gentleman intent upon catching up on his reading.

■ 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

■ GREENBERRY CAFÉ

101 Regent's Park Road, NW1
Tel: 020 7483 3765

■ Open Monday-Saturday 9am-11pm. Sunday 9am-4pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆

■ Cost: Perfectly reasonable, generally. Dishes from £4.50 to £20. Bargain £8.50 breakfast served till 3pm.



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