



Loire for sense of spring

Journey to discover French joys to suit rising temperatures



■ La Noblaie vineyard in spring

Yesterday – the vernal equinox – was the first day of spring. Whether or not it feels that a seasonal milestone has been passed, let's start thinking of wines that fit better with warmer weather; even those that might be happily sipped outside over a sunny lunch.

There's one wine region that, above all, provides all the right bottles as temperatures rise and outdoors beckons. The vineyards of France's Loire valley offer a rare vinous spectrum – from very good fizz through crisp and aromatic whites to soft, easy pinks and serious but restrained reds, with a final rack of sweet wines. So join me on the virtual journey I offered to a group of wine society members recently.

A limit of eight wines meant some compromises and combinations, so we began with a pink fizz, The Society's Saumur Rosé Brut NV (The Wine Society, £9.95, www.thewinesociety.com). A blend of cabernet franc and local grolleau, it's made, in exactly same way as champagne, in the magnificent galleries cut into the chalk cliffs on the south bank of the Loire from whence came the white stone for the valley's stately chateaux. Gratien & Meyer, the 150-year-old company responsible for this pretty, strawberry-tinged-and-flavoured sparkler, is one of many to open welcoming doors to visitors.

Wine two introduced another of the classic grapes of the valley, sauvignon blanc, mixed with a touch of chardonnay in the

gold-medal-winning Domaine du Salvard Cheverny 2011 (The Wine Society, £7.50), a fragrant delight and one of many examples of the remarkable value for money Loire wines present.

Next came an anonymous glass – I didn't want to reveal, until the wine had been tasted and appreciated, what it was. There were a couple of tentative guesses, but no one was confident. No wonder. Jo Landron's Le Fief du Breil 2010 (£15.50, Les Caves de Pyrène, www.lescaves.co.uk) is certainly not muscadet as most people know it. This is a complex, mineral, almost salty wine but with the body of burgundy, reflecting its grower's deep knowledge of his vineyard soils and the painstaking biodynamic culture of the vines which grow in them.

Succulent

The white choices finished with the fine barrel-fermented Anjou Blanc 2010 from Domaine des Forges (£9.95, Stove, Vine & Son, www.stonevine.co.uk) just to the south of Angers, a tasty dry companion to the succulent sweet wines which the Branchereau family also make from chenin blanc.

The red journey started just below France's longest river, in a little-known vine-growing region where south meets north – hence the inclusion of négrette (better

known from around Toulouse) in a bright, aromatic blend with pinot noir and cabernet franc. Mareuil Rouge 2011, Fiefs Vendéens, from Jérémie Mourat (The Wine Society, £7.50), is perfect picnic wine when the weather warms.

Terroir and practice distinguished the two pure cabernet francs, Les Nivières 2011, Saumur (Waitrose, £8.50) and La Noblaie 2010, Chinon (The Wine Society, also £8.50). The Waitrose stalwart, fresh and elegant, shows what a well-run co-operative – in this case the Cave des Vignerons de Saumur – can do. La Noblaie is small and beautiful, one of the prettiest vineyards I've ever seen, meticulously tended by Jérôme Billard, whose range of wines are all delicious.

For the final sweet treat, where chenin's acidity turns the sticky stylish, we returned to Domaine des Forges, for Coteaux du Layon St Aubin 2010 (Stone, Vine & Son, £11.50 – should be more stock soon, or go for the splendid Les Onnis Chaume 2009, £19.50, or, at Waitrose, the Branchereau's half-bottles, £8).

There's a lot going for the Loire now: good young growers, better vintages, plenty of sustainable/organic/biodynamic viticulture. If you'd like much more detailed notes for this tasting, email me on liz@sagues.force9.co.uk.

Good, but not as good as Primrose Hillbillies make it out to be...

The Landsdowne serves delicious, large portion dishes in a convivial atmosphere – shame about the disgraceful toilets

I have nothing but admiration for cartoonists. Each of those I have ever met has been ... well ... singular, shall we say – which is why their individual work is always instantly identifiable. They tend to see things sideways – though never from the same side as another of their profession. Caricature is maybe even more worthy of praise – because while no actual joke is required, the pay-off can be even more considerable, provided that the artist knows what he's about. Unlike a mere portrait painter or photographer, it is the task of a caricaturist to not just present an exaggerated semblance of the subject (either affectionate, ribald or – in the case of such as Rowson

or Scarfe – terrifyingly damning and grotesque) but to somehow delve deeper, and beyond. We must be given an inkling into character, inclination, vice or even aroma. The most successful seem to be achieved in remarkably few lines – this maybe exemplified by Gary (who represents his subjects' eyes as dashes, dots, squiggles or crosses, and yet always they are the eyes exactly) and our own Ken Pyne of this parish, whose little vignettes of the famous which feature regularly in Private Eye are always bang on the money. All this is a rather modern approach: the pioneers in the field produced highly detailed depictions, making full use of colour: the hilarious cruelty of Rowlandson and Gillray, the confident elegance of Max

“ It's a self-service joint, this. Everything is chalked up on a blackboard and you convey your desires to the pair of Australasian ladies at the bar, who will confiscate your credit card

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■ Joseph with Charles Yorke at The Landsdowne – a photo montage by Polly Hancock

Berbohm ... and, of course, Spy. This was a pseudonym for Leslie Ward who, over a period of about 35 years, produced for Vanity Fair 1325 'Spy cartoons'. More modern exponents whom I love are Mort Drucker for Mad magazine, and Trog (Wally Fawkes – jazz musician, creator of Flook, and still working at the age of 89).

Compliments

So wasn't I a lucky chap to be lunching with another of the ilk: Charles Yorke, whose spare and telling drawings many will remember from the Sunday Telegraph and, most notably, The Spectator. Although he was brought up in NW1, he currently lives in Kensington, so I had invited him to a restaurant in St John's Wood (Fora) because I thought the travelling might be easier than slogging further north. But of course on the very week of our date, said restaurant was closed for redecoration, so

rapid thought was called for. Many Primrose Hillbillies have recommended The Landsdowne to me, so The Landsdowne it was. Charles assured me that the journey had been no problem at all: straight to Chalk Farm on the Tube. Well I wouldn't know. Another Charles – Prince of Wales – was in the papers recently, taking his first Tube journey in 27 years. Well I can beat that hollow – I haven't been on the Underground since 1976, and I'm told it has got no better.

The Landsdowne is a corner pub in a quiet street with a pleasingly intact exterior: chipped creamy tiles up above, forming original signage for Charrington's Ales, and oxblood tiles below (recalling, I dimly recall, those of a Tube station). Within, it appears as a large barren boozery; the vast L of windows now bereft of acid etched glass, and so filling the place with light and offering views of handsome 19th century terraces

in one direction, and, in the other, a half-built ridiculously horrible yellow brick eyesore of the future. The walls are white (sort of) and the Anaglypta ceiling and window frames black: not beautiful, but fashionably functional. The only picture is a Hopperesque portrait of the pub itself, and Charles and I were sitting beneath it. And as the room filled up rapidly with clearly regular, local and fairly youthful tableful of people probably all involved in PR and advertising, still I was sitting at this table (rich as it was with the sticky residue and crumbs of meals from the last millennium) ... and waiting. Waiting not for a cloth, or napkin, or cutlery, or candle, or flower – I'm not that much of an idiot – but maybe, I don't know ... a menu, maybe ...?

Well no: it's a self-service joint, this. Everything is chalked up on a blackboard (including drinks) and you convey your desires to the pair of Australasian ladies

FACTFILE

- **THE LANDSDOWNE**
90 Gloucester Avenue, NW1
Tel: 020 7483 0409
- Pub hours, though open for food Mon-Fri noon-3pm, 6pm-10pm. Pizza available all day.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆ (there isn't much)
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: Can be high for a gastropub, with mains up to £19.50 ... but you can get out more lightly.

at the bar, who will confiscate your credit card. So Charles was having the grilled pork chop with puy lentils, salsa verde and black cabbage, and I went for confit of duck leg with stewed peas, carrots and lettuce, and a side of chips to share. Charles complemented the look of his meal as soon as it arrived – for his manners are impeccable, as one might expect of an Old Etonian (and he then went to the Ruskin School of Drawing at Oxford, where he won the Ruskin Certificate). But I saw what he meant about his plate – not pretty, but with the hugest chop I have ever laid eyes on. He enjoyed it very much, and devoured every scrap. My duck – breast and leg – was pretty good – moist and well flavoured, the skin over-crisp and therefore cardboard hard – and the peas were peas (i.e. not noticeably "stewed" – unlike the duck, which did have a hint of that). The chips were okay, if slightly flaccid, and the Sangiovese we were glugging was very good value at £16.50 – and there's a lot of wine to choose from, as well as very decent beers.

Autograph collector

Charles is a member of two of London's very finest clubs: the Garrick – to which he sometimes will walk from Kensington (takes an hour, if you're interested) and Brooks's, to which he tends to make a beeline on Wednesdays, when they serve a huge rib of beef. And when he is not dining or drawing, he is collecting autographs:

since boyhood, he has amassed a very considerable collection, the star of the show being Charlie Chaplin, whom he approached at the Savoy. He has just illustrated a children's book written by Maria Perry called The Chocolate Cake Fairy, and which, he informed me – technophobe that he is – is available on Kimble. And no I didn't point out that Kimble was the Harrison Ford character in The Fugitive, because we all know what he means. He then fell upon a very good rhubarb and apple crumble ("what a treat ...!") and I liked the selection of Keen's cheddar; Stinking Bishop and Cashel Blue.

The Landsdowne is good, no doubt – though not as good as the admiring Primrose Hillbillies imagine it to be. And the Gents, my dear ...! An absolute disgrace: floor awash with water, blistering damp on the walls, much engraved graffiti ... truly shameful; the liquid soap is called, not inappropriately, Dirty Harry's. And lo ... now it was time for Charles and I to deliver ourselves up unto the tender mercies of resident Ham&High photographer Polly Hancock ... who, rather subtly, can sometimes be something of a caricaturist herself, you know ...

■ 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.



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