



Get your fix of sunshine

After all that chocolate indulgence, it's time for something dry – and liquid, of course. But something still indulgent, as this column is an excuse to share personal pleasures by revealing some of the wines I've particularly enjoyed over recent weeks.

One high in the star ratings is a very classy white from the far south of France – so far south, in fact, that the roots of the vines reach almost into the Mediterranean, on the south-facing slopes of the former island of La Clape, one of the respected crus of the Languedoc. True to its place, Château de la Négly La Brise Marine is a blend of two southern French grapes, bourboulenc and roussanne.

The grapes are handled with great delicacy in the cellar and the new wine is left on its lees for three months to develop more character, with just a miniscule proportion matured in barrel. The result is – appropriately – a sea breeze of a wine, with noticeable minerality behind the tropical fruit scents and generous flavours. It's great to drink on its own, but is also a versatile partner of fish and salads – together, a breath of the Mediterranean which we dearly need at the moment.

The supplier is an on-line merchant which I'm happy to recommend – From Vineyards Direct (www.fromvineyardsdirect.com). I've loved every wine I've tasted from its small but well-chosen and fairly-priced list and, at £10.95, La Brise Marine is excellent value. All prices include delivery, provided you buy at least 12 bottles (can be mixed). The list focuses on France but extends further; there are en primeur offers – tempting 2011 Rhônes,



■ White grape harvest at Château de la Négly Picture: Olivier Diaz de Zarate

for example – and cellar plans if you'd prefer founders David Campbell and Esme Johnstone make the choices for you.

Now for some bubbles: surely, sometime this spring you'll have something to celebrate. The bargain first: Torres Santa Digna Estelado Rosé 2011 doesn't attempt to follow the international pinot route, instead using Chile's oldest grape, país. Mostly, país wines are best passed by, but this champagne-method fizz is splendid, with vivacious fruity depth. And it's the result of a Torres/Talca University/Chilean government project to revive the grape and improve living standards for the growers, another reason to raise a glass. It costs £12 to £13 at Soho Wine Supply, www.alfredthegrape.co.uk and www.vintagemarque.com.

Organic fizz
Champagne proper now, the first a bottle with a conscience. Going green in Champagne has to be encouraged, given the toxic history of so much of the region's soils. Canard-Duchêne Authentic Green Brut (£28, Oddbins) has a lovely sherbety mousse, soft, happy flavours and clean length

from its organic grapes. And for a very special occasion, endlessly elegant Egly-Ouriet Brut Tradition Grand Cru (£40-plus, Lea & Sandeman, Roberson) proves that pricey champagne can be worth its cost.

A quick tour of more pleasures, starting in Australia with Tyrrell's Vat 1 Hunter Semillon 2006, a wonderfully complex, serious wine to drink reflectively now and to keep – in fine semillon terms, it's still a baby (£27.50, The Wine Society). The final two wines evoke happy memories of place: Corsica, where Terra Nostra Nielluccio 2011 (the grape is Italy's sangiovese) has a hint of the island's heady herby scents alongside bright fruitiness (£7.50, The Wine Society), and Pic St Loup, Domaine Les Grandes Costes 2009, which completes the circle back to the Languedoc crus.

I climbed the Pic one hot summer's day, when a flask of water would have been more appropriate than a bottle of wine, but have loved the rich, stylish reds of its slopes ever since. Les Grandes Costes is a fine example, dark, dense, aromatic and structured (£13, The Co-operative).

Phew! All sorts of hoops to jump through in this comic caper

A quest to eat Desperate Dan's Cow Pie sees disappearing tables, missing wine and almost ends in fisticuffs over menu choices

Desperate. That's what Dan was, according to the Dandy, that late and much lamented comic. It expired at the end of last year on its seventy-fifth birthday, its circulation reduced from a 1950s heyday high of more than two million to just 8000. Comics were just about all I read when I was a stripling, the Beano being my absolute favourite: Dennis the Menace, Roger the Dodger, Minnie the Minx, Lord Snooty, Little Plum – and, best of all, The Bash Street Kids. The rivals boasted but one or two such stand-out characters – The Topper had Beryl the Peril, and The Dandy, of course, had

Dan. Who never did appear to be even vaguely desperate, actually – Chambers defining this word as the state of being in the depths of despair. On the contrary – Dan seemed to be endlessly inventive and optimistic, seemingly careless of his superhuman strength and the damage that could be wrought even from his barbed wire stubble. I fondly remember his fashioning a pipe out of a dustbin and a drainpipe, then filling it with 20lb of best shag before puffing on it contentedly. But most laudable and memorable of all was his gargantuan appetite: every evening, his Aunt Aggie would prepare for him his favourite meal – the incomparable Cow Pie. This

“Well it's not the size of a cartwheel, there's no sign of horn nor tail ... but the pastry does look mighty fine, and at its centre is a section of marrow bone stuffed with cabbage (shame it wasn't stuffed with marrow)

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■ Joseph at The Stag pub, which boasts a cosy interior and an attractive bar

vast and circular delight was presented in a dish the size of a cartwheel, and from the golden crust there protruded not just a tail, but a full set of horns. Well, yum yum.

Thwarted

So wasn't I thrilled beyond measure, when perusing the menu in The Stag, to see at its summit ...! Yes: cow pie! My dish, I thought, shall runneth over. Imagine my further feelings, then, when Max my guest – who is not un-Dan-like in his proportions – boldly announced his determination to have the cow pie ...! Well I'll be jiggered. So for the sake of the review, I'd have to have something bloody else. Woe, woe and thrice woe.

But before all that, let's have a little background on this Fleet Road pub. I had been alerted to the fact that on the upper floor they had opened G. Wadley's Meat Room – which I thought sounded silly and faintly nauseating in roughly equal measure. But they seemed proud of their various aged cuts of beef, so I booked. Except that I didn't, because when I phoned I was informed that G. Wadley and his Meat were no more. "The menu is now more varied", I was told. Well okay. And then the day before dinner was due, they rang me to say that the upper floor would be closed altogether, but the same menu would be available in the pub downstairs, "and I promise you," the man said, "I will give you a

wonderful table". Well okay. And when I rolled up, the barman said "oh, just sit anywhere ...". Well okay.

And I'd walked right past the place. Because it was dark and it's black. Hardly lit at all. Jet black: vanished into the night. It's a cosy interior with mismatched furniture, fake leather bound books, an attractive bar, tea lights in jam jars – pubby, but in a good way. I selected a table (sticky, as it turned out) which had a very low and damned unyielding church pew to one side of it, two little stools to the other. Clearly, very considerable thought had been given as to how to make a diner as bleeding uncomfortable as possible. I asked for a couple of chairs: you know – chairs ...? The

Californian waitress (whose first day it was) smilingly brought them over.

Max was having the cow pie. Did I say that? Yes – Max was having the cow pie ... so I thought I might go for a hanger steak. This is an increasingly trendy cut that is cheap to buy and can be very flavoursome, but also can have all the texture of a Chesterfield, so I shied away from it. I nearly had the Stag cheeseburger, because I've never had stag in a burger ... but then I twigged that it wouldn't be that. So I ordered red legged partridge with mulled red cabbage and cranberries. With chips. And Max was having the cow pie – oh yes, he was having the cow pie all right. And before that, a platter of pates and pickles, which he liked a lot (and at £14.50, so he should; it's pretty expensive here, actually – my son tells me that a pint of Peroni will set you back a fiver). The wild mushroom sort of dip was very good (but fridge cold) and so was the chicken liver pate. He liked too the piccalilli and hummus – two things I can't stand. I had a 'made to order' Scotch egg: rather good. Warm, crispy coating, decent sausage meat and a glowingly orange yolk: to look at it, it might have been a duck egg, but the richness of flavour wasn't there.

Puzzling

I ordered a bottle of Italian red, and when it arrived the top three inches were missing. The summoned barman said he had never before seen the like, and I could only agree: a fresh bottle was whistled up. As we waited for mains – and Max, he was having the cow pie, oh yes, oh yes – we talked of the upcoming nuptials of his daughter. "I am trying to persuade her to elope," he said. "I have offered to pay for the ladder". He had just flown in from Stockholm, and the next day was going to Zurich. He has visited twenty countries in the last twelve months – the man just can't keep still. And you may care to know that he considers Swissair 'first class' the best in the world. "I never want to land. EasyJet it ain't."

My partridge was okay, no more,

the breast very dry – although the shredded leg meat was much better: a partridge being a partridge, though, there wasn't much of it. Chips were fine. And Max ... I've forgotten now what he ate ... oh no I haven't: it was cow pie, wasn't it? And so how was that ...? Well it's not the size of a cartwheel, there's no sign of horn nor tail ... but the pastry does look mighty fine, and at its centre is a section of marrow bone stuffed with cabbage (shame it wasn't stuffed with marrow). Let Max talk you through it: "This is really excellent – nice, light and suety pastry, crammed with tender beef, beautiful gravy ... very good". Huh. And I didn't have it. Because Max had it, you see – oh yes, Max: he was having the cow pie.

Anyway, we both were pretty full by now (he rather more so than I) and didn't feel we could do justice to the cheese (£12!) – which was a pity because on offer were Colston Bassett stilton and Montgomery cheddar, my absolute favourites. And then on the menu I saw this: 'Have you visited G. Wadley's upstairs?' Well no I haven't, actually, because it doesn't exist. Even 'upstairs' doesn't seem to exist – and so to continue to promote the place does seem on the part of the proprietors to be more than a little, well ... desperate.

■ 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

■ THE STAG

67 Fleet Road, NW3
Tel: 020 7722 2646

■ Open for lunch and dinner downstairs – upstairs (if it exists) is anyone's guess.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Cost: In the pub bit, rather more than you expect. Mains up to £16, chips £4 ...



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