



Delicious white diversity

Here are two new words to add to your vinous vocabulary: aspiran and araignan. I thought someone was having a joke suggesting they were French grape varieties, but they are. There are plenty more, perhaps just a little more familiar but far from mainstream, from the same region: terret, clairette, bourboulenc, mauzac, carignan blanc.

Together, with a raft of others, they contribute to a delicious diversity of white wines from a part of France better recognised for its reds. The good news is that there is a remarkable renaissance of white wines from Languedoc-Roussillon. The bad news is that they're not flooding onto wine shop shelves in the UK.

Largely gone are the lakes of cheap and not always very nice wines from the Sud de France. Instead, small domaines – some run by newcomers, others by the current heirs of many-generation vigneron – have an approach both modern and traditional. They take great care in vineyard and cellar, many adopting organic, biodynamic or Terra Vitis minimal-chemical practices, and they honour their heritage of grape varieties. Most of all, they have a passion to share the best that they can bottle.

More than 100 examples of the results were poured in a tasting at the region's London base in Cavendish Square in the West End earlier this month. When I say I came away depressed, that has nothing to do with the wines, which on the whole were remarkably good. I simply felt dispirited that so many retail wine shelves groan with bottle after bottle of mediocre chardonnay or sauvignon blanc instead of these varied, interesting and "want-to-drink"



■ Languedoc-Roussillon offers fine wines for seafood

wines. It's not much to do with price, for a lot of the wines looking for UK distribution could hit shelves here at below £10 a bottle. More of a factor, I suspect, is their unfamiliarity.

Superb fruit

It's time to champion those that are available, and to hope more will join them. A couple of weeks back I recommended a bourboulenc-roussanne blend from La Clape, the former island whose vineyards rise up just metres from the Mediterranean shoreline. More of its fine wine, this time with grenache blanc and marsanne added to the blend, comes from Château d'Angles (Grand Vin, £20, www.ocado.com, combines superb fruit and stunning freshness and ages splendidly; Classique, £12, coming to Wine Rack, is a scented, stylish introduction).

Vianney Fabre's father, a former chief winemaker in a very exalted Bordeaux cellar, bought the estate a decade ago with the intention of concentrating on mourvèdre-based reds. Once there, the family discovered the potential of bourboulenc, which Vianney likens to a white version of mourvèdre. Pick late, he says,

letting the grapes ripen fully so that their tough skins thin and their fragrance develops, add in the "salt and pepper" seasoning of roussanne and marsanne and the roundness of grenache, and the result is very special.

Inland and a little to the north-east, Domaine le Conte des Floris has deservedly attracted much praise for its organic carignan blanc/marsanne blends – Arès Blanc sees a delicate touch of old oak and is very smart indeed (£12.50 plus VAT at www.vinetrail.co.uk, whose list is strong on other estates in the region, too).

And there were other delights which you can find with just a little effort. Majestic is a strong Sud de France supporter (look out, among others, for whites from Domaines Paul Mas); Cambridge Wine Merchants' on-line shop (www.cambridgewine.com) has a great selection – Château Rives-Blanques and Domaine Treloar are excellent; among stars at The Wine Society is Domaine Jones Blanc; The Flying Corkscrew (www.flyingcorkscrew.com) has the superb J-S Pons from Domaine de la Perdrix. Experiment, and Languedoc-Roussillon should surprise and delight you.

Byron's burgers lord it over their cheaper rivals

With quality ingredients, good cooking and cheerful service, here the meat patty is far from being junk food. Pity about the décor...

My my, the burger has come such a very long way since, first in the 1950s, schoolchildren everywhere were simply thrilled to be taken to a Wimpy Bar, there to joyously squirt ketchup out of the big red plastic tomato on to their one-and-sixpenny hamburger: a thin and grey thing, to be sure – but similar enough in appearance to those seen and marvelled at in American films as to make everybody feel suitably hip, and even rather excited (a simple time, you see – and that's no bad thing). The Wimpy Bar was a brightly lit red and yellow sort of a place with shiny plastic tables and a stand-up menu with a little red roof on the top of it: all a satisfying mile away from the lacy little teashops and department store plaise-and-

chips restaurants of the parents' generation. The fact that the actual Wimpy hamburger was a beastly mean little thing meant nothing at all: and anyway – how did we know it was mean and beastly? We had nothing to compare it with (except a Birds Eye frozen beefburger, which was also mean and even beastlier).

Bits of horse

But the scope for comparison in these blessed days is truly immeasurable. But let us now get the obligatory mention of horse safely out of the way. All these vile cheap burgers and other horrible concoctions that have been turning up in supermarkets – the bits of horse very probably the most nutritious and protein-packed of the ingredients (because you really do not want to know what makes up the rest of the thing).

“It all rather comes down to whether you enjoy eating in the rusting bowels of a decommissioned submarine. What we have here is not just steel ducting and plumbing, but walls clad in salvaged stained and galvanised corrugated iron sheeting.

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■ Joseph at Byron in the O2 Centre in Finchley Road

But here lies part of the British malaise: we expect to be able to buy piles of food at rock-bottom prices, and then affect outrage when we discover that they are not of the finest. Good food costs money, but there is always choice – which is why now you can find burgers in any high street eatery at £3 or £4, and up to £20: you are paying for the quality (and, of course, a little bit of cool tax in the fashionable joints such as Bar Boulud in Knightsbridge – an amazing burger at about £16). For many, the yardstick still is McDonald's (which, incidentally, is about to introduce to its 1,228 French outlets a variation that has been dubbed the 'camemburger' – topped with wholly ersatz 'camembert, much to the fury of the Normandy producers of the real McCoy). But we must always take France's expostulations

with un pinch de sel: McDonald's annually generates four billion euros there – the second-biggest market after America. Alors: Vive la malbouffe! (which is their word for junk food).

Quality chains

But back to Blighty. There are many places to get a good burger these days, and the spreading of the quality chains are making them more accessible than ever: Gourmet Burger Kitchen ... and, more recently, Byron. I have had a Byron burger before, and I vowed that as soon as they opened a branch on our little patch, I would review it. And lo – one has landed on the upper floor of the O2 Centre in Finchley Road. And what a very rum place the O2 Centre is. I hadn't explored it in a while: some old stalwarts remain – Habitat (one of only three in

London now), Waterstone's (part bookshop, mostly crèche) and of course the giant Sainsbury's. The others seem to be changing all the time – although Nando's seems to be a stayer, there are also now Zizzi, Yo Sushi!, Weatherspoon's and a coffee place that goes by the name of Apostrophe, I suppose because they didn't feel they decently could call it Colon. There are also a couple of new purveyors of glam and quirky trinkets for the interior-minded upwardly determined – which can only put Habitat's already bloodied nose even further out of joint. Bonas and Bo Concept, they are called – the BO clearly being contagious.

So up to the first floor (while observing that the epileptic and erratically spouting jets of water are no longer a feature of the escalator) and there is Byron, its name spelled out in lightbulbs as

if it were a starlet's dressing table mirror. And next to that, the tag line that has become their calling card: "Proper Hamburgers". Each of the tables has a little yellow booklet which rather laboriously underlines the idea by way of one pre-school phrase per page and quite a few very irritating photographs of not much at all. But still the idea is good and laudable: to do just burgers, to source the best ingredients, cook them well and serve with a smile. This gives them very little wiggle room in terms of a reviewer's verdict – because if they fail in any one of these claims, they not only render themselves faintly ridiculous but rather obviate their entire existence.

Brutalism

They also say that they serve the burgers in "a comfortable environment". Well let me see now: this is not a brightly lit red and yellow sort of a place with shiny plastic tables, although some might say that it could do with a little of that. It all rather comes down to whether you enjoy eating your lunch within the rusting bowels of a decommissioned submarine. For what we have here is not just the absolutely mandatory exposed steel ducting and plumbing, but walls clad in salvaged stained and galvanised corrugated iron sheeting. The ceiling is partly composed of nailed together driftwood, the lighting is that of a factory floor and the chairs reclaimed from a post-war borstal. The only thing that is attractive is a curvaceous bentwood coat stand – the pretty little thing so frail and alone amid so much brutalism, shivering and quietly sobbing its heart out in the corner.

I ordered the "Byron burger" – 6oz of freshly ground Angus beef with dry cure bacon, mature Cheddar, lettuce, tomato, red onion and "Byron sauce". My wife was having the recently introduced lamb burger, and we shared fries and courgettes frites. The burgers are cooked medium – and although you can specify if you want them well done, you can't specify rare, matey, because the health police

have stamped all over that option. The order was smilingly taken (all the waiters and waitresses wearing the uniform: black, with a huge white B across chest and bosom). A Byron pale ale for my wife (created for them by Camden Brewery) and a glass of wine for me. These come trendily ranked as Good (Spanish), Better (Sicilian), Great (Argentinian) and Best (Australian). A lunatic classification, but there you go: I had Sicilian, and it was fine.

And the burger was ... pretty fantastic, actually. Juicy, generous, nice squishy bun, flavoursome bacon, good cheese ... though obviously one discards the red onion: you don't want to eat that. The lamb burger was excellent, and came with a big bowl of salad. Fries ... nearly first class, the courgettes as good as in a decent Italian restaurant. And although it's not particularly a pudding place, we shared a chocolate brownie, and damn me if that wasn't very yummy too (the ice cream maybe not too great).

So there it is: they claim to make proper hamburgers, and they do. And if you have the ability to eat with your eyes shut, this new Byron is very good news. So do stop horsing around and just get yourself down there.

■ 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

■ BYRON

O2 Centre, 255 Finchley Road, NW3
Tel: 020 7794 3323

■ Open Mon-Thu 11.30am-11pm,
Fri 11.30am-11.30pm, Sat 11am-11.30pm, Sun 11am-10.30pm

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
(it depends on your view of corrugated iron)

■ Cost: Basic burger £6.75, but it mounts up. Not particularly cheap, but excellent value.

