



An unbeatable challenge

International event is focused on finding fine wines for consumers

The wind howls, hail bounces off the pitch, *Here Comes Summer* plays over the PA: welcome to Lord's Cricket Ground as April pursues its capricious course. And welcome to the 30th edition of the International Wine Challenge.

The scale of what goes on at Lord's now each year is huge: around 12,000 wines from 50 countries blind-tasted (each one at least twice; all those which win medals, three times or more) by 400 judges from close to as many nations as those producing the wines. We may be in an age of overused superlatives, but after being involved with the challenge for 20 of those 30 years, I reckon the claim that it is "the ultimate international wine competition, bringing reassurance through integrity" is absolutely true.

Of course there have been changes over the years, not only in location – the first time I judged it was at Chelsea Harbour, and between there and Lord's I've sipped and spat in an assortment of slow-to-let Docklands office blocks and in Barbican exhibition halls. It's a lot more smoothly organised, and there are plenty of safeguards to ensure subtle wines are not overlooked (horror stories of first-growth bordeaux being too quickly eliminated linger from the early days).

But the challenge retains a happy informality alongside the serious commitment of the judges, who come from all walks of wine life. And its focus is very much on finding good wines for consumers to enjoy, which is why all judges are faced with an array of wines of many grapes and origins, rather than being directed down a narrow path of only those of which they have most experience.



■ Bottles with a prime view of the ground at Lord's

Take, for example, the bottles which faced me during my three days of judging this year. I tasted 200 in all, the most unexpected from Russia and the Ukraine, plenty from New Zealand, Spain, Italy and Portugal, but only a few from France. There was sweet fizz from the moscato grape, amontillado sherry, indigenous varieties from Eastern Europe I'd never before encountered, classics such as premier cru burgundy, unusual versions of familiar styles – I'm thinking here of pure-graciano riojas. We were faced with many more reds than whites, reflecting the balance of entries.

Surprising stars

The stars were just a little surprising: a fine, northern Rhône-like syrah from one of Chile's cooler valleys (and there were some other very good wines in the same line-up, which we reckoned deserved one gold and two silver medals among the six wines), and a very smart 2009 English sparkling rosé, with elegant creamy strawberry fruit and brioche in a style that

champagne would be proud of.

I can't give you the details of those two wines (I don't know them, as the bottles remained firmly shrouded in their anonymous wrappers, and the results won't be announced until later this month). But I think they – and so many more of the medal-winning wines, identified by gold, silver or bronze stickers when they reach the marketplace – will prove that, 30 years on, the International Wine Challenge is a continuing force for good for everyone who loves wine.

I'll finish by recommending a rather unusual wine which I can tell you about now. For all I know, it may have been entered in this year's competition, and if it was, I hope it won a medal. Anfora Trio (Marks&Spencer, £7.50) is a rare example of an everyday-priced Turkish wine available on the high street. Its maker, Pamukkale, one of the country's leading wineries, blends the smooth and fruity kalecik karasi with shiraz and cabernet sauvignon and lets their ripeness sing through without the hefty oak so many Turkish wines impart.

Old-style British cool amid warm glow of nostalgia

New pub-restaurant at the revamped King's Cross station has some good cooking going on, in a fashionably old-fashioned way

King's Cross ... is slowly but surely coming together. As eyesore after eyesore is either renovated or removed altogether, the good bits are visibly beginning to join, in the satisfying manner of a jigsaw – and this before even all the new stuff has been built on the site of the famous gasometers (which, obviously and inevitably, will be glaringly inferior to the old stuff). One can clearly see now though that all the talk about regeneration, the rescuing of the area from virtual death, was not just hot air. It's actually becoming ... nice. And the best thing that has happened lately is the removal (nearly complete) of the sprawling wood and glass slum that was thrown up in the 1960s as a seemingly calculated insult to the noble façade of Lewis Cubitt's

station. The yellow London stock brickwork now has been cleaned, and one actually can see the thing again – those two great swooping arches, startlingly modern for 1851: it could almost be art deco. Cubitt – not to be confused with the rather more famous brother Thomas, who constructed much of Belgravia and many Camden and Holborn squares – was also responsible for the massive old granary behind the station which now is home to St Martin's School of Art and the Granary restaurant, reviewed here a while ago.

And as conservation is now very much the name of the game, it was pleasing to discover a new restaurant and pub actually within the station and on the upper floor above the main concourse. This is called The Parcel Yard because it used to be ... guess what? Yes indeed: that very thing. And my

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■ Joseph with guest Michael Dillon at The Parcel Yard – in montage by Ham&High photographer Polly Hancock

guest for lunch – Michael Dillon, a great friend of mine for more than 20 years – informed me as we were selecting a decent table that if you look carefully at the closing scenes of the Ealing Studios classic *The Ladykillers*, here is the very spot where the sweet little old lady (who fails to be killed) gets to collect and keep ‘the loot’.

Shabby chic

And it hasn't actually changed very much: large and rambling, the floor of original planking and flagstones, many old enamelled railway signs incorporated into the shabby chic décor: Mind The Step, Exit, Gentlemen & Ladies and so on. One does rather experience a pang of regret, however, for the days when railway

stations actually did boast not just a parcel yard but offices dedicated to Lost Property, Tickets, Left Luggage ... with Waiting Rooms and, oh my God ... porters! With peaked caps and waistcoats and trolleys, plying their trade amid the clouded hissing of steam. It's a little like the old Joni Mitchell song: “They took all the trees, put ‘em in a tree museum...” We rarely see anything anymore in its original context, but are invited instead to cavort amid a series of mini theme parks devised as a sop to tourists (plenty of whom were excitedly clustered around the Harry Potter platform, above which the restaurant looms).

Having selected one of the more spacious crannies over a rather more constricted nook, we sat at

a Utility table and scanned the menu – printed on manila card, ‘postmarked’ in red, and stuck into a cream enamel jug. The far wall has a huge skeleton clock face above the black mantel, there are old red kilims on the floor, a corner knot of small leather buttoned sofas and reclaimed sorting office cubbyholes rammed with nicely dog-eared classic Penguins (from the days when their peerless design adorned the actual books, and not just deckchairs, pencils and mugs: in itself a prime example of another mini theme park).

Michael Dillon owns a very famous members’ club in Soho called Gerry’s – in Dean Street, a few doors down from the Groucho and the French House. You might

wonder why it is called Gerry’s and not Mike’s, say – the reason being that its original owner was Gerald Campion, the actor who, when well into his forties, played the fat Greystones schoolboy Billy Bunter in the 1950s TV series. It is Michael, however, who has made the club the legend that it is today – which manages to be both old-fashioned and fashionable, in that it never changes. Rather like this menu we were looking at: old-style British stuff, that is now so very cool. Michael ordered pressed duck terrine with toast and a walnut and celery salad, while I was intrigued by something called scallop benedict. This turned out to be two large and juicy scallops on little cakelets formed from bubble and squeak, this interleaved with bacon – a very successful addition – and topped by an exemplary Hollandaise. Michael very much enjoyed the terrine, which he pronounced “proper” (high praise, in his vocabulary) and particularly approved of the toasted currant bread, which apparently went extraordinarily well with it.

‘Mending things’

These days, he isn't in the club every afternoon and evening as he used to be, so I was wondering what he got up to. “I’ve taken to mending things,” he said. Oh really...? What sort of things...? “Anything that needs to be mended. And many things that don’t. Whereupon I put them in the shed. I bought a high-powered patio cleaner, with suitable protective clothing. It blew away half the concrete. So I put it in the shed. With the protective clothing.” His eyes widened appreciatively now at the sight of his venison pie: a lovely great round thing with proper base and sides and a golden shortcrust top. Swede mash was alongside, the gravy within was slick and glossy, the pastry good and suety, the venison tender ... and here again was bacon, which Michael said added to it immeasurably: clearly, they are very good with bacon here. I fared rather less well with braised shin of beef, potatoes, baby onions, carrots and mushrooms. The carrots were al dente, just sugary,

and very fresh and flavoursome, the mushrooms, sweet onions and gravy all excellent. Though then we came to the problem with the meat: it had about it something of the air of an amber bouncy castle: the accessible bits were fine, but it was not at all yielding as it really has to be, and there was a great big collar of fat on it. Michael was fine, though: “I was very hungry,” he said. “Didn’t have breakfast.” And so I asked him what he normally had for breakfast, and he said peaches. Naturally I wondered where at this time of year the peaches came from...? And he said from a tin. We had rather woeful puddings, then: Grand Marnier pancakes – the English way of saying crêpes suzettes, I suppose – which although nicely orangey, were thick and stone cold. My chocolate brownie was solid with walnuts, and actually bloody stodgy (but there’s good cooking going on here, despite the puds and my lump of beef).

Now Michael is very much a Soho man – and so whenever any sort of filming is going on there (often) they call on him to lend verisimilitude. Today was another such occasion: Japanese television wanted to interview him at the club, and I asked him what was the subject this time. “Bacon,” he said. “Not,” he clarified, “the stuff they cook here ... just the artist, 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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