



Rare delights of en rama

If any wine has an image problem, it's sherry. "Anything that gives a bit of interest to sherry has to be a good thing: and en rama is positive to the image of sherry." Those were words of hope from one importer as the purveyors of what is surely the wine world's best bargain met in a London livery hall late last month to spread the message.

The Big Fortified Tasting (BFT) wasn't just about sherry, however. Port, madeira and a host of other wines where there is additional alcohol adding character and often extra keeping quality were there too, not just from Europe – Australia, America and South Africa featured too.

But for the moment, let's consider en rama. If you haven't heard of it yet, it's time you did. May be it's a passing fashion – though I don't think so – but it's a great one, provided due attention is paid to the limited timescale between buying and drinking.

Let me explain more. En rama is the term used for wines which are bottled just as they might be served straight from the cask in the cellars of Jerez and Sanlúcar where they're made. It's a practice which applies principally to the young, crisp and dry styles of sherry – fino and manzanilla. Sweet sherries aren't part of this scheme of things.

The candidate sherries are made in the usual way, though they often come from specially selected barrels in the solera ageing system. Before bottling there is no clarification, fining or filtering, so they are very much more fragile and shorter lived. But they have more complexity, character and flavour.

They have been around for a few years, but in small quantities. While availability is gently increasing, this is never going to be mainstream wine. There



■ Pouring sherry in the Gonzalez Byass bodega

is, says Antonio Flores, head winemaker at Gonzalez Byass, just a three-month window between bottling and latest recommended drinking time – not that the wine will be rubbish after that, but it will be different.

At the BFT, Flores led a seminar on the concept, illustrated with the wines which lead up to en rama – the new wine before fortification, some six months after fortification, after three years in barrel and, finally, the 2013 release of Tio Pepe fino en rama. It's delicious, salty and nutty with hints of newly baked brioche, bone dry and lingering.

'Magic moment'

This is the fourth release of the wine, which, says Flores, is intended to bring "the magic moment of pouring Tio Pepe in the cellar to people in London".

It is not the only en rama available to Londoners. There were several more examples at the BFT, not just youthful fino and manzanilla but also pasada styles of the latter, somewhat older wines already on the way to

becoming amontillado. Hidalgo's La Gitana manzanilla en rama has a real tang of the sea, again with wonderful, memorable length. Delgado Zuleta's manzanilla pasada Goya XL en rama is a great example of how age can give more mouth-filling depth to this style. Williams & Humbert's fino en rama 2006 has nutty, creamy scents and concentrated spicy flavours.

And I was privileged to taste three en rama examples of classic Lustau Solera Reserva sherries: Puerto fino, manzanilla Papirusa and dry amontillado Los Arcos – an experience to treasure, as these are rare indeed.

Stockists: Tio Pepe (rrp £15) is already released and should be at Adnams, Berry Bros & Rudd, Lea & Sandeman, some Majestics and The Wine Society while stocks last; La Gitana new release (rrp £14.50) is expected in late May, with likely stockists including Avery's, Cambridge Wine Merchants, Jeroboams, Eagle Wines London SW11, Virgin Wines. Do ask good independent merchants if they have others.

How a charming chum found her favourite things

There are these people – outsiders, civilians – to whom the word 'Hampstead' is little more than a malicious rumour, satirical adjective or else (most offensive of all) a contemptuous synonym for The Bishops bloody Avenue. And such folk will often ask me why oh why is there nowhere really decent to eat up there? And all I can say to them is this: Listen, matey – you should have tried it a decade ago, in the days when we were really in trouble. It is true though that there has never truly been a destination restaurant in Hampstead (Keats? Not really) – which, given the comparative unpoverty of the area and general enthusiasm for all things culinary, was and remains a mystery. People will make a special trip to see the Village, and certainly for the Heath ... but when it comes to eating, there is nowhere absolutely obvious to go. I always thought that the Freemasons in Downshire Hill or Jack Straw's Castle at the highest point in London would

have provided rather wonderful sites: large, handsome buildings – and somewhere to dump the car. But the first of these remains a disappointing pub serving fill-you-up grub and with a lovely garden chock-full of kiddies and smokers (and it does occur to me that since the smoking ban, when children and addicts were forced to congregate in the same small outside space, the little mites' passive lungs must be infinitely more polluted than before) while Jack Straw's is ... well I'm not sure what it is: luxury dwellings for luxury people, I suppose.

Hell of a shock

But actually the Village is not at all bad now: the Wells, Jin Kichi and Villa Bianca have kept up the standard, and the opening of Côte was a mercy. Piccola is good, cheap and cheerful, and so is the Holly Bush (well – not that cheap, but you get the idea). And now there is a new one to add to their number: Aubaine. There are a few others scattered about the better areas: Mayfair, Kensington,

“The soft shell crab was a huge and fairly frightening thing – like a small golden octopus which had happily been toddling about its business before being hit unexpectedly by Pompeian lava, and instantly petrified

"CARMEN" BY G. BIZET



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■ Joseph with old chum Deborah Moggach at Aubaine – in montage by Ham&High photographer Polly Hancock

Wimbledon and Brompton Cross (not Brent Cross, Brompton Cross – do try to keep up) – but don't tell the outsiders any of that, or else they will think that we're chi-chi. Aubaine is on the High Street site of the old and excellent Goldfish, which I see has now rather mystifyingly popped up again across the road where there used to be a little sushi place, and before that the rather spiffy Ed's Diner. Aubaine is painted pale grey with smart white lettering and literally abuts on to Côte ... which is painted pale grey with

smart white lettering. Strange: you could easily intend to go to one and find yourself in the other. Inside it is quite unrecognisable from its Goldfish incarnation – and if you are ancient and your memory stretches back to the Dickensian candlelit intimacy of Fagin's Kitchen, you are in for one hell of a shock. The original panelling is now dove grey, the furniture – quite Gustavian – pale and pretty and refreshing: zinc-topped tables, spring flowers, lots of light and a very friendly and professional welcome.

I was greatly looking forward to this lunch because it was to be in the company of my dear old chum Deborah Moggach – who arrived amid a flurry of smiles, kisses, multicoloured striped cardigan (and also – later – perfectly matching spectacles). Debby has lived in a beautiful Georgian house in Hampstead for decades, where she has written many successful novels including *Tulip Fever* and *These Foolish Things* – which was turned into the smash-hit film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, starring every old

and famous actor you can think of. Her new novel is called *Heartbreak Hotel* (you can't keep a good hotel down) and she is adapting it for the BBC. In the meantime, it has been shortlisted for the gloriously named Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse prize – along with the latest novels by Michael Frayn, Howard Jacobson ... and me.

There is what they are pleased to call a 'menu couture' – two courses for £14.95, offered between noon and 7pm. But we were going a la carte: so – for Debby, a soft shell crab for a starter. "I've never eaten one," she said. "Always wanted to." This was actually a main from this 'menu couture' thing, but she charmed the waiter into bending the rules. It was a huge and fairly frightening thing – like a small golden octopus which had happily been toddling about its business before being hit unexpectedly by Pompeian lava, and instantly petrified (which wiped the smile off its face). "Wonderful!" she said, crunching it down. She very much liked too a little red and green cakelet formed from tomato and avocado. I had a rather pricey (£12) starter of duck egg on brioche in a wild mushroom fricassée – and it was superb: fantastically intense and creamy mushroom flavour which made the brioche just pappy enough to welcome the ooze of the duck egg.

Eating with gusto

After this, I did enjoy a corn-fed chicken supreme – tender breast, juicy, deftly sliced – on a bed of white bean puree with chestnuts and chorizo. And Debby just adored her sea bass: "Crispy skin on top – then it just melts. And it comes with mussels and artichoke – my two favourite things in the world!" Which was lucky. We shared a couple of sides of spinach and crushed potatoes – and these were particularly successful, having been steeped in olive oil, and all the better for it. It's just lovely to see someone eating with gusto – and I said so. "Oh God yes," agreed Debby. "I can't stand these women who just pick. We need more women with appetite and backbone!"

"I'm not having a pudding," she said – but I thought I'd look at the menu anyway. But instead of a menu the waiter brought along a large slate sheet bearing nine examples of the patissier's art (although not made on the premises). "I'm not having a pudding," said Debby – while I was hovering over a chocolate thing which, the waiter said, came with vanilla ice cream. "I might go for that," I said. "Do," urged Debby, "but I'm not having a pudding." So I ordered the chocolate thing, and Debby ordered the raspberry and pistachio cake. Both were pretty good, but not outstanding.

So we do have a rather good, attractive and well-run restaurant here ... but the bill can mount up a bit. Starters begin at £7.50 and rise to £19.95 (lobster salad) and mains to £25, a burger coming in at £18. Our bill – with just two glasses of wine – topped £100. And Debby then had a thousand things to do concerning the promotion of her novel: she has already this year attended literary festivals in Jaipur and Dubai, and that day was off to Ely, Hay, Edinburgh and all the rest of them will follow. Audiences love her, as I can testify: she will sail through the lot with wit, good humour, generosity and a lusty laugh. I'm telling you: we need more women with appetite and backbone!

■ 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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