



# Mixing it like the master

**R**eposing in my cellar, with strict instructions not to be opened for at least a decade, is a bottle of Sandeman's 2011 vintage port. I have had a sneak preview – from a bottle poured last month during the UK's biggest and best fortified wine tasting – and I know there is a real pleasure in store.

But why do I have it? I must thank the two Davids, one a wine broker distributing many thousands of southern European bottles through northern Europe each year, the other an importer and seller of some very smart Spanish and French wines. By fortunate chance, I sat next to them during a workshop on aged tawny port, and each table of three became a team for the challenge to follow.

## Correct proportions

The task was to replicate Sandeman's 20-year-old tawny port by blending the correct proportions of the four component wines which its maker, Luis Sottomayor, had used. It was the Davids' skills which came closest, and meant that each of us went home with a bottle of Sandeman's 2011 – a vintage which throughout the Douro Valley is regarded as very special indeed.

My contribution? Not a lot. I agreed with the Davids that the main 85 per cent of the blend should be the first of the four components before us (though we all decided that number four was the most delicious wine – a reason why too many of the other teams chose it, putting personal preference before palate). Then, going for simplicity, my partners added five per cent each of the other three components. "I quite



■ The two Davids seriously at work

like it," shrugged Sottomayor dismissively, before moving on to taste lots of other efforts to imitate his work.

A long wait – and then the result: "The winners are ... Liz's team" (after all, I had contributed one substantial thing – my name for the team title). We were delighted, not simply because of our prizes, but also because we'd got nearest to the real thing. And Sottomayor was more complimentary now: our result was "very close".

But not that close. When the actual blend was revealed, the proportions were far more precise and varied, from 93.7 per cent for the largest component to 0.8 per cent for the smallest. Number four, the wine everyone loved, came from the 1965 vintage – which shows that some of what is inside an aged tawny port bottle goes back much further than the number of years on the label.

Before we'd been let loose with wines and measures, there had been a chance to experience the four generations of Sandeman tawnies, from the flavoursome 10-year-old with its fresh edge

and savoury nutty finish, through to the fragrant, long-lasting delights of the 20-year-old – drinking splendidly now, and a fine wine well worth its around £36 price tag – to the serious, more mature pleasures of the family's patriarchs, 30 and 40 years old.

"Tawnies are the work of man with the help of God," said Sottomayor, emphasising the need to incorporate the very best, most complex wines into the blends and ensure that high acidity is maintained through the long ageing process in wooden casks at Vila Nova de Gaia at the mouth of the Douro, away from the temperature extremes of the valley vineyards.

Sandeman's are work well done – buy the 20-year-old at some Waitrose stores, Hedonism, Lea and Sandeman; Alexander Hadleigh ([www.ahadleigh-wine.com](http://www.ahadleigh-wine.com)) has all four ages; [www.corksout.com](http://www.corksout.com) and [www.southdownscellars.co.uk](http://www.southdownscellars.co.uk) have the 30 and 40.

And Sandeman 2011 vintage, at £218 a case of six (pre-VAT) from Lea & Sandeman, will surely prove a very sound investment.

# The cassoulet in this cellar was really the pits

Le Garrick in Covent Garden clearly prides itself on its Frenchness, but the quality of what it serves is nothing to crow about

**A**nd so to the National Gallery, there to see the exhibition devoted to Federico Barocci – a wonderful artist, though I must admit I'd never heard of him before all the reviews began to appear. He lived from 1535 to 1612, though much of his output does seem strikingly modern: not so much the very grand altarpieces as the enchanting pastel and chiaroscuro preparatory sketches: you could swear they were 19th century (and I suppose I'm thinking Pre-Raphaelite, which makes a sort of sense). The highlight of the show came when an elderly lady, peering at a very muscular Nativity scene, whispered to another elderly lady, "yes, but they don't look very Jewish, do they...?". So anyway, a

jolly good time was had there by my wife, son and self – despite the exhibition being in the Sainsbury Wing, which is vast, unenchanting and rather resembles a Stalinist railway station within, and an uncompromising pre-apocalyptic bunker without (despite the grudging inclusion on the façade of the occasional fractured Corinthian capital). A restaurant nearby was therefore needed – for there is nothing like a dose of art for waking up the appetite. Somewhere in the middle of the final room, I tend to find myself sneaking a peek at my watch: ah ... 12.45 – perfect: soon I shall be feeding again.

The light in Trafalgar Square was perfectly blinding after the Hades of the gallery – and they were filming the 50th-anniversary episode of Dr Who there, just by

“The waiter recommended boeuf bourguignon – which is a dish that hails from near Avignon (his home town, he told me). ‘And,’ he added, ‘I have made it with my grandmother.’ I had assumed it would be made with beef, but there you go

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#### ■ Joseph at Le Garrick

Nelson's Column, complete with Matt Smith and a crane-lifted Tardis. All of which I gathered from the following day's papers: didn't notice a damn thing at the time. Now I have many favourite restaurants within strolling distance of here – J Sheekey, the Ivy, Mon Plaisir, Les Deux Salons, Balthazar, to name but five – but I rather thought I fancied somewhere different ... yes indeed, why not? Then I could write a review of a Covent Garden restaurant new to me. Yes well: big mistake.

#### Stygian gloom

Le Garrick is in Garrick Street and precisely opposite the Garrick Club (after which the street was named, and not vice versa) where I often browse and sluice, and one or

two members had recommended it: established 25 years, French, good value, informal, is what I had been told ... which sounded just the ticket. And talking of Tardis, this place is actually the reverse: from the outside, it appears to be a generous corner establishment – but within, there are just four or five tiny tables for two ... and if you're not very careful indeed, you will plummet headlong down the tight little spiral staircase right by the door that leads you down to the restaurant proper: more deep and Stygian gloom, as if the Sainsbury Wing hadn't been murky enough. What we have here is basically a cellar, with all sorts of interesting little nooks, and off these there lurks the odd cranny. Brick is bare, ceiling low, furniture hotch-potch and the walls are covered in all

things Gallic: playbills, wine bottles, portraits of Piaf and the tricolor in abundance. Were you still in any doubt that this place is seriously froggy, the waiter will soon have disabused you. He had been in London for only four months, he for some reason told me, and was learning the language. And doing quite well with it, in that one certainly did recognise the occasional word, while the accent was parodically amusing. He had, he said, worked in Michelin-starred restaurants in both Corsica and Avignon – his home town, he told me. And now he was in a cellar in Covent Garden: tant pis.

He was ridiculously proud of the defiantly French menu, as all French people will be. They instinctively understand, you see,

that you are an idiot rosbif who exists solely on boiled potatoes and fried breakfasts, tea and warm beer, and it is their privilege to treat you to the fabulous cuisine of the mother country. Which was absolutely fine with me ... until it arrived. All the classic dishes were on the menu (apart from, oddly, coq au vin) – and mindful of how brilliantly they do them at Mon Plaisir, just around the corner in Monmouth Street, we were all very much looking forward to it. So my wife ordered moules marinières as a starter, and my son and I were both having escargots. The waiter recommended a wine that is made close to Avignon (his home town, he told me) and it was good. The moules ... were moules, but in a very thin and uncreamy sauce which imparted precisely nothing. The escargots were not served in the shell, and therefore from a can, and were energetically rubbery in the sauce which was basically clarified butter and garlic, and really rather horrible. The whole had the consistency of bits of bungee dredged out of an inkwell.

#### 'Exactly like Heinz'

Then we had the mains to deal with. The waiter recommended boeuf bourguignon – which is a dish that hails from near to Avignon (his home town, he told me). "And," he added, "I have made it with my grandmother." Now this was quite a blow: I had assumed it would be made with beef, but there you go. I ordered it anyway, and my wife was having a cassoulet with duck, pork and Toulouse sausage and lingot beans, while the son went for a confit of duck with haricots verts – and we had sides of sauté potatoes and "petits pois grand-mère" (I'm telling you – she's into absolutely everything, this woman). So ... where to begin ...? Well – the boeuf bourguignon was OK: too salty, but decent chunks of beef in an all right sauce. The duck confit was also just about OK – but just a bit of duck: no depth of flavour. The haricots verts turned out to be not verts at all, but identical to the beige lingot beans on my wife's plate – which were, she said,

"exactly like Heinz baked beans in that orange sauce, but when you haven't finished a tin and discover it five days later and all you have is sludge and starch". To which I have nothing to add. The duck was mean, bony and overdone, while the sausage was as good as a piece of shop-bought sausage will be. The pork was a large cube of solid fat: wholly fat, with no meat at all, and actively disgusting. The potatoes were whole, and not remotely what I would call sauté – while the peas...! So very few of them, and vastly outnumbered by heaps of "lardons", for which read cut-up bits of very fatty bacon: awful.

So I relayed to the bouncy waiter a little of this, and he was bouncy no more: at a stroke, Monsieur Sunshine had been transformed into Monsieur Frosty. We didn't want pudding: we wanted to leave. So he brought along three cold madeleines and three shots of Poire William "because you didn't enjoy the cassoulet". Well, Poire William, I think, is like the fuel that an old Ronson lighter used to run on, so we left those (and mine had lipstick on the glass anyway). Then the bill arrived without service added, "because you didn't enjoy the cassoulet". Yeh right: bloody cassoulet was charged for, though. And so there it was: on the whole a pretty buggery awful experience (excuse my French).

■ 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](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## FACTFILE

#### ■ LE GARRICK

10-12 Garrick Street, WC2  
Tel: 020 7240 7649

■ Open Monday-Saturday noon-10.30pm. Sunday 1pm-5.30pm

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: About £100 for three-course meal for two with wine

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