



Pleasures at just over £5

Aim a little higher than rock-bottom plonk to find some good deals

How often does this happen: aspiring fine diners buy an expensive joint of organic beef or rare-breed pork, and serve it with a BOGOFF (buy-one-get-one-free) gondola-end bottle from their local supermarket's wine section. Fortunately, such vinous parsimony seems on the way out.

Trends in wine buying show that consumers are increasingly prepared to spend a bit more on a better bottle. That may have something to do with hard economic times encouraging treats at home rather than in a restaurant. Or maybe the message has finally got through that between a £5 and a £10 bottle there's something like a 25-times increase in the value of the wine content (largely because the exchequer's share is so much less). And high street retailers are responding.

These thoughts are prompted by the bottle in front of me: Saint-Emilion Grand Cru 2010. It's not a wine you'd immediately expect to find in a Lidl supermarket, but it is an example from the supermarket's premium range. There was an even posher Saint-Emilion, Château Laroze Grand Cru Classé 2007 at £20 – the most expensive wine Lidl has ever sold – but that “flew off the shelves”.

The “Wine Cellars” in the German company's 600 UK stores – a burgundy red/wooden wine crate feature – were introduced six months ago, a £1million investment bringing what specialist wine category manager Ben Hulme describes as “affordable luxury” to Lidl's customers.

Four Masters of Wine have been involved in assessing the wines, and distillations of their



■ The town of Saint-Emilion and the vineyards beyond

notes are displayed alongside the bottles. There's a fairly rapid changeover, with extra selections at Christmas and Easter, and the focus is largely on classic European areas. While the initiative is great, regrettably the six wines I've tasted didn't excite me too much – for example, the Saint-Emilion 2010 (£10, from a co-operative, not an individual château) was something of an oaky, tannic bruiser.

Attractive freshness

My favourite was Saxa Loquuntur uno rioja 2010, £7, modern in style but with an attractive freshness to its concentrated fruit and only a discreet hint of the French and American barrels in which it matures. “The stones speak” is how the name translates – and it reflects the stony soil of the low-yielding old vineyards in the Rioja Baja region from where it comes. I hope there's still some left.

At the other end of the supermarket spectrum, Waitrose has an image of catering for high-income customers. But that doesn't mean that its wine prices are stratospheric. To contrast with the Lidl experience, I paid particular attention to some of the lower-priced wines at the

spring press tasting two weeks ago (May 15-16), held at the Waitrose cookery school above the branch next to Finchley Road station.

There were a lot of pleasures below £10 and even a few sound and enjoyable wines at £5. I'm not advocating that bottom-line pricing is a good thing, as, wine value apart, it's hard to see how the winemakers responsible can survive. But the tasting proved that if your wine budget is limited, you don't need to patronise the more basic supermarkets.

Waitrose has, for example, a very decent rioja (Vega Ariana 2011) which at £6.50 costs less than Lidl's and is more obviously characteristic of its origin. Even cheaper is a minerally, fresh and softly zesty 2012 soave (£5): buyer Katie Mollet should be congratulated for this and lots more very appealing Italian whites, including the serious, minerally dry Alasia Cortese 2012, £5.70.

And if you're more concerned about enjoyable drinkability than appellation, do think beyond the classics – there are a lot of less-familiar European locations where the product doesn't carry a mark-up linked to its name.

Dining out with Dante was far from infernal...

...though the shortcomings of the seafood linguine leave our reviewer ruing his choice of an Italian dish in a French bistro

You have heard the term “squeezed middle”...? London restaurants know all about it: when people who were used to eating out quite regularly at their favourite local bistros and trattoria suddenly now are feeling the pinch ... then the favourite local, I'm afraid, tends to be largely forsaken in favour of home cooking, takeaways or the eternal supermarket “dine-in” deals. The top restaurants remain fully booked, fast food continues to fill the hungry hordes (they're lovin' it!) ... but many middling restaurants have been forced to call it a day and shut up shop. This then results in much wailing and rending of garments among the very locals who ultimately – though through no fault of their own – failed to support them.

But many more restaurants are proving to be rather more tenacious, and are coming up with ideas in order to lure the punters back. While some have decided to dispense with loss-making lunchtime opening altogether, others think that ever longer hours are the answer. And just last week, I ventured to one of these ... oh yes indeed: upon your behalf, I travelled – if not quite to the ends of time, then certainly to the End of Crouch.

Local institution

Bistro Aix is long established and something of a local institution – on a noisy road, flanked by a Japanese restaurant and a brace of Indians. Outside stands an old-fashioned butcher's delivery bicycle, its pannier filled with flowers, and a blackboard

“The bistro boasts ‘a delightfully romantic setting with rich, earthy colours, soft lighting and soothing classical music’. Crumbs: I maybe should have been dining by candlelight with a sultry mademoiselle by the name of Fifi

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■ Joseph and guest Dante Mansi at Bistro Aix in Crouch End

Picture: Polly Hancock

proclaiming that it is now “Open all day long, seven days a week”. Here is either bold enterprise or else hard-driven desperation, and probably a blend of the two. The bistro boasts “a delightfully romantic setting with rich earthy colours, soft lighting and soothing classical music”. Crumbs: I maybe should have been dining by candlelight with a sultry mademoiselle by the name of Fifi ... but instead I was lunching by sunlight with my chum Dante – who sports a fine handlebar moustache, and therefore in no way may be confused with Fifi. The “rich earthy colours” are supplied by a terracotta ceiling and some exposed brick walls, the lighting (not notably “soft”) by a couple of iron and medieval-looking pendants. I can quite see, of course, that in the evening

when I am here with Fifi, the whole thing might well come together ... but at lunchtime, with only three tables taken, any murmur of a “romantic setting” was fighting for its life.

Dante, until very recently, was the proprietor of Marine Ices in Chalk Farm which after 80 years has just changed hands. The place still looks the same and bears the name, but is currently leased to a small Italian chain called Ponti's, and this may or may not become permanent. Marine Ices always did very well – the ice cream itself absolutely legendary – but simply it was decided by the family that it was time to move on. Dante was born in Primrose Hill (not, I think, literally) then lived in Highgate before moving to Crouch End in 1978, where he has lived ever since. He loves it, and I can quite see

why: it is comfortable ... rather cosy – crouchy, I like to call it.

There is a set two-course lunch for £12 – and no fewer than seven starters and 10 mains are offered at this price, which is extraordinary. There is a further offer of a plat du jour, and this is just a tenner, to include a glass of wine: bargain indeed. The carte is much more expensive and even more huge ... and this did worry me a little bit: 20 starters, 16 mains and five vegetarian dishes: do we think all this can really be fresh...? The menu is just so massive, one has to wonder. We were seduced by the carte in the end – and Dante was going for smoked duck breast with celery, pine nut and parmesan salad with shaved fennel (because don't we just loathe the bearded kind?) while I liked the sound of crab cake (“white meat only”)

lightly breaded and browned. This – for £9 – was rather small and thin: it contained dark meat as well as white, was unlightly breaded and therefore so very thickly crunchy that it needn't really have been crab at all. Dante loved his duck salad, and thought the pine nuts added hugely.

Then I did a stupid thing: hard to credit, I know – but there it is. The menu was full of very tempting French classics, and Dante very sensibly went for one of them: roast rabbit in mustard sauce with julienne vegetables and potato purée. And I very nearly went for ... well it doesn't really matter what I nearly went for, because what I actually went for was seafood linguine. I know. Italian. In a French bistro: curse me for a fool. But it did sound so tempting: scallops, prawns, mussels and squid in a white wine and herb broth – oh yum. And it was ... sort of OK. Just about. The linguine was rather doughy, the seafood decidedly mean: one scallop (not plural, then) two prawns, two chewy squid rings ... and six mussel shells, three of which contained a mussel. Cream had been added to the sauce, which you really don't need: as Dante said, “it should just be ‘in bianco’ – white wine and herbs”. And he knoweth of Italian food.

‘Deep flavour’

But he adored his rabbit: “Really nice, deep flavour. Excellent potato and vegetables.” Well goody goody for him: Oh God – I should have had the roast guinea fowl with French beans and sauté potatoes ... that's what I nearly went for. Oh well. As we sipped a very decent Côte du Rhône Villages, Dante sang the praises of Crouch End: “I'm old enough to remember Wilson's, the department store – a cross between John Barnes and Grace Brothers. Over the road is Callis, the best shoemaker. We have a wonderful butcher, Morley – Walter Purkis the wet fishmonger. Ironmongery in Bishop's, a timber merchant, Dunn's Bakery ... the trouble these days is mums with buggies the size of a car: they push you into the street. Why they call this Nappy

Valley, I suppose.” I asked him if it was true that Bob Dylan was once going to live here. “Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics has a studio here. Dylan had come to see him, got a bit lost and knocked on a door. He said to the lady who answered: ‘Is Dave here?’ and she said he wasn't, but would be soon. Turned out her husband was called Dave – he was a plumber. When he came home, his wife said: ‘Bob Dylan's in the sitting room waiting for you’, and he said: ‘Yeh right’.”

There are 17 puddings...! Dante had the classic tarte Tatin ... except that he didn't, because instead of the fan of thin caramelised apple slices, there was a great mound of stewed apple: he liked it, but it was million miles from a tarte Tatin. I had a good chocolate fondant – warm, properly oozing, served with “our” vanilla ice cream. And here's the story: years ago, Marine Ices used to supply the ice cream here, then they began to make their own. “It's superb,” he said. “First class.” And I had to agree. Dante had very much enjoyed his lunch ... I rather less so. But I had eaten an awful lot, so wasn't grouchy – still just crouchy. And my middle was truly squeezed.

■ 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

■ BISTRO AIX

54 Topsfield Parade
Tottenham Lane, N8
Tel: 020 8340 6346

■ Open from 11.30am
seven days a week.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
(better in the evening, I'm sure)

■ Cost: Plat du jour with glass of wine £10, two-course set lunch £12. Carte pretty pricey by contrast. About £110 for three-course meal for two with wine.



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