



It's summer, so go green

However hard you look at the photograph accompanying this column, you won't see a single vine. But it is appropriate in more than its lush green colour to a discussion of vinho verde. This is the spectacular garden of Quinta da Aveleda, producer of the largest-selling vinho verde in the world, Casal Garcia.

Walk a few metres more, though, and the vines snap into view, tidily pruned much lower than the traditional tall trellis or tree-climbing style of the region, as were the vines at the other vinho verde property I visited recently, Quinta da Lixa. It is no tourist-welcoming tropical garden, but soon there will be an attractive, eco-friendly wine tourism complex to encourage visitors to enjoy and understand Portugal's best-known white wine (a wine hotel is happening at Aveleda, too).

Vinho verde, while still a light and fresh summer wine, is a lot more seriously enjoyable now than that very spritzzy and tart liquid too many of us remember from decades back. These days, a light prickle in the mouth is more likely to come from carefully injected carbon dioxide than random continuing fermentation, and there will be more fruit and body to balance the crispness. But even though alcohol levels are creeping up a little, many examples are around 11 degrees.

I'd always associated vinho verde with the very northernmost area of Portugal, close to the Spanish border – that's where I had my first experience of the wine (and of a memorably horrid red version, now thankfully a style much improved if still unusual). But the demarcated region, which is one of the



■ Luxuriant green in the Quinta da Aveleda garden – visitors welcomed

largest in Europe, stretches to well south of Portugal's second city, Oporto. It covers a total area of 7,000 square kilometres and encompasses 21,000 hectares of vines.

Within it are nine sub-regions, on mostly granitic soils though with some quite different growing conditions. The producers don't make much fuss about that, preferring to promote a general clean, green and light-in-alcohol image of vinho verde. But there is a subtle switch towards more single grape variety wines alongside the traditional blends. Both Aveleda and Lixa are enthusiastic about alvarinho, generally regarded as the quality grape of the area – even though, in their southern location, they can't call a pure alvarinho wine vinho verde. Only growers in northerly Monção-Melgaço are allowed to do that.

The alvarinhos, interestingly, have been the most diverse of the region's categories that I've tried. Some have a lovely peachy purity, elegant mouthfeel and classiness that resembles a fresh condrieu. But others can be disappointing compared with lower-priced, well-balanced blends. There can be other good single-variety wines, too, from citrus-fresh loureiro and bigger, structured avesso.

Aveleda and Lixa, both carefully tended, classy and

quality-oriented family-owned estates, make fine wines through their ranges, from the simplest blends upward. They aren't high street names here, but their wines are available online. For Aveleda, including the aromatic, prettily complex and gently lingering Quinta da Aveleda estate wine, £8.50-£9, try www.portugaliawines.co.uk, www.corkingwines.com and www.dbmwines.co.uk; stockists of Lixa's wines are www.exelwines.co.uk and www.averys.com, though sadly neither has the particularly fine Aromas das Castas.

Specially stylish

Also on the web, <http://theexceptionalwinecompany.com> has two specially stylish dry vinho verdes, plus a dessert wine, from Quintas de Melgaço – Castrus (£16) is strongly recommended.

Those wines stocked by familiar retail outlets also carry the green flag well. Quinta de Azevedo, fragrant and fresh, is in Majestic (£8, £6 for two or more) and Waitrose (£7.50); the Wine Society also has Azevedo (£7), and its four-strong choice starts with the excellent Adega de Monção (£6); The Sampler stocks the soft, easy Arca Nova blend (£7.10). In summer sunshine, they're a happy choice.

Pasta with tales of BBC comedy

My childhood was not of the bookish variety, which is maybe why I took to television with a considerable passion (whereas now I don't watch it at all, really – just record old films). I loved the American cowboy programmes, and God there were so many of them: *Wagon Train*, *Bonanza*, *Rawhide*, *Cheyenne*, *Hawkeye*, *Bronco*, *Wyatt Earp*, *Maverick* – on and on. What with all these and cartoons such as *Popeye* and *Yogi Bear*, it's amazing I ever got my prep done. But my special affection was reserved for the English comedy programmes – *Hancock's Half Hour* in particular, but also *The Army Game*, *Arthur Haynes* and *Steptoe & Son*. There were no repeats in those days, and obviously no way of recording them – and yet I seemed to absorb the scripts as if by some form of osmosis, and my mother would go crazy when I endlessly repeated the odd amusing little nugget, striving to do all the different voices: it was the accents that got to her, because it seemed to be a given that nobody in comedy would actually speak English proper like what you's meant to. Then I was exiled to a boarding school where viewing was limited to 7.30-8 o'clock each evening, and so apart from *Top of the Pops*, TV

for me more or less died the death – though still to this day if anything is to lure me back, it will be home-grown comedy, every single time. And so how pleased was I to be lunching with a chap whose entire working life at the BBC has largely been devoted to producing and directing that very thing: classic British comedy. As he tells it, Gareth Gwenlan's first big break came in 1964 when, as resident director, he had been achieving 92 per cent capacity audiences for a string of productions in the Derby Playhouse, and so asked for a raise of 10 bob a week ... whereupon he was sacked. And so applied for a job at the Beeb. "I knew nothing of television. I didn't even own a television – on 15 quid a week, I couldn't afford one."

Pleasantly summery

I yearn to hear more ... but first let's eat, yes? We were in Getti, an Italian restaurant at the Madame Tussaud's end of Marylebone High Street. The interior is pleasantly summery and Mediterranean – white walls, pale tiled floor, and a vivid blue in the form of a sinuously serpentine bar and a single hyacinth on every table. There is a silver five-branch candelabrum with five lit candles on a sunny day (as last seen atop Liberace's piano), a large fork and spoon bolted to the window and

“The BBC was a very different place when Gareth fell into it. 'I said to a Sybil Fawcety lookalike I was here to see Mr Beasley, and she said you can't be, Mr Beasley always hunts on a Monday'”

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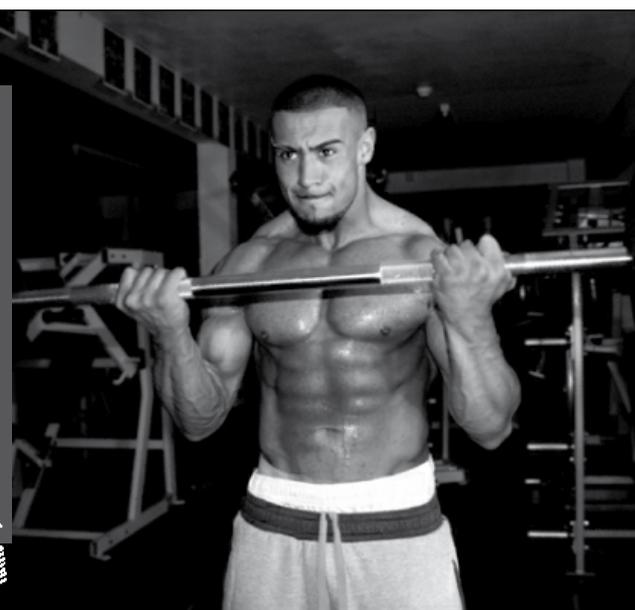
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■ Joseph with guest Gareth Gwenlan at Getti – in a montage by Ham&High photographer Polly Hancock

an even huger pair dominating a wall: just right for a bout of titanic spaghetti twirling. The chairs are sort of plywood buckets (more comfortable than that may sound), the napkins proper and the staff authentically Italian. The menu says “we encourage our chefs to take advantage of Italy’s huge regional culinary heritage and invite them to recreate the tastes of their childhoods”. Which would be risky in this country: you’d get everything from Farley’s rusk to Turkey Twizzlers, by way of fish fingers and the Pot Noodle. But the

menu didn’t at all shout out with any surprises – all pretty standard – and although there is a set two-course lunch at £13.95, we thought we might spread ourselves a bit. Gareth chose carpaccio to start, and I had sautéed scallops with grilled courgettes. The scallops were large, four in number, juicy and yummy with coral attached for those who like it (I don’t) – though the courgettes were rather under-grilled and flaccid. Gareth very much liked the carpaccio, and the generous shavings of parmesan. The BBC was a very different

place when Gareth fell into it. “I was 25. When I went for my interview, I said to a Sybil Fawltly lookalike secretary that I was here to see Mr Beasley, and she said, ‘You can’t possibly be: Mr Beasley always hunts on a Monday’.” One year later he was first assistant director, and eventually aspired to comedy because the shows were filmed before a live audience: “That’s what I missed from theatre: the audience.” Initially he had been working on shows such as *Z Cars*, *Doctor Who*, *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Top of the Pops* and

Spike Milligan’s *Q* – but it was when he became a fully fledged producer and director that sparks began to fly. Yes ... but first we’ve got to eat more food ... scaloppa milanese with spaghetti napolitan for Gareth – and quite alarmingly vast it was: I didn’t have a tape measure about my person, but I’d take a stab at more than a foot. Alas, he said that although the breadcrumbing and flavour was pretty good, the veal was as tough as tough can be ... and that you really do not want. The tomatoey spaghetti was tomatoey spaghetti ... and my tagliatelle bolognese was good, but the nicely seasoned and meaty sauce just wasn’t saucy enough: a little more liquid would have served to invite the pasta to join the party, instead of keeping it waiting at the door.

Vast arena of talent
Gareth came to be head of comedy at the BBC, but before that contented himself with producing and often directing, oh – a whole load of old shows you never will have heard of: *Butterflies*, *To The Manor Born*, Wodehouse Playhouse, *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* ... and *Only Fools and Horses*. “I actually cast Nicholas Lyndhurst as Rodney – I had worked with him on *Butterflies* and knew that he was good. We always knew we wanted David Jason for Del, but had to wait patiently until he had finished doing *Open All Hours* with Ronnie Barker.” And then Gareth went on to commission yet another whole load of old shows you never will have heard of: *Blackadder*, ‘*Allo ‘Allo*, *Birds of a Feather*, *Keeping Up Appearances*, *Yes Prime Minister* and *One Foot in the Grave*, among quite a few more. “Amazing...” I say. He shrugs. “Well – I’d be at a loss to do anything else.” Out of this vast arena of talent, did anyone become a special friend, I wondered...? “Oh yes – so many. But in particular Leonard Rossiter. An ace squash player, you know. He and John Baron – CJ in *Perrin* – were seriously into fine wine. We had many good times. Penelope Keith and Felicity Kendal I remain very fond of – also my great friend

Geoffrey Palmer, whom I meet quite often at our club.” Just last year Gareth produced a new series of *Yes Prime Minister* for UK TV, and was awarded one of the most prestigious honours of all: the BAFTA Lifetime Achievement Award (which this year went to Michael Palin).
But did he want pudding, that was the question...? He rather thought not, but could maybe go a digestif. I asked for two drinks lists: Gareth was given the pudding menu, and I the set lunch ... oh dear. And they had no calvados, so Gareth settled for a Courvoisier – which was served in a way I have never before seen: the balloon cradled in a glass of scalding water so as to be virtually cooking the cognac. Gareth is an amusing and modest fellow, and perfectly content – his only regret being that he no longer rides with the Berkeley Hunt (which, incidentally, spawned a memorable bit of rhyming slang in its truncated form ‘berk’, of which many people seem to be blithely unaware). So I had another glass of the barbara we had been drinking, as we eased into an afternoon of chat. And why shouldn’t we...? Only fools and horses work.

■ Joseph Connolly will be talking tonight (Thursday) about his books, eating out and growing up in Hampstead: 7pm for 7.30 at Burgh House in Hampstead, so do come along for a chat and a listen. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

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