



Learning to love reislung

A month-long promotion shines spotlight on an underrated variety

Far too few wine drinkers think of what is arguably the world's finest white wine grape when choosing summer bottles. Even fewer, probably, consider the country where it shows its purest expression. But people in the know are trying to change all that.

We're in the middle of 31 Days of German Riesling, a promotion by Wines of Germany which runs throughout July involving independent wine shops and restaurants doing all they can to raise the profile of wine which, in the late 19th century, was more sought-after and higher-priced than the smartest products of Bordeaux chateaux.

Plenty of the places involved are within Ham&Highland or close by, and the full list – plus the chance to win a weekend at Dresden's wine festival – is on www.31daysofgermanriesling.co.uk. But the one which most matters for any wine lover in this part of London is The Winery, in Clifton Road, Maida Vale. David Motion's compact, floor-to-ceiling-bottle-filled shop is nirvana for anyone who has been won over by the delectable and complex charms of dry German riesling.

More than simply stocking what is quite likely the best selection of German dry rieslings in the UK, David and his enthusiastic staff know them very well indeed and can lead newcomers to those which will best match individual tastes and pockets. And, of course, The Winery has adopted the 31 Days promotion with typical verve. Though, as David says: "We are fairly strict observers of 365 Days of German Riesling, and 366 every leap year."

They launched the July-specific celebration with a tasting of four



■ Acclaimed grower Clemens Busch in his Pünderich vineyard

fine dry delights, topped and tailed by a sparkling riesling, a fruity style and a schwarzriesling (the German name for pinot meunier). That evening was a one-off, but download the list (www.thewineryuk.com), pop into the shop and do it yourself – at £9 to £19 a bottle, prices are reasonable indeed, given the quality and the fact that production quantities are often miniscule.

Rising star

There are two more events to come, and a few tickets should still be available. Next Wednesday, there's a three-course riesling dinner at Hardy's Brasserie in Marylebone. "We're firm believers that riesling works with everything – you can put us to the test!" Then the following Tuesday, at Kandoo restaurant in Edgware Road, Gerrit Walter, a young winemaker who David considers one of the Mosel's rising stars, joins the team for a module of The Winery's wine course. After a short introduction to wine-tasting technique, Gerrit's wines will be joined by others from the Rheingau, Rheinhessen and the Nahe, exploring why riesling is the ultimate "terroir" grape. The

tasters will, David predicts, "come away as bonkers about German Riesling as we are".

Email info@thewineryuk.com or phone 020 7286 6475 to book tickets – the dinner is £50, the wine course module £40.

Chain wine shops can't match that sort of individuality, but the new Wine Rack shops which have emerged from the ashes of the massive Thresher's empire are offering a decent choice at sound prices. There's one opening in Haverstock Hill, Belsize Park (the shop where Nicolas used to trade) on Friday next week, and for the first three days (July 26, 27, 28) there will be free tastings all day, with regular weekend tastings after that.

Manager Marcin Kryzysczyk and his colleagues have special offers to tempt early shoppers, including celebratory fizz: Laurent-Perrier rosé £43 instead of £55, Bollinger NV £30 (normally £40) and Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label NV £30 (normally £39). There's also a red Bordeaux bargain, La Vieille Cour de Seguin 2010 red, £6 rather than the usual £9. Wine apart, the spirit choice is huge: more than 200 lines. See www.winerack.co.uk.

restaurant of the week

How I lingered over lunch with a lefty legend of old Fleet Street

The conversation flowed like a river and the wine did too when our reviewer met up with veteran economics writer William Keegan

Bistro Laz is a very jolly-looking and inviting little restaurant just at the edge of Swain's Lane – that very pleasing crescent which has apparently been 'saved' from redevelopment. It has a wonderfully villagey feel, and is packed with useful shops such as a proper butcher, newsagent, florist, wine merchant ... so naturally there arose the situation where it had to be 'saved': if ever something is much-loved and long established, it of course must be at risk, obliging locals to 'go into battle' – because they well

understand that (a) once it is gone, they will never again see its like, and (b) whatever replaces it will be intrusive, useless and ugly. So anyway ... Bistro Laz: large orange awnings and a charming frontage made up of planters packed with bamboo and evergreens spanning its considerable breadth – this to take in Al Parco, the affiliated bar and pizzeria. The wall of planting screens an outside eating area from the worst that Highgate West Hill can chuck at it, and the modest interior is very cosy indeed, the ceiling alive with clusters of coloured and leaded glass Moroccan pendants that

“The menu here is beyond massive: you can choose one of the 20 breakfasts from 7am until a generous 3pm – or go to the alternative menu, which lists 36 mains. Did you hear me? Shall I say it again? Thirty-six mains...!”



Joseph Connolly at Bistro Laz, Highgate



■ Joseph with guest William Keegan at Bistro Laz in a montage by Ham&High photographer Polly Hancock

combine with the orange of the awnings to bestow upon the place the glow of an exotic and eternal sunset. Though who was Laz, I wonder...? Short for Lazarus, could it be? There are two of them in the Bible – one crops up in Luke, and is a beggar. And if you think that's bad, just take a look at the one in John: he's dead. But the owners here plumped in the end for Bistro Laz rather than, say, the less chummy Dead Beggar. Penury, incidentally, being what we are told the 'squeezed middle' of Britain is collectively in the grip of – and I was having lunch with a gentleman who understands all about this sort of thing: the very affable William Keegan, senior economics commentator at *The Observer*, where he has been writing his weekly column for the past 36 years, this making him very much a Fleet Street legend.

Bill lives in Islington and came on the Overground, very pleased to be bang on time. Normally he drives, but is still recovering from a broken humerus (incurred, somewhat ironically, while running for a bus). Soon, however, he will be back to driving his two daughters each morning to Francis Holland School, after which he walks on the Heath and at Kenwood reads the papers, while musing over the forthcoming column. "It's very relaxing," he says. "And I've got to know John le Carré, who does a similar thing." Bill's wife – his second – is a highly successful commercial barrister, and they have three children, which must be added to the tally of the four that he has from the previous marriage. He has written quite a few books, one of which was entitled *The Prudence*

of *Mr Gordon Brown*, rather in the manner of, I don't know ... *Mr Pooter Goes To Westminster*. Actually, Bill is a friend and supporter of the much criticised Brown: "He actually saved the international monetary system: history will be kind."

Charming waiter

Maybe. Anyway – I was hungry, and that's always the point. The menu here is beyond massive: a morning-till-night operation, so you can choose one of the 20 breakfasts from 7am until a generous 3pm – or go to the alternative menu, which lists 36 mains. Did you hear me? Shall I say it again? Thirty-six mains...! Everything from fish and chips to kebabs to spaghetti to casseroles to steak ... on an on: worrying in one way, but very low prices. The charming Italian waiter

recommended a red wine called Brindisi, so obligingly we drank a bottle of that, which took no time at all. And then he brought some unbidden parmesan ... this was just after our starters: calamaretti with baby prawns and fennel in tomato sauce for Bill – and he very much approved of that. I had something I hadn't come across before: courgette cake – fried, grated courgettes with other veg, eggs, cheese and herbs in tomato: it was pretty nice – rather dry, but OK flavour. Then we had a bit more Brindisi...

The waiter (who clearly had taken a shine to us) then brought over the special dinner menu (it was as if the 56 breakfast and lunch options he considered to be rather mean and overly limiting). Here were some rather more adventurous things on it, so we went for a couple. We were getting good treatment here (the notebook might have been playing a part ... what am I saying? Of course it was playing a part) and so by way of simple gratitude, we ordered more Brindisi...

'Rather great'

So: Moroccan chicken tagine with onions, peppers, apricot and almond – an attractive and generous dish that Bill pronounced "very good indeed – I like tagine, know a bit about tagine, and this is rather great". He wanted some beans, but a waitress said they only had "baked" ... so settled for a salad. And I had what was billed as a chargrilled veal cutlet, but they seriously undersold it: here was no mere cutlet, but a T-bone. Vast, just well enough charred, again rather too dry, but a deep meaty flavour. This came with a pile of golden chips that looked rather beautiful ... but ... but ... they tasted of absolutely nothing: not potato, nor whatever they were fried in. I ate the lot, of course (just to be sure) ... but no: nothing. Quite extraordinary, really ... but they did a good job of absorbing a good deal more Brindisi...

From the age of seven, Bill knew that he wanted to be a journalist. "My first piece was published in the *Cork Weekly Examiner*.

I was 11 at the time, and living in SW20." His hero was (and is) John Maynard Keynes, so after Cambridge, a first job on *The Economist* seemed perfectly fitting. He moved to *The Observer* during the glory days of Fleet Street: "Papers sold so well then, there was no corruption ... now, I'm not so sure." He is, of course, a lifelong lefty, though says this: "I believe in 'social security' ... but not 'welfare'." Similarly, he is "pro-Europe, but anti-eurozone". As long ago as the 1980s he was offered a Labour peerage, but couldn't contemplate giving up hackery: then, as now. Officially, he's retired, but he continues his column as a freelance, and eats out in the meantime. "I do know a few people who say, 'I can't wait to retire – then I can live like Keegan!'" As well as modern restaurants such as Galvin in Baker Street, he still frequents the old haunts: El Vino's, The Gay Hussar, L'Etoile. "I always went to L'Etoile with Iain Gilmour, Jim Prior and Peter Walker – my favourite Tories."

Bistro Laz is a very comfortable and easy place, meant for lingering. We were given buckshee baklava ... and had just a tad more Brindisi, as we chatted on. It was, um ... quite a lunch. Four days later, I arose from the dead, picked up my bed, and just about walked.

■ 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 LAZ

1 Highgate West Hill, N6
Tel: 020 8342 8355
Open all day from 7am.
Food: ★★★★★☆
Service: ★★★★★☆
The Feeling: ★★★★★☆
Cost: Remarkably reasonable across the whole vast menu, including wine. Two of you will be fine for £50-60 ... unless you go nuts on the Brindisi.

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