



Lulubelle adds to the joy

Discovering chablis with a tutor in a 2CV is the only way to do it

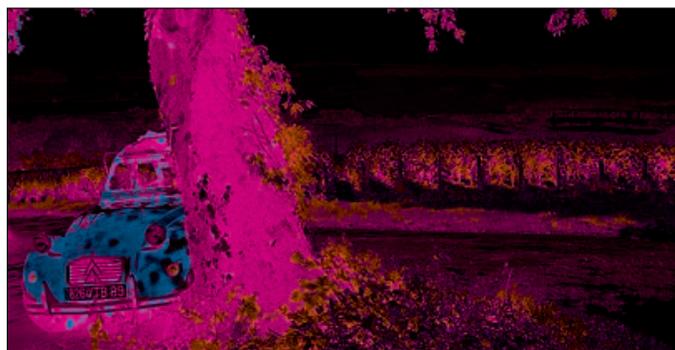
If wines have a sense of place – and all those that have real character surely do – chablis must stand high in the location league. Nowhere else does the chardonnay grape express such flinty, steely minerality or the precise acidity which makes youthful wines mouth-puckeringly appetising and gives maturer examples a purity which lingers on long after the initial taste sensations have faded and encourages gracious ageing.

In a single short column I can barely begin to explain why and how this happens, or to distinguish what gives the wines of some vineyards grand cru status or allows others to carry simply the petit chablis label, the first step up the appellation pyramid.

Go there, if you possibly can, and explore both the place and the wine, perhaps under the guidance of expert and enthusiastic Bourgogne Wine Board-accredited tutor Eric Szabowski, who takes his students through the vineyards in a turquoise 2CV called Lulubelle.

From a viewpoint high above the River Serein, which runs through the town of Chablis and whose valley splits open the 150 million-year-old limestone ridges into vine-friendly slopes, the story of why medieval monks planted grapes here begins to make sense. “They smelt the quality,” says Eric, sniffing in empathy.

Exposition is crucial – with one small exception, the very best vineyards face south or south west. But so too is soil – Kimmeridgian limestone is the base rock for all but petit chablis, whose roots dig into the rather less fossil-rich Portlandian limestone on the plateau. The



■ Lulubelle in a shady spot overlooking the grand cru vineyards

depth of the limestone and the thickness of the layer, the proportion of clay in the soil – these too affect the result in the glass and the designation of the vineyards.

A remarkable vinous panorama opens up as Lulubelle bucks along rutted tracks that are evidence of the generous rainfall in this part of France, close to the northern limit of sensible wine grape growing. This year’s wet winter and spring have, however, left a welcome green glow and healthy baby bunches on plants which because of climatic inclemency in 2011 and 2012 delivered dramatically reduced yields. If the weather holds, 2013 will be a fine, if late, vintage.

Best slopes

The famous grand cru names cluster together, in an arc to the north of the town; on the next-best slopes the more numerous premier crus complete the circle. In the spaces between, flanked by woods and cornfields, lie the vineyards of chablis and petit chablis. And scattered through the view, like poppies in those cornfields, are white-stone villages, where almost every courtyard houses a vine tractor, every street is lined with

welcoming “dégustation” signs as the vigneronns pour their produce, and every restaurant’s specialities feature chablis-based sauces.

Along the road verges a remarkable profusion of wild flowers blossom, seemingly an indication that weedkillers are increasingly frowned on. They certainly are in many of the vineyards – most of the vigneronns I spoke to practise *lutte raisonnée*, which means using chemicals only when absolutely needed, not according to an arbitrary timetable. Many have rejected herbicides altogether, preferring to turn over the soil and encourage earthworms.

A few have gone fully down the organic route, arguing that their vines and the resulting fruit are healthier (as are the people who tend the vines), but in this often-marginal area most growers prefer to retain the last-resort option of chemical intervention if that’s the only way to save the harvest.

Three days in the vineyards and cellars, courtesy of the Bourgogne Wine Board, have helped me understand much better why chablis deserves its reputation. I’ll explain more, with the help of the vigneronns I met, in a future column or two.

restaurant of the week

A déclassé name but really rather posh grub

A former head chef at the Ivy and his chums are serving up traditional fare in an unusual way, as our reviewer discovers

I don’t get to Islington really very much, though whenever I do go I am reminded yet one more time as to just what a hell of a way it is from Hampstead. I always for some reason imagine that it’s sort of just beyond Highgate, but when you are actually making the trek it seems rather closer to Brighton. Now I have observed here before that streets such as Parkway in Camden Town and Marylebone Lane are unusually well bestowed with eating places, but all of that is as nothing when set against Upper Street. Upper Street simply defies all belief: while there are a few trendy and prettily decked-out shoppettes scattered hither and yon, all selling gorgeous and thoroughly inconsequential

fripperies, the street is essentially one long restaurant: during the course of a reasonably short amble, I gave up counting when the tally reached sixty. And presumably there are sufficient cool and hungry Islingtonians who have made over their own kitchens at home into media IT centres, or possibly meditation rooms, to keep all of them in foodie business.

Pedigree

The Fish & Chip Shop – as, if you have your finger even close to the current restaurant vibe, you will be more than aware – has so déclassé a name as to guarantee that here is pedigree, and rather posh grub: so it proves – it has been set up by the ex-head chef of The Ivy, and other people involved here have cut their teeth in various

“The menu is a folded piece of brown wrapping paper that says “From boat to our kitchen to your table”, There was no boat parked outside that I saw, so maybe they keep it moored in Hampstead ponds

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Joseph Connolly at The Fish & Chip Shop, Islington



■ Joseph at The Fish & Chip Shop

outposts of Caprice Holdings. In the old days, the place might have been christened La Poissonerie – but we're all just honest-to-goodness plebs nowadays who like nothing better than hunkering down to eat in some or other condemned shanty cabin with various crude non-furnishings about us in order to demonstrate our utter and base contempt for formality in any of its bourgeois guises. It's a mish-mash, this place – as new places simply have to be: some of it classy, some of it lowlife. So we have an attractive indigo frontage with gold lettering on the glass touting such sturdy peasant fare as "shellfish", "lobster" and

"champagne". The interior is long and thin with a raised bit at the back where the kitchen lurks – and also a bar that looks fashionably clapped out, and the sort of thing you might remember from a Spaghetti Western where all the greasy Mexicans thought they could outgun the lanky gringo with no name. Cosy, eh? Comfortable tobacco fluted leather booths – but beware of these if you are on the chubby side of comfortably-padded: they are a very tight fit indeed: didn't bother me because I am as skinny as Twiggy (and I don't mean the current nicely-rounded and mumsy Twiggy in Your M&S, but

1960s bag-of-bones Twiggy, when still she had eyes like a pair of supplicating soup plates).

The walls are covered in a job-lot of junk: frames displaying only old and stained plywood backing boards, mottled mirrors, tiles, planks, filthy old ceiling with exposed uranium processing plant ... all the usual aggressive affront to order and sanity: just as you remember your traditional old chippy as being, replete with a table fashioned from a gymnasium vaulting horse (one of fashion's more delirious concoctions, this). The menu is a folded piece of brown wrapping paper that says "From boat to our kitchen to your

table", There was no boat parked outside that I saw, so maybe they keep it moored in Hampstead ponds. There are unusual cocktails, all sounding lethal enough, and a very attractive selection of fishy food – a lot of it good value, and a lot of it decidedly not. To start, my wife had London particular fritters: not fishy at all, actually, but a melange of ham hock and mushy peas (hence maybe the name: echoes of a pea-souper) breadcrumb and deep fried. Very good, these – in a filling if slightly peculiar way – though dry: all that was supplied by way of a dip was uncut mustard. I had a prawn cocktail which was more of a prawn salad, but fresh and fine for all that.

Battered

I think on reflection that the way to go with the mains would have been the battered fish route (cod, plaice, haddock) but we were seduced by the "Grilling Today" section – an upmarket variant of "Frying Tonight". My wife ordered whole lemon sole ... and I just had to have Isle of Man lobster and chips: a perfectly ridiculous £30, but how often do you see it? And ... I was very disappointed. A weeny thing, over-grilled and blanketed in melted butter. As was I, by the end of it: God it's a messy business, eating a lobster: no bibs as you would be given in Maine (along with, incidentally, a wonderful lobster the size of a Sci-Fi invader) but I did get the cracker thing and the probing thing ... all the tools of a psychopathic dentist. So you crush and poke about a bit, but you end up with pitifully little food, and all of it tasting of butter. The chips were no more than just about all right, and only half-peeled, which drives me crazy: if the word "chip" forms half of a restaurant's name, then really they should be no less than magnificent. Over-dryness was the problem with the lemon sole – a decent fish, though not just on the bone but riddled with the little bleeders. Very good mushy peas and new potatoes – which is what I ended up eating when the million-

dollar lobster was no more than a wee and buttery memory. We had a glass of prosecco each, and these were delivered in Duralex tumblers. Why ...? "Because," explained the waitress, "we serve champagne in flutes, but prosecco in tumblers". Uh-huh: why ...? "Because we do". Great. So your hand is warming the wine, the bubbles dissipate instantly, and the whole thing looks very depressingly like the leavings of half a lager.

A chocolate burnt cream was excellent: crème brulee really, with a very fine and subtle undertone of choc – the best bit of the meal, actually. And that was trendily that. What else can I tell you ...? Oh yes: not only are the loos at the summit of a flight of twenty very steep stairs, and not only does the Gents have wallpaper depicting Marilyn Monroe famously nude in that first commercial calendar ... but said loos are respectively labelled thus: "Buoys" and "Gills". I know. There are no words. Oh and by the way – I was wrong about the boat: I must have been blind – for there it was, bobbing away at the quay just outside in Upper Street – so following a cheery wave from Captain Birdseye, we both very quickly boarded and sailed on the tide, all the way back to Hampstead.

■ 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

- THE FISH & CHIP SHOP
189 Upper Street, N1
Tel: 020 3227 0979
- Open seven days, noon-midnight (last orders 11pm).
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Most fish dishes around a tenner, without sides. Two people should get out for £70 – with modest drink, and steering clear of the idiot lobster.

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