



Individual tastes decide

Take eight people who like wine, choose what they buy intelligently and drink it sensibly – with food, with friends, not to excess. Present them with eight different wines made from the same grape, wines of largely similar quality and not extreme examples of the winemaker's artifice, and see how they react.

That's what I did the other weekend. The results were fascinating and very much proved the point that wine likes and dislikes are so much a case of individual taste.

Look at these comments for one of the wines: "Boring, watery, fades fast." "Fine and enjoyable." "Nice, but not for a whole glass." Or these, for another: "Lovely." "Possibly poisonous." "Palatable." And a final one: "Smooth but bland." "Sickly sweet." "Warm and sunny." Could you believe that each set referred to the same wine? Honest, they did, and each time the pattern of likers and dislikers was different.

Deliberately, I didn't ask my long-suffering friends to write professional-style tasting notes. I wanted the immediate reaction of the ordinary wine drinker. And what they put down very firmly emphasised the individuality of wine's appeal.

It was, I think, a fair experiment. The grape was chardonnay, there were five countries represented among the eight bottles, most were 2011 vintage, and all were in the £10-plus RRP bracket, rising to £22 for the priciest. They were poured blind, to prevent preconceptions influencing the tasters' reactions.

Note-writing over, we settled down to enjoying the wines with a selection of summery food, through wine-friendly cold salmon to tricky-to-match



■ The Craggy Range Giants winery at Hawkes Bay, New Zealand

mushrooms stuffed with spinach and goats cheese, from cold roast peppers and tomatoes to warm, garlic, parsley and tomato infused chickpeas. By the time I cleared away the plates, it was clear which wines had been the most popular.

The two nearly-empty bottles came from either end of the price spectrum: Torres Chile Valley Collection Cordillera 2011 (£12, www.ampsfinewines.co.uk) and Simonnet-Febvre Chablis Premier Cru Vaillons 2011 (£22, Spirited Wines).

Happy surprise

For me, the Cordillera was the happy surprise of the tasting – splendidly pure, concentrated flavour with an attractive and long-lingering citrusy edge, at a very tempting price. Half is fermented in new French barrels, but the oak influence delicate. It comes from the dry, sea-breezy Limari Valley, where big differences between day and night temperatures contribute to its freshness, and shows the Torres family's masterly touch extends beyond Spain.

Simonnet-Febvre is a big, reliable chablis producer and the Vaillons is a very enjoyable example, with minerality and great length. But much as I like chablis, it wasn't the best-value wine of the evening.

Every wine had at least one

enthusiastic supporter, and they were all respected for their quality. So here are the others (the comments are mine, following the principle that you follow a particular wine writer – as you might a theatre critic – because you have shared tastes).

Viñalba Reserva 2012, Argentina (£10 two-plus bottles, Majestic): juicy and easy, a touch sweet. Louis Latour Grand Ardèche 2011 (£11 two-plus bottles, Majestic): pleasant fruit, but a little too oaky. Louis Jadot Macon Villages 2011 (RRP £11, £9 Wine Rack): clean, fresh, lemony, enjoyable.

Craggy Range Kidnappers' Vineyard 2011, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand (RRP £18, £13.50 The Wine Society, £20.20 Jeroboams): one of my favourites from the tasting, with much of the crisp, mineral character of chablis alongside a hint of something more tropical and salty – the vineyard faces the ocean.

Wakefield Jaraman 2010, Adelaide Hills/Clare Valley, Australia (RRP £21, www.ozwines.co.uk): serious, complex, with creamy fruit and appealing length. McHenry Hohnen Calgardup Brook 2011 (£18, www.winedirect.co.uk): another smart, serious multi-faceted wine.

Good chardonnay has never gone out of fashion with serious wine drinkers – wines like these prove why.

restaurant of the week

Eatery deserves to be the talk of Fleet Street

New French restaurant is among the best in the Village and hopefully word will get out and bring in the lunchtime punters

Ibought a cushion. It's got NW3 written all over it. Literally. A printed montage made up of photographs of all the variants from old black-and-white street signs: a lovely thing which I had espied last month for sale in Burgh House, after I had done an evening talk there – but Lordy, it really was one hell of a price. Then just last week I decided on a Hampstead Village day (this to take in lunch – well of course it was to take in lunch) and popped into Burgh House again, actually to catch up with a small exhibition of pictures curated in tandem with the estimable Heath & Hampstead Society, and covering all the local watering holes – something of a sad reminder of the many famous

pubs that now are lost to us: the Yorkshire Grey, Horse & Groom, Bird In Hand, Cruel Sea, Coach & Horses, King of Bohemia ... a sobering thought. And Jack Straw's Castle, which now, just a tad ironically, is a health club (whatever more than grisly thing a health club might be) but mercifully we still have the Wells Tavern, Flask, Holly Bush and Duke of Hamilton. Anyway – I'd completely forgotten about the cushion, see – but there it still was. And, Lordy, still at really one hell of a price – and I said as much. The affable chap there confided in me that between ourselves they had been considering reducing it ... and I urged him to continue to think deeply in just such a direction. Got it for half price in

“I can see it doing well in the evenings (when prices are higher, of course) but I hope people do start going there for lunch because I actually think that La Provence is currently among the best that Heath Street has to offer, as well as extremely good value

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Joseph Connolly at La Provence in Hampstead



■ Joseph with Robert Low at La Provence in Heath Street

Picture: Polly Hancock

the end, and I was well pleased: you can see it in the picture above – good, eh? I'm thinking of having a suit made up in the same material.

Anyhoo ... off to lunch at a brand new French restaurant in Heath Street, La Provence. Now I have written before about the perils facing restaurants here: they change hands and names so very frequently. This one is picturesquely set right up at the top – bang opposite La Gaffe (which has managed to survive for 50 years) and the narrow road to The Mount Square where ages ago I bought a house for £11,000: I don't still own it, and I daresay it's probably worth a little bit more now. And La Provence is next to what long ago used to be an atmospheric (i.e candlelit) restaurant called Turpin's, now a private residence. My guest was Robert Low, a journalist to

the fibre of his bones who cut his teeth on the *Birmingham Post & Mail* before graduating to *The Observer* where he remained for 16 years holding all sorts of posts, including that of sports editor. He was instrumental in that paper's sale to *The Guardian*, "by which time," he says, "I was out of sympathy with their politics". After that he became the European bureau chief for *Reader's Digest*, based in Brussels. Now he is freelance, and consultant editor of the prestigious monthly *Standpoint*, having along the way written four books, one of them about W.G. Grace.

Great value

The restaurant's frontage is entirely made up of sheer plate glass – though no traffic noise from the busy street intrudes. The walls are variously lilac and maroon, the floor made up

of textured handsome stone flags, the furniture brown and utilitarian (Provençal ...? Well – at a pinch: if you squint). There is a background of "easy listening", which I seldom find easy at all: really bloody hard going, on the whole. The menu is short, which is a blessing – six starters, six mains – and, the charming and enthusiastic waitress assured us, "all completely fresh, and changing every day". One puzzle: on the A-board on the pavement, a £13 two-course lunch is offered ... but on the menu, everything is individually priced. Puzzle solved: any two courses may be ordered for the advertised £13 – and when one of the mains is priced at £15, this is a pretty good deal. The only truly Provençal dish was Boeuf Bourguignon, but it was a sweltering day, so that didn't seem right at all. Bob kicked off with rare grilled tuna Niçoise with

tapenade and soft boiled egg, and I went for prawn and cherry tomato salad with pink radishes. Both of these were very good, and almost of main course proportions. The tuna was genuinely rare, the egg yolk just gooey, the tapenade – said Bob – with just the right tang. My prawns were nicely meaty – they slightly fought back – the leaves zingily fresh and silkily dressed with an oil-rich vinaigrette: pink and pretty radishes nicely thin, from a mandolin.

Recollections

By no means all the wine is French: there was Argentinian, Australian, German, Italian – indeed, the most expensive (at £98) was a Barolo. But I thought we'd cleave to the Gallic vibe by going for a nice young claret at a perfectly reasonable £21.95. Bob had ordered pan fried sea bass with a courgette mousseline and new potatoes. "I'm not vegetarian," he said, "but I find that more and more I'm going off meat. Particularly steak – it's just so much". Steak was on the menu, and I was tempted – but went for grilled chicken breast with mushroom risotto. I don't know why more restaurants do not offer a smaller portion of risotto to accompany something else entirely: a well-made risotto is a lovely thing, but it does get awfully boring just slogging through a great big bowlful of the stuff. This was superb – very creamy and flaked with parmesan, the mushroom singing out earthily, the chicken succulent and tender: a fine combination. We were chatting about Hampstead: Bob has lived around here for 35 years, having very recently downsized from a six bedroom house just behind John Barnes to a garden flat in West Hampstead. "It was a terrible wrench at first ... getting rid of stuff ... but I'm very happy where I am now. And I must say this sea bass is excellent. Cooked just right. And the mushy peas are lovely ... oh no – it's courgette, isn't it? Very good". Well I'm pleased: nothing I like more than seeing a guest enjoying his lunch – even if it isn't an epic Fleet Street lunch of yore: as Bob recalled a hack of the old

days saying "I always know when it's spring: it's still daylight when we leave the restaurant and go back to the office".

Puddings ...? Oh God yes: for Bob, baked apple with vanilla apple sauce and strawberry champagne ice cream (!), while I went for the (waitress-recommended) warm chocolate fondant with vanilla ice cream. The fondant was not so much oozing as wholly liquid – but none the less sinfully yummy for that. The apple was not entire, but chunked, and very much enjoyed – though Bob was not overly aware of champagne in the ice cream. I was really very impressed by this lunch ... but but but ... oh dear oh dear oh dear ... we were the only people in the restaurant. This is the problem with the higher reaches of the Village. I can see it doing well in the evenings (when prices are higher, of course) but I hope people do start going there for lunch because I actually think that La Provence is currently among the best that Heath Street has to offer, as well as extremely good value.

It was maybe talk of old Fleet Street that suggested a trip to the Holly Bush for a "nightcap". We were not out to get hammered, you understand – but nonetheless I was comforted by the presence of my newly acquired NW3 upholstery: it would help to cushion the blow.

■ 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

■ LA PROVENCE

116 Heath Street, NW3
Tel: 020 7433 3055

■ Open every day for lunch noon-5pm, dinner 5pm-11pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

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