



■ Majestic staff ready to pour at a spotlight tasting

Now's time to drink from the fount of knowledge

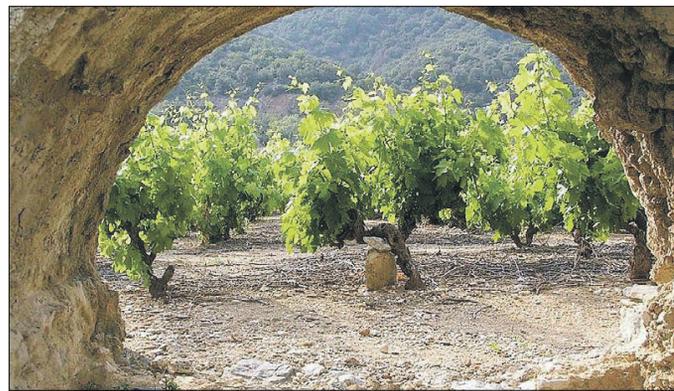
Courses offer wine lovers an enjoyable introduction to tasting skills

One happy aspect of being involved in the wine world, even on the column-writing fringe, is how many enthusiastic, well-informed and genuinely nice people you meet. And almost without exception they are happy to share their knowledge, whether entirely free and off the cuff or on a formal paid-for basis.

This time of year – sign-up time for courses on a myriad of subjects – prompts this incursion into the wine education world. The point of departure is the International Wine Challenge (IWC), the world's most respected blind wine-tasting competition. I've been judging in it for 20 years, and it's thanks to the encouragement of a wine industry publicity person (from Majestic) that I got involved – a debt I'll always owe her. So as a small repayment, let's start with what's happening at Majestic stores over the coming weeks.

On the next three Saturdays, each branch is hosting 30-minute "spotlight tastings" (at noon and 3pm). The subjects are Spain, sauvignon blanc and syrah/shiraz. They're free, but book via your local store's website or phone 01903 238225. And between October 7 and 13, all Majestic stores will run a 90-minute evening or weekend course, a relaxed but informative introduction to wine and wine tasting featuring six wines and a champagne, again free – branches will provide more details. Each is limited to 10 participants, so booking is essential.

The IWC links, too, with a set of wine workshops, much more ambitious in scope. The Wine Explorer is the title of Elizabeth Watkins's four two-hour evening sessions run by the Hampstead



■ Old vines in Roussillon

Garden Suburb Institute (at Bishop Douglass school, East Finchley), starting next Tuesday and continuing on October 1, 15 and 29.

I've judged with Elizabeth twice at the IWC and can confirm her knowledge and enthusiasm. While the course is directed at beginners and starts simply, it progresses fast, with students learning to taste in a professional way. "It isn't for the faint hearted," says Elizabeth. "We go quickly, with a lot of class participation, and there is homework."

After introductory background and discussion of grape varieties the workshops (maximum 16 students) move on to Old World and New World sessions, with fine bottles opened – in all some 25 different wines are tasted, included in the £150 fee. For enrolment details, phone 020 8829 4229 or see www.hgsi.ac.uk.

A good number of IWC judges lecture for the Wine and Spirit Education Trust – including Charles Metcalfe, joint founder of the challenge and a current co-chairman. He's giving a lecture (accompanied by an enticing line-up of wines) in the current Spanish series. The Unusual Suspects

is on September 23, 6.30-8pm, at the London Wine & Spirit School, close to London Bridge station, cost £55. It is intended for wine lovers with basic knowledge.

Charles is a splendid lecturer, so this should be a treat. To learn more, phone 020 7089 38 00 or see www.wsetglobal.com.

And stop-press news of two tastings at Adnams, Store Street, Bloomsbury – September 21 (5.30pm, £30), English sparkling wines pitted against champagnes; September 26 (6.15pm, £20), an esoteric "something completely different" line-up.

■ On a different tack, a final recommendation of wines from holiday places. Web merchant Ten-Acre Wines (www.ten-acre.com) is highlighting three French growers whose wines I love: Jérémie Huchet in Muscadet, Jérémie Mourat in the Vendée and the co-operative Cave de l'Abbé Rous in Roussillon's far south, near the Spanish border.

If the introductory France Off the Beaten Track 12-bottle case (also including wines from Charles Baur in Alsace, £179.50 delivered) is sold out, plenty of individual wines from the trio are listed on www.ten-acre.com.

Chewing the fat with the 'Jewish Jane Austen'

Our reviewer relishes some high-quality culinary offerings in the company of Booker Prize-winning novelist Howard Jacobson

Howard Jacobson and I have been threatening to have lunch together for, oh – so damned long: we tend quite often to collide at some of our jointly favourite restaurants (Wolseley, Dean Street Townhouse, Delaunay – although he also greatly favours Scott's, while I rather prefer J Sheekey) as well as at the occasional bookish thrash. So really it was something of a consummation when finally he made the trek up north from his very groovy penthouse in Soho to The Wells in old Hampstead Village on a blissfully warm and sunny day, when all was leafy and perfectly serene. He had arrived early, and I met him in Christchurch Hill, having a wander. "I love Hampstead," he said. "When I first came to London from Manchester, I visited someone very close to here, and I thought Ah ...! Heaven! I am in the country! This is where I want to live."

I have reviewed The Wells before, but not for simply ages: Beth Coventry – the sister of the excellent restaurant critic Fay Maschler – has been running this successful venture for 10 years now, so a revisit was certainly called for. The setting so close to the Heath is just about ideal:

there are a few tables outside, but if they ran to a garden proper, then it would be truly idyllic. The interior is very much more bar than pub (an upstairs dining room opens in the evenings and at weekends) – not too shabby, not too chic ... casual, but professional ... all very Hampstead really. We had a corner table, tucked away from the actually not remotely madding crowd – and the first thing that Howard said upon confronting the menu: "Oh ... puddings! Look at all the puddings. I've been ... dieting a bit." Well the only rule when dining with me is that a guest must partake of his fill of just all that he wants: Howard instinctively understood this, and was I think very glad to have a sound reason to abandon all talk of that sort.

Generous salad

"We could maybe share a pudding..." he now was musing. So we studied the menu – in the fallout of Paxmangate, the pair of us maybe idly resembling the inaugural assembly of the Pogonophile Society, when only we two had bothered to show. Howard went for grilled beetroot, pecan and rocket salad with goat's cheese and a red wine vinegar reduction, and I was having seared scallops with a

Discovering a foodie institution's

Villandry on Great Portland Street is something of a foodie institution and holds fond memories for me.

In the early days of our relationship, my husband would stop by the Parisian-inspired food emporium to pick up flowers or a patisserie for special celebrations, including a memorably light, heart-shaped chocolate cake one Valentine's Day.

Since my other half moved office, I've missed these beautifully wrapped Villandry treats, and was glad to once gain pass beneath its continental-style awnings.

Many will have enjoyed the gorgeously fresh seasonal and artisanal products from Villandry's take-away, or coffee and a salad in the all-day café. They may have quaffed a cocktail in the pleas-

ingly theatrical red room.

But fewer perhaps may know there's a seriously good restaurant to the rear, and they should take the time to venture out back because it's an example of how lucky we Londoners are to have such high-quality neighbourhood dining – that's, whisper it, better quality and value than anything I've eaten in France for years.

With dark wood floor, clean white walls and tablecloths, and restful low lighting, it's Mediterranean in spirit, with the emphasis on the lighter side of French cuisine, oodles of fresh fish, herbs and veg rather than creamy, butter-n-boozie-laden sauces.

Starters range from £7 to £9 including asparagus, roast beetroot and goat cheese, and dressed crab salad. I opted for a hot smoked

Joseph Connolly at The Wells

shallot puree and crispy bacon, with a samphire and rocket sauce. Which was just gorgeous: five decent scallops – smallish, but just as plump and juicy as you want them, all the rest of it bringing the whole thing together in a novel, delicious and rather masterly way. Howard was similarly pleased with his generous salad, which vanished in no time: “Fresh, crispy, excellent flavours ... you can tell I enjoyed it by the state of the tablecloth: I am a very messy eater.” Well: not noticeably. For his main, Howard wanted the corn-fed chicken supreme, though largely for the sake of the mustard mash that accompanied it. Then he saw the steaks in the grill section ... though not with chips ... but maybe the mustard mash...? The waiter assured him that that was entirely possible, and then asked if he might prefer the onglet to the ribeye he had selected. “No – why should I?” “Well,” pursued the waiter, “it’s very good”. Now it’s a tricky cut, onglet – flank, much favoured in France, of course, though while it resembles fillet in appearance, it can often be as tough as hell. Turns out that this was cooked “sous vide” – a slow and careful process involving steam, plastic bags and know-how – and so Howard took a punt on it. I was having Cumberland sausages with mash and onion gravy ... and then, with a young Fronsac (claret) to glug, we set to chatting.

Appreciative audiences

Howard is, of course, a very successful and award-winning novelist, having published a dozen of the things, *The Finkler Question* of 2010 bagging the ultimate trophy that all novelists dream of: the Man Booker Prize. “It does change everything ... but I still don’t feel I am sitting at top table.” You don’t? Well who is? Martin Amis, say – is he at top table? “Martin could be ... but he just can’t be bothered to take his place.” We talked about how much more appreciative audiences are at foreign literary festivals than the homegrown kind. He was recently in Jaipur,



■ Novelist Howard Jacobson having lunch with Joseph Connolly at The Wells Tavern

Picture: Nigel Sutton

where hundreds of Indians were seemingly rapt upon the subject of Jewishness – though while Howard is as well known for his Jewishness as his novels, he isn’t a traditional adherent. Once, when someone called him “the English Philip Roth”, he countered that he saw himself rather as the “Jewish Jane Austen”.

His steak was nicely vertically sliced, and medium rare as requested. “Just slightly chewy,” he said, “but terrific flavour.” I had a bit, and thought it rather superb. As was my bangers and mash: so easy to get this very simple dish quite horribly wrong – but here we had three tremendous sausages with yielding skin, ethereally creamy mash, and a dark glossy gravy that was utterly, utterly good. When Howard isn’t working on a novel, he has his weekly *Independent* column to attend to. “I’ve been doing it for 14 years ... I sometimes think

I’ll stop, but I know I’d miss it. Sometimes there are four or five topics clamouring for attention ... and the next week, I’ve nothing to write about...”. He is currently making a TV programme about four Australians who made their considerable mark in Britain: Clive James, Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer and the late art critic Robert Hughes. “People used to think I was Australian. I lived there for a while. Wrote a book about it. My first wife was Australian ... but I’m not.” His third wife, Jenny, is a television producer – they actually met when he was making another programme, and they have been very happy indeed for many years.

Then Howard said this: “I don’t actually want you to share my pudding now...” Hardly surprising: he had alighted upon sticky toffee pudding with vanilla ice cream – and I was having crème brûlée. “I love sticky toffee pud-

ding,” he added, while eagerly spooning it down. “And this is ... the very best I have eaten. Ever.” And at that very moment, who should sail through the door but Beth Coventry, the proprietor. Which meant she hadn’t been cooking, then ... but with a sous-chef of the calibre we had experienced today, the Wells has little to fear from her occasional absences. And, I suppose inevitably, she recognised both of us, so on this occasion anonymity did go rather out of the window. Didn’t matter: I had already decided that The Wells is currently the best place to eat in Hampstead.

And afterwards, Howard was clearly very keen to resume his amble around the Village, happy just to gaze about him. I was pleased to have had his company all to myself – pleased to learn later that all the other founder members of the Pogonophile Society had in fact been given

the wrong address – so that was a near thing, wasn’t it? A very close shave.

■ Joseph Connolly’s latest novel, *England’s Lane*, is now available in paperback, hardback and unabridged audiobook. All past restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

FACTFILE

■ THE WELLS

30 Well Walk, NW3

Tel: 020 7794 3785

■ Open Monday-Saturday, noon to 11pm; Sunday, noon to 10.30pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: About £90 for three-course meal for two with wine.

lesser-known joys

salmon with horseradish cream and a pea and mint puree, a pretty pink island of flaky fish in a sea of vibrant green that while I might have hoped for less pea and more mint, was nevertheless a fine dish.

My friend approved of her supremely fresh and crispy salt and pepper squid spiked with smoked paprika, cayenne pepper and a tarrare sauce.

Mains are £15 to £20 and despite salivating at thoughts of sea bass with quail eggs or a steak, we opted to share the special, a whole baked sea bream stuffed with lemon, herbs and wilted greens that, with a side of rustling hand-cut chips, proved how the simple equation of great fresh ingredients and execution can truly deliver:

We’d been enjoying a gooseberry-bright New Zealand Sauvignon, but switched extravagantly to Cham-



■ Villandry has a seriously good restaurant at the back

pagne for a cute sharing starter of mini salted caramel tart, berry pavlova, lemon tart, chocolate brownie and mixed sorbet – every mouthful a spoonful-sized burst of flavour, with no danger of feeling overstuffied at the end.

For our next special celebration, I’ll return with the husband to rekindle those early days of courtship.
Bridget Galton

■ Villandry is at 170 Great Portland Street. Bookings on 020 7631 3131.

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