



Big can be beautiful too

There's a widespread culture – in wine as in many other consumables – that small is beautiful, that individual producers offer something far more special than that which comes from much larger-scale sources.

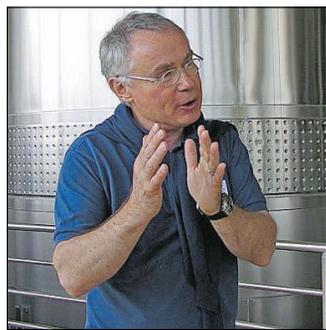
Often, that's true. I love the personal touch of individual or small family wine growers, especially if I've met them and seen the place where the vines are planted and the wine is made. But that doesn't mean that big can't be beautiful, too.

Take the example of wine co-operatives, once derided, now often highly regarded. Earlier this year I visited La Chablisienne, whose 280 member growers are responsible for a quarter of all chablis produced. That's a lot of wine, some 10 million bottles each year. Not only is the winery very impressive in its scale and state-of-the-art equipment, but – crucially – the wines are also very good.

Familiar name

La Chablisienne is a familiar name on British wine shop shelves: it has 20 distributors here and has, for example, been working with Marks & Spencer for more than 30 years, a co-operation which my guide, the fervently-enthusiastic Hervé Turki, described as “a two-way process, a real partnership”.

The growers press their own grapes, the juice going to the co-operative. But La Chablisienne's quality-control involvement is on a daily basis throughout the year. “The more you work in the vineyards, the less you work in the cellar – and the wine is better,” said Turki. And despite the scale of the operation, individuality happily survives, through terroir, vine



■ Hervé Turki in La Chablisienne's modern winery

age and cellar practice. Another “big” name on that same trip was Simonnet-Febvre, which both owns vineyards and buys in the raw material it needs for a comprehensive line-up of chablis. But that's only half its 900,000-bottles-a-year business. Jean Febvre, a barrel-maker, began it all in 1840, specialising in a traditionally-made bubbly wine. Crémant de Bourgogne still accounts for close to a quarter of Simonnet-Febvre's products, alongside a range of other wines from the region.

Altogether 90 per cent is sold outside France, with good distribution here, including Spirited Wines and Wine Rack. But the UK is never an easy market, as communications manager Emmanuelle Pasquet stressed: “Price is always an issue. It's never low enough.”

Further down the size scale there are some intriguing contrasts. Walk into Jean-Claude Courtault's cellar and while it's clean and neat it lacks the sheen which generations of investment provides. Why? Courtault is an incomer, son of Loire wine growers, who arrived in Chablis aged 24 as a vineyard manager. But soon he wanted independence.

Vineyard land in the appellation is not only



■ A selection of La Chablisienne's wines

exorbitantly expensive, it is also near-impossible for incomers to buy. Courtault, over 30 years, has painstakingly built his estate to a respectable 20 hectares and through much serious networking effort has positioned his name alongside those of longer-established growers. But while his cellar shows the bit-by-bit development forced by cash constraints, his wines shine – most recently rewarded with a gold medal in Paris. Sadly, they're not currently on sale here.

At Domaine Louis Robin – in the same family for eight generations – there's major expansion work going on at what is already a large and smartly equipped cellar. The chablis (sold by www.jascots.co.uk) is prettily floral, the crus have expressive fruit and crisp salinity.

The Collet family have been making wine even longer, since 1791, but their cellar is totally 21st century: gravity transportation, ranks of matching stainless steel tanks, even a cult concrete “egg” fermentor. UK sales are only a tiny part of the 60 per-cent-plus export share, but Romain Collet wants them to rise. If they don't, chablis lovers here will be missing out – his wines are wonderful expressions of the specific terroirs of great chablis.

Golden age of steam is dining as it should be

Joseph revels in the glamour and glitz of a black tie dinner as he rolls through the South Downs...despite an oaf in a checked shirt

Glamour ... do you remember it at all ...? Because it's something that tends now to be associated with the past, which is a fairly sad and depressing state of affairs, I think. The thirties: Fred Astaire in black-and-white, amid satiny bedrooms the size of a ballroom, and ballrooms with the acreage of a continent. Or maybe the golden age of jet travel in the fifties, when at Heathrow the likes of Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor would look just so stupendously glamorous as to knock your bleeding eye out (and now it is left solely to the great Joan Collins to proudly continue the tradition). But these days, well ... anything that smacks of “show” or “formality” or even (let's face it) any sort of effort at all can be greeted with suspicion, derision, or else just a great big fat yawn.

But in Britain today there is a rearguard action that is alive and well – better than well, actually: positively blooming (and booming). Because canny operators such as Cunard and the famous five-star hotels have long ago twigged that there is an ever-growing and highly lucrative market for doing things the old way, the glamorous way ... and at the forefront of this revival of elegance has always been the Orient-Express. And mention of this legendary train will instantly bring to mind ... well, what? The road to Mandalay? Raffles and Singapore? Maybe: but mainly it's the train that is notorious for getting murdered on, so that an irksome little Belgian can find out how it all came to pass. Less known, however, are the great British counterparts: the Northern Belle, the Royal Scotsman and, most notably, the British Pullman.

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Joseph Connolly on the British Pullman



■ The cost is high but it is perfect as a special occasion says Joseph Connolly

This very beautiful train – in its distinctive coffee and cream livery – has its own exclusive berth at Victoria Station, platform 2. Throughout the year it travels all over England – every city you'd ever want to visit, stately homes, legendary restaurants such as Le Manoir au Quat' Saisons, and stunning Yorkshire Dales and Lakeland scenery. But I, of course, was here for grub – what else? – and a fairly recent innovation is an evening excursion called simply 'The Dinner', which, rather bizarrely, involves your rolling up to platform 2 in full black tie in order to board a train, eat dinner while it ploughs through the South Downs, and four hours later you pitch up back on platform 2: so you're going nowhere, not fast. One of the best bits actually is when you are milling around the reception area waiting to board – swigging Laurent Perrier

champagne, downing the canapés, tapping your foot to the live guitar and sax, the glittering women slyly adjusting earrings and spaghetti straps – while witnessing the astonished stares of all the exhausted and careworn commuters in their rumpled work clothes falling off a merely ordinary train: the glare of many is positively homicidal.

Giggly on bubbly

But even among the party, there will be some people who badly let down the glamour quotient: and we call these people men. Because the ladies all seemed up for it, and why on earth shouldn't they be? While 90 per cent of the men were in black tie (and one or two of their suits even more or less sort of nearly fitted) the remainder were in – oh God – "lounge" suits (i.e. straight from the office). One young oaf was in a checked shirt,

with no jacket all. Never mind: the women were more than making up for it: already giggly on bubbly, and rattling their jewellery. Each of the carriages that make up the Pullman is a wonder: superbly restored originals form the 1920s and 1930s, alive with softly glowing marquetry, old brass and the twinkle of crystal. You sit in a large and very comfortable wing chair before a dinky and immaculate table: the glassware (heavy, so it doesn't tumble) is branded Venice-Simplon Orient-Express, but soon it will be Pullman proper, to complement the newly introduced crockery and antimacassars (oh yes, matey – antimacassars!). The expert stewards are elegant in smart black livery, piped and buttoned in gold. They wear white cotton gloves – just like Mickey Mouse, though these have the more regular number of fingers. So then

there's more champagne and more canapés, as you gaze through the window while the warm and dying sun casts its amber magic upon the summier end of Earl's Court: no matter – the glamour is all within. And now begins the ceaseless procession of food: six courses, and five selected accompanying wines (so don't go nuts on all those canapés).

Mushroom hit

To kick off: an amuse bouche, should your miserable little mouth be requiring amusement. A cappuccino (which might have been frothier) of haricot beans with morels and white truffle oil crème fraîche. A nice small slug of it, and a decent mushroom hit. Then comes a rectangular platter with chunks and a claw of Cornish lobster (all of it mercifully shelled) with a red pepper and cardamom sauce – unnecessary, maybe, as most things are with lobster – and some Avruga on tiny halved new potatoes. Avruga is a black caviar made from herring roe: nothing approaching true Beluga, but not bad at all (and you can get it in Waitrose). There was a so-so Sauvignon blanc with that: bit green. Better was the white Graves that accompanied a very good and meaty mosaic of game (unidentified, but I'm guessing guinea fowl, venison ... maybe pheasant) with a fig and onion compote. The star of the show was the next course: a lovely roast fillet of halibut – glossy and pure, crisped skin, with very flavoursome shiitake mushrooms, thin green asparagus and a port wine sauce: classy, very. A merlot with that – dark as sin, though so very light in flavour ... and not in the class of the Pauillac that now accompanied the baked fillet of Rhug Estate organic beef. This Bordeaux was from the Baron Philippe de Rothschild stable ... as were all the other wines, actually: so a fruitful partnership going on there. The beef was billed as having a herb crust, but mine didn't. It wasn't as sumptuously yielding as you really want a fillet to be, but the taste was all right. There was an onion boulangere,

puy lentils, red cabbage and a good red wine jus. No cheese on offer, rather strangely ... though after an interval when many were wishing that they had after all plumped for the elasticated waistband, there came a gâteau. But it wasn't a gâteau, not really: layers of pastry and a few berries ... not great, but bolstered by a very decent 2005 Sauternes. And as you leave, a pressie: a velvet pochette containing a branded silver napkin ring (oh yes, matey – napkin rings!).

Extraordinary how quickly and smoothly the four hours passed: it really is a professionally executed and jolly event, this: the staff genuinely seem to care that you're having a good time. Next year, they are upping the frequency to one a month and bringing in such as Raymond Blanc and Marcus Wareing to create special menus and travel with the guests ...! So autographs all round, then. The cost of all this is high (see below) but just about perfect for an anniversary or something greedily romantic – and December is riddled with Christmas lunches. It is true that for less outlay you could in London get a rather more gourmet meal in a Michelin-starred restaurant ... but "The Dinner", you see, is truly unique. Special. Memorable. And then if it's glamour you're after, you could hardly do better.

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel ENGLAND'S LANE is now available in paperback (Quercus £8.99).

FACTFILE

■ BRITISH PULLMAN 'THE DINNER'

Victoria Station (check dates)
 ■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
 ■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
 ■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
 ■ Cost: £395 per person
 The British Pullman runs throughout the year to cities, castles, country houses and sporting events. Prices from £205 per person. Tel 0845 077 2222. www.orient-express.com/uktrains

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