



We have eye for bargain

As a member of The Wine Society, my own purchases must contribute towards the annual compilation of members' favourites – those wines which stay the shortest time on the shelves of The Society's huge Stevenage warehouse.

Looking at the 2013 choices, there are wines I've bought – the crisply green and flavoursome *Domaine du Salvard Cheverny* (£7.95) for example, or smart, lively-fruited *Domaine Talmard Macon-Villages* (£9.50). There are many, many more, though, that I'm still waiting to enjoy, such is the scope of the list.

But if the image of posh claret and champagne sold to the sort of people who frequent St James's clubland still drifts into view for this 139-year-old co-operative, formed out of the leftovers of wine imported for the 1874 Annual International Exhibition in London, you couldn't be further from the truth.

Widely respected

Members clearly have an eye for a bargain: these best-sellers are principally priced between £5.25 and £10. They hail very largely from Europe, which proves the point that France, Italy and Spain increasingly deliver more interest, more pleasure and more value than a lot of their new world competitors. Chile, with sub-£6.50 reds, also has a lot of Wine Society fans, and there's even an English wine in the favourites list – *Three Choirs Midsummer Hill* (£7.50).

Even beyond its own membership, The Wine Society is widely respected. At this year's *Absolutely Cracking Wines* from France tasting – which showcases the favourite bottles of leading wine writers and sommeliers and will feature in this column very



■ Provence picnic at Château Barbanau, whose whites and rosé are on The Society's list

soon – very nearly one in every six of the 160 wines chosen came from the society – 24 in all. I don't think any other merchant even reached double figures.

The wine competition honours the society carries off each year are legion. This year it is the *International Wine Challenge's* Wine Merchant of the Year (for the third time), and also the challenge's Wine Club of the Year and Specialist Merchant for Alsace, Chile and Portugal. Add in the *Decanter National Retailer of the Year* title for the third year running, and you understand how highly regarded it is by wine professionals.

Its 1,500 wines, even as you go further upmarket, remain generally exceptional value for money, even though the lengthy period when prices stayed unchanged while others around were spiralling upwards is now over. Many can't be found anywhere else in the UK, and when they can the price is often substantially lower than those of competitors. As an example of that, a Spanish rosado I mentioned this summer was £9.80 at Waitrose, £8.25 from The Wine Society, and the latter's price for a particularly enjoyable Loire red, *La Noblaie Chinon*, is currently

£8.95, undercutting the only London merchant I know which sells it (albeit a different vintage) by £1.15.

One important reason for this, apart from the fact that profits go not to shareholders but back into the business, is that there is absolutely no price inflation to fund unrealistic discounts or buy-one-get-one-free deals. Wine Society offers are about showcasing wines of specific regions or style, and even then there is no more than the occasional small saving on selected mixed cases.

Currently – until October 20 – the emphasis is on Languedoc-Roussillon, where the offer includes two fragrant delights. *Pelerin Blanc* (£6.25) is a fresh, floral, apricot and citrus-led bargain; *Fitou Origines* from *Domaine Bertrand-Berge* (£8.25) bursts out with the herby fruit so characteristic of this part of France.

Of course The Wine Society is not the only place I'd recommend to buy wine (and a coming column will feature some other excellent independent merchants), but it is one of the very best.

Look at www.thewinesociety.com and be tempted.

restaurant of the week

Gastropub offers tasty meal – but why in drawers?

The George in Hampstead finally gives us a good place to eat, at not-too-expensive prices, but have they not heard of plates?

Bleeding screaming sirens ...! Aren't you just sick to death of the bleeding screaming sirens that have become the constant and heart-stopping background to living in Hampstead? Working in the garden on the last decent day of summer, I counted 26 between 7.45am until six in the evening, when I simply couldn't be bothered totting them up any more (and still they continued to sound). A taxi driver once told me that every time a police car activates its siren, it has to be logged, with an explanation as to why. Do you believe that ...? No – I don't either. It's just some Jack the Lad copper who last night was gorging on box sets of *Kojak* and *The Sweeney*, and he's having a good old laugh. Anyway: I was walking to Belsize Park, and I'm telling you, matey

– it was very nearly curtains for your restaurant reviewer as the wail of a police van's siren initially inflicted upon me a paroxysm of stasis, this followed by the van itself (empty of anyone save the driver) careering within a whisker of me at unspeakable speed. Are there really so many emergencies in Hampstead ...? It's like downtown Los Angeles. Or Peckham.

Well I made it to Belsize Park – and I was there because I had heard about a complete revamp of The George (new décor, chef and manageress) which hitherto had always been a rather sticky and missable pub ... but now it has been gastro-ized. I have so done gastropubs, I just can't tell you: but this did look rather good – though how would it fare for grub, I was wondering. Because The George has not enjoyed a great

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Joseph Connolly at The George



Picture: Nigel Sutton

■ Joseph lunches with Bruce Fireman at The George in Haverstock Hill

reputation: once its name was changed to something like the Prat and Bastard, and then a year or so ago the kitchen was closed down due to the discovery of some or other unimaginable infestation. It was very much a place for just soaking up the beer, the exterior being that of the black-and-white mock Tudor roadhouse, liberally festooned with the white bearded old man (not me, actually) who advertised Younger's Ales. Well the whole of the frontage is now two shades of pale grey – absolutely mandatory, these days, for any new restaurant. The swing sign no longer bears the portrait of King George, but is two shades of pale grey and says simply 'The George', this being surmounted by the crown that is familiar from the "Keep Calm And Carry On" poster, together with all the rather tedious derivatives: "Keep Calm And Make

Tea", "Keep Calm And Carry On Shopping", "You've Kept Calm – Now Freak Out". Yes yes, all most terribly amusing.

Wisely retained

The bar was always a generous and handsome sight boasting clusters of pumps, and this has been wisely retained. The rest was simply grotty – while now it is rather serenely beautiful. The entrance is marred by an enormous A-board on the pavement, extolling "Burger Night": rather more seductive is their Thursday offering: "Steak Night", with four different cuts and recommended accompanying wines. But this was a Tuesday lunchtime, and so it was pretty empty. The interior ... well obviously it's two shades of pale grey: you expect that. There is a rather gorgeous long banquet

in brown antiqued buttoned leather, some nice leaded glass, rows of glass pendants and a pale oak floor with the occasional decorative tile. The ubiquitous mish-mash of chairs ranging from Thonet bentwood to your auntie's front parlour, and a tremendous trompe l'oeil Adamesque ceiling. Music is late-night Manhattan (Sinatra, Peggy Lee) at a low and suitable level, and there's a little bit of outside seating as well. This is still a pub in that it offers seventeen "quirky craft beers" and five ciders, but also dozens of decent and well-priced wines (£15-£60) with lots of them by the glass.

My guest was Bruce Fireman. Unusual name, no? There is actually a Tonka toy called Fireman Bruce, though the two are unrelated – my man being a qualified solicitor, though merchant banker by trade: a

corporate financier responsible for having funded the start-up of many fine endeavours including *The Independent* and the BBC's digital channel. Bruce grew up in Kilburn, where he attended the grammar school before winning an open scholarship to Cambridge – where, during his very first week, he encountered Barbara, to whom he has now been married for 45 years. They lived in Swiss Cottage and West Hampstead, "which", he says, "in those days was very much split into the English, Irish and German Jewish sectors, very clearly delineated. We went to a café called the Dorice, opposite the Cosmo restaurant – we were the only people there not speaking German". (This reminded me of a further variation on the "Keep Calm" thing that I saw the other week on some bloke's T-shirt: "I Can't Keep Calm – I'm Jewish!"). For many years the Firemans (Firemen?) have lived in Highgate, where, as he says, "there's nowhere decent to eat". (And if any readers thinks differently, I'd love to hear from them).

Took the hint

Bruce wanted an amontillado sherry, but they had only fino – so instead we got stuck into a bottle of Montepulciano called Ancora (which is Italian for "again", so I took the hint and ordered another). The menu doesn't have starters as such, though there are "little plates". We shared a "farmhouse deli platter" which – although it took half an hour to arrive – was rather good. Some nice cold rare roast beef, a so-so duck liver pâté and an absolutely superb wild boar Scotch egg: warm, gooey yolk, great meat flavour and an excellent breadcrumb crunch. Also, oddly, a whole apple, a piece of blue cheese and half a loafworth of toasted sourdough. Bruce then went for the rib-eye steak burger with bacon, Black Bomber cheddar and triple cooked chips, and I wanted the roasted and breaded chicken supreme, skinny fries and ale chutney. Yes ... but I didn't get it, did I? Because apparently there wasn't any. Which isn't great. So

instead I had a very good beer battered fillet of cod, minted peas and broad beans, "rustic" tartare, and more of said triple cooked chips. The fish was shiny and fresh, nicely steamed within its carapace of excellent and crispy batter, the chips first rate, the "rustic" tartare actually perfectly urban, the peas all right and the broad beans absent. Bruce's burger was extremely good – with cubes of pancetta rather than bacon and oozy cheese – but not cooked medium rare as requested (decidedly medium to well). But ...! Both dishes were served in a wooden drawer. No honestly. A drawer: With a rope handle. Dear God Almighty ...! And I thought I'd had the lot: planks, roof tiles, slates, panes of glass, chunks of marble ... and now a bloody drawer! What next? Flowerpot? Shovel? Brogue lace-up? What's it all about, eh? Have they not heard of plates, or what ...?

So: The George is now a good place to eat – though they did lose points for the age it took to get the food, the dearth of chicken, and – if I'm perfectly honest – the sodding wooden drawer. And as we stepped out into the sunshine I instantly suffered another near-coronary due to the shock of yet another bleeding screaming siren ...

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel *England's Lane* is now out in paperback (Quercus £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **THE GEORGE**
250 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020 7431 0889
- Open Mon-Sat 10am-11pm.
Sun 10am-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆ (attentive, but slow)
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Reasonable, for the quality. Two of you should be fine for £60, with drinks.



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