



The joy of independents

Stick with smaller suppliers for wider choice and deeper expertise

There are plenty of reasons to buy wine at an independent, specialist merchant, but two crucial ones are knowledge and choice. Take the recent experience I had “discovering” nebbiolo, the grape responsible for many of northern Italy’s finest wines.

Of course, I’ve tasted lots of wines made from this intriguing grape – its most famous expression is in aged barolo, where it famously exudes two scents rarely associated with wine, tar and roses – but never so many, nor such fine examples, in a single afternoon.

The experience was courtesy of Lea & Sandeman, which has four shops in London (sadly the branch in Belsize Park is long gone, but Chelsea or Kensington aren’t that far away), a comprehensive website (www.leaandsandeman.co.uk), a splendid choice of wines sensibly rather than stratospherically priced, and a deservedly high reputation. If you search nebbiolo on that website, 29 examples appear, 25 of which I tasted.

That opportunity isn’t on offer to every customer, but the website descriptions are extensive and in-store there is more informed explanation. A first step, suggests co-founder Charles Lea, is to read the descriptions, then try a bottle or two. After that, go into one of the shops, explain what you’ve liked (or not), and be ready for a well-directed case of suggestions.

I know I liked the nebbiolos of Sottimano, a small family estate whose organically managed vineyards stretch over different soils and expositions in the Barbaresco region and whose wines reflect both place and vintage. The 2011 Barbera



■ Nebbiolo wines maturing in the Sottimano cellar Picture: Laura Mulassano

d’Alba Pairolero (£23) shows the stylish concentration of a very ripe harvest; move on to the 2010 Barbarescos – Cotta’ is particularly splendid (2008 currently available, £42) – and the quality of what Andrea Sottimano describes as “one of the best vintages ever” is so obvious.

These are serious, long-lived wines, well worth their cost. There are decent case discounts (cases can be mixed), and delivery is free on a spend of £100 or more.

Six of the best

But merchants such as Lea & Sandeman don’t cater only for those wine lovers with deep pockets. One feature of the annual press tasting of The Bunch, a group of six of the best independents, is a selection of wines under £10. These are my favourites from the 2013 showcase last month.

There were smart, ripe, crunchy, herb-edged, southern French reds from Adnams (a shop in Store Street, Bloomsbury): Domaine de la Cadenette 2012, Costières de Nimes, £8; from Corney & Barrow (www.corneyandbarrow.com, customer portfolio tasting on October 30, tickets £35): Domaine de Saissac cabernet sauvignon 2011, Pays d’Oc, £8; and from Yapp Brothers (www.yapp.co.uk): Le Petit Caboché 2012,

J-P Boisson, IGP Vaucluse, £9. Berry Bros & Rudd (St James’s Street, Piccadilly) offered a pure, smart Spanish red, Almuvedre 2012, Alicante, £9; great whites came from Lea & Sandeman, the delightfully enjoyable Touraine Les Sauterelles 2012, Domaine de Pierre, £9.25, and Tanners (www.tanners-wines.co.uk), pretty and perfumed La Petite Vigne viognier 2012, Pays d’Oc, £7.

The tasting featured some extraordinarily fine wines, too. They’ll feature in later columns.

Beyond The Bunch, Haynes, Hanson & Clark (Elystan Street, Chelsea, www.hhandc.co.uk) has many delights, including very tempting new Rhône-Languedoc listings which I hope to detail soon. Two sub-£10 recommendations are Domaine Gayda viognier 2012, Pays d’Oc, classically aromatic, fresh and appetising, £9.40, and juicy and structured cabernet franc Domaine Laroque 2012, Cité de Carcassonne, £9.20.

Hampshire-based Stone, Vine & Sun (www.stonevine.co.uk) features often – deservedly – in this column. Last time, I regret I misspelled the name of its excellent new South African supplier. But the good news is that there are now 10pc case discounts on Nitida wines – you need to ring SVS on 01962 712351, as the offer doesn’t appear on the website.

restaurant of the week

Waiter’s lack of English made meal mysterious

After taking pot luck at a rather unpromising spot in Finchley Road, our reviewer was pleasantly surprised by the food that arrived

And so, as the watery sun still is struggling to glimmer from the pallor of a milky sky, just prior to lowering its eyelids and giving way to a sparkling dazzle of drizzle, let me take you by the hand and walk you down to the water’s edge ... which in this case happens to be an almighty filthy puddle by the edge of the kerb in downtown Finchley Road: the glamorous end, you know it – where four lanes of traffic are constantly revving at the lights before thundering away and rounding the raised up camber that forms the grey and dismal mosaic wall which forever condemns innocent little shops to an eternal day of darkness, but yet allows Iceland to rise up high in all its orange vileness. Though on this

showery day, the destination of my wife and myself was not in fact Iceland, but Brazil.

A brand-new restaurant in Finchley Road is always something of an event, because constantly one wonders whether this time finally amid this very barren drag something worthwhile might actually have landed. This is the site almost opposite John Barnes at the foot of Trinity Walk that for many decades was an indifferent spag bol Italian, before becoming a ceaseless succession of things which began to make the indifferent spag bol Italian seem as Locanda Locatelli. I can’t remember them all: there was an Indian or two, a café ... most recently a sushi joint ... and now it is Brazilian, and called Capoeira. Which is the name of a martial art that is combined with

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Joseph Connolly at Capoeira



■ Joseph at Capoeira on Finchley Road

dance, colour, excitement and performance, so I was perfectly prepared for the white walls, wood strip flooring, brown furniture, and absence of a living soul. Well, to be fair – the place has been open but a month, and this was a wet Monday lunchtime. There is their national flag wrapped around a pillar, a couple of bits of astonishingly awful art and a row of small yuccas along the window sill, together with some bottles, their sides a-bubble with carefully predipped multicoloured candles (this giving a whole new meaning to Brazilian wax).

Also there ... was a huge wall mounted flatscreen ... showing football. Booming. Which almost made me turn around and march right back out again ... but duty called (and it was raining) so I subdued my bile and requested

that they lower the volume, if not tear the bloody thing off the wall and smash it with an axe. The waiter simply smiled. "Could you," I tried to make clearer, "reduce it...? Make it quieter...? Less loud...? Softer...? Lower, yes...?" And then he said: "Good afternoon." Not his fault, I suppose: he just didn't speak English. I mean – not just in the way that in London now is perfectly usual: this smiling and affable fellow didn't appear to be in possession of a single word, and so instead was relying wholly upon the international language of relying upon a sunny disposition.

'Hump steak'

The set-up here is, of course, the churrascaria – those rows of gleaming swords, each temptingly charged with nicely grilled

portions of various dead animals ... except that here there was nothing to be seen: no spectacle – all was hidden away. On the menu (which I think might have been written by our waiter) are "Salad's A big variety, of Brazilian salads". And then a list of 12 meats, these to include "baby beef" and (unforgettably) "hump steak". So I said to the waiter: "Do we choose what salads and meats we want, or do they all just arrive...?" He blinked. "We choose, do we...?" I pursued. He said yes. "Right. So how many do we choose?" He said yes. And this time truly appeared to mean it. "And the salads...?" He shook his head. And then he said yes. Well all of us, including the waiter, were practically hysterical by this time, so I just let him get on with it: we simply sat there and waited for whatever he might care

to bring along. My wife was sipping a Brazilian beer called Itaipava (which, she said, tasted of beer) and I a glass of Montepulciano from a list that was Italian, without a single exception: a good move, actually – but singular.

The view from the windows is quite comically awful: a wall of cars and vans (though the soundproofing is good) interspersed with hurrying pedestrians who nonetheless all found a moment to stop and stare at us in open amazement. It's a problem: restaurants previously on this site tried louvres, screens, café curtains ... but then the place looks uninviting, or else closed. What they really need to do here is make the actual food on offer visible and to the fore: that would bring in the hungry punters – and then they could maybe frost the rest of the glass, for the sake of the diners within.

Brandishing a sword

So then we were served with large square plates: at one corner were undressed leaves (olive oil and balsamic supplied), at another a melange of chopped green beans, carrots and peas in what I feared might be the dreaded salad cream, but turned out to be something cheesy ... there was a bit of fried cassava, and then a mound of sliced celery with very finely grated chicken. Taking up the fourth corner were proper golden and crunchy chips: unadvertised, and a welcome surprise: as, actually, was the whole of the meal. A bloke came over brandishing a sword, looking very gloomy (the bloke, not the sword). He peeled off a sausage apiece: pink and plump and bouncy (the sausage, not the bloke). Then I said to the waiter "How many meats are coming? And are they all coming at once?" He chuckled indulgently and said: "Oh yes, thank you." He came back soon with four little baked golden puffs. They were very good: like a savoury profiterole, or a Huntley & Palmer Cheese Football, left out in the sun.

Then the gloomy bloke with the sword came over again: a portion

of chicken thigh ... and then a bit later, a piece of chicken breast wrapped in bacon – very good, actually. But God he did look so utterly depressed. Michael Palin, in Brazil, discovered a woman who had a restaurant on the Copacabana beach: she said that every time she cooked, she had an orgasm. Our man on Finchley Road was covering his arousal with admirable aplomb. Then there was pork tenderloin, and finally some carvings of beef (not noticeably "baby", nor "hump"). You get an awful lot of really rather decent food here – and at lunchtime it is not £25 as stated on the menu, but half that: this news has got to go in the window, with maybe seductive photos of the skewers on offer, if not the food itself. This is, as I said, a difficult site – but Capoeira is considerably better than anything else that has occupied it. And on Friday and Saturday evenings, there is live music – which you will find either wholly exciting and alluring or else quite thoroughly appalling, according to taste.

I said to the waiter as we left that I was sure that it would begin to get busier, as word got around. He said yes. And then he nodded, and said no. Opened the door for us: smiled so broadly as he waved us away with a "thank you...!" And then he called out "please...!"

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

FACTFILE

■ CAPOEIRA

106c Finchley Road, NW3
Tel: 020 7435 1551

■ Open seven days 10am-3pm, 6pm-11pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

(polite, but enforcedly mute)

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Cost: All-in barbecue £25, a mini version £12.50 at lunchtime. Drinks the usual prices.

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