



# Pure products of nature

Tasting of Spanish minimal intervention wines reveals great variety

**S**ometimes, words fail me on wines. They're the bottles you won't find recommended in this column: bland, boring, bad, pitiful value for money. But rarely have I written such detailed notes as those about the wines at one quite small tasting last week.

Les Caves de Pyrène has all kinds of marvels on its list, as well as a good number of Marmite wines – love-or-hate examples of what's known as natural winemaking, when intervention is kept to the minimum and the result may be orange-coloured, somewhat cloudy or unexpectedly effervescent.

The French choice is epic in every sense of the word, and there is plenty from Italy. But I hadn't experienced many of the Spanish offerings before.

The morning started in an appropriately offbeat fashion, as Christina from Can Mayol searched for the appropriate tool to lever off the corroded metal bands which for a decade had constrained the cork of Loxarel Gran Reserva 109 (vintage 2002, kept on its lees for 109 months), a cava like no other I'd ever encountered.

There was still a satisfying pop when the cork came out, and some fizz left in the slightly cloudy, pale gold liquid which wafted complex scents of yeast, nuts and dried apricots towards my nose. The taste? Bone dry (Loxarel cavas have no dosage of sugar) with a big hint of cut apples, more yeast and something chalky.

Christina was swilling it around in her mouth too: "So chewy, you can almost eat it with a fork and knife."

In contrast, the Loxarel Amphora 2012, a still white from



■ **Special sherries: Fernando Hidalgo in the family cellar in Jerez**

the same xarel-lo grape which is a main component of cava, was much less challenging to enjoy, with salty complexity, purity and a long, fresh finish. While Gran Reserva 109 will leave little change out of £55, Amphora – made in large clay pots rather than conventional tanks – is a great-value delight at just under £12.

#### Care and commitment

But the aged cava experience was to continue, courtesy of Recaredo. The Mata family has been making brut nature cavas for close to a century, with as much care and commitment to quality as the very best champagne growers. And ageing the wines is crucial, export manager Alex Bautista explained: "There's no sense in putting in all that effort and commitment in the vineyard [Recaredo, like many of Les Caves' other growers, follows organic/biodynamic practices] without continuing it in the cellar."

Tasting four different vintages, 2007 back to 2001, which use different blends of grapes from vines of varying ages, was a privilege, and illuminating – terroir as well as cellar skill in bubbles, something very rare. Prices for these wonderfully complex and aromatic wines

range upwards from £21.

Nothing orange? Ah, yes – here's Benimaquia Tinajas 2012, prettily marmalade-coloured, with a citrus and muscat-grape nose (it's 100 per cent moscatel) which leads to a surprise: on the palate this intriguing and very tempting wine is bone dry, fresh, pure, with a lovely floral character.

It's one of a number of impressive dry wines from Bodegas Bernabe Navarro, which despite its steaming Alicante location avoids sticky over-ripeness – instead, crispness rules.

This wine – which gains a lot of its character from its time in those traditional clay tinajas – isn't in stock yet, but others in the Bernabe Navarro range are bargains, starting well below £10.

You see how words are running away with me... And I haven't yet mentioned the fabulous sherries of Emilio Hidalgo – that's the family from Jerez, not the more widely known and widely available unrelated namesake from Sanlucar – and many more great wines.

■ All can be ordered from Les Caves' shop – ring 01483 554750 – and you can read more about them on [www.lescaves.co.uk](http://www.lescaves.co.uk).

## restaurant of the week

# Fast food? Well at least it's over with quickly

Perched on a shelf, deafened by rock'n'roll, our intrepid reviewer tries and fails to find any good reason for burger bars' popularity

**H**ave you noticed how terribly often lately the humble hamburger has been making the news? Or simply "burger", I should say – because the "ham" bit is generally dropped, these days (not that it ever did have anything to do with actual ham: the derivation is from Hamburg, you see, and ... oh, I can't really be bothered to go into it, and you probably don't want to hear it anyway). But there is, of course, a class structure attached to the burger: well of course there is – this is Britain, so everything comes bolted to a sturdy class structure, whether you like it or not. At the bottom, the very plebeian, are the vast and frozen sacks of "patties" made of Christ knows what, but nominally beef, that

are bought up wholesale from iffy supermarkets by the whey-faced legions of "harassed working mums". Then there is McDonald's – and recently (get this) the co-author of *Freakonomics* pronounced the McDouble (a double cheeseburger) to be "the cheapest, most nutritious and bountiful food that has ever existed in human history". Crumbs. But you sort of see the point: apparently the only things that would deliver an equivalent quantity of calories and protein for less outlay are servings of red lentils and organic brown rice. And face it: they're not going to be flying out of a takeaway any time soon.

Next in the hierarchy are the more upmarket chains such as Byron and Gourmet

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## Joseph Connolly at Tommi's Burger Joint



■ Joseph at Tommi's Burger Joint in Thayer Street

Burger Kitchen, each of which is extremely good in terms of both quality and value. Then there are the groovy brasseries' individual takes on the thing, and – increasingly, almost insanely, popular – the one-off fashionable little tucked-away establishments aimed squarely at the more self-conscious young. Ah yes, the young ... who, though spoilt rotten, seem also, when it comes to restaurants, to be bound by a parallel addiction to masochism, if not outright self-flagellation: queuing in the rain in order to hunker down in some or other condemned and fetid shack and manhandle an overpriced burger while squatting on a crate is these days seen to be very heaven. So ... I thought I'd try out one of these

glittering hellholes, just to see if they are actually any good, or whether it is all just hysterical hype. Soon, though ... there will be yet more variations on the infinite theme: already in New York people are swooning over the "ramen burger": instead of the traditional bun, there are two deep-fried cakes of ramen noodle, making the whole thing vast on carbs, but no one seems to mind. Here is but a passing wonder ... but what will surely be with us one day is the Frankenburger, the £220,000 prototype having recently been sampled by foodie experts. This freaky thing started life as a spoonful of cells from the rump of a cow that then spent five years in a Petri dish in a lab. Yum yum. The initial verdicts ranged from

"crunchy" to "cake-like" ... but before very long, I feel, they will crack it – whereupon it will be regarded as positively perverted to eat a real cow.

But to eat a real cow – or a bit of it, anyway – was the venture of the day ... but also to be (don't laugh) cool and fashionable, while I was about it. Probably the best known of these new places is MeatLiquor: and what an appealing name that is, you might well think. There is also Dirty Burger – round the back of the fabulous Chicken Shop in Dartmouth Park – and now too there is Tommi's Burger Joint. This is a Scandinavian set-up that started last year as a pop-up in Marylebone Lane – and despite this street being jam-packed with eateries, it proved an instant hit –

so much so that when the fag-end of the lease was up, a fair cross-section of the local community descended into mourning. So imagine their collective joy when this summer Tommi's was born again just around the corner in Thayer Street – and this time it is permanent. A black exterior strung with red rope fairy lights, yielding to a black interior strung with red rope fairy lights. There is driftwood, there is netting. There are hard stools, and not many of them. The décor was executed not by Kelly Hoppen, but a purblind student high on skunk, and with liberty to splurge at will the entire budget of £1.50.

### Rapidly rammed

My wife and I (well I wasn't going to be the only non-kid in the place) got there deliberately early for lunch, as I had heard that the place becomes rapidly rammed (no bookings permitted, but of course). And even before noon, I was stuck in a queue to order at the counter. It doesn't take long to order though – because here is the menu: burger; cheeseburger; steak burger; veggie burger. That's it. Fries, drinks, sauces ... that's it. They describe the following as the "Offer of the Century": burger; fries; soda: £9.90. And by "soda" they do not mean a whoosh of Schweppes, no of course not: just one more Americanism meaning "fizzy drink" to contribute to the shattered remnants of the English language. Having ordered and paid, you retire to a shelf, if there is one. I was perched on a piece of wood in front of a poster depicting Clint Eastwood looking inscrutable in *A Fistful of Dollars*: I was looking uncomfortable, with a fistful of burger. It comes in a basket (why?) and the burger is wrapped in white paper (why?) and the fries are pale and underfried (why?). The paper napkins – which you have to hunt for – are tiny, thin and useless (why?) The drinks – a Peroni for my wife, a tiny bottle of wine for me (as served from the trolley in a train) – come with plastic glasses (why?). Mine was squat, like that in which you might leave a sample at a hatch with sliding doors, and so I

was rather glad that the wine was red, not white.

And the burgers ...? Well ... they are OK. No more. Rather small. With my (minced) steak burger I had a side of "Bearnaise sauce": dreadful industrial gloop. And so there we sat, the two of us, having long ago abandoned the struggle to talk over the mega-thudding 1950s rock'n'roll. Look: I do understand that we were a million miles from the target audience here, being the only people in the joint who were older than 17-and-three-quarters (EJ Thribb should make a beeline). But still ... these places are really hard work: your fingers are a mess, it's cramped, loud, amateur and actually largely ridiculous: but the queue to get in remained constant. The thing that really gets me though is the fact that the burgers – the huge and very point of the thing – are merely pretty good, while everything else was pretty damn wrong. While the whole thing cost £30, which struck me as rather poor value: the young really ought to know that they could do a whole lot better. But if time-saving is high on your agenda, then surely this is the place for you: it is the only restaurant ever in which I have had lunch and been out of the door before it was even one o'clock. And out of the door ... ooh, that felt really good.

■ Tommi's has a residency on the third Thursday of every month at The Princess of Wales in Chalcot Road, Primrose Hill, NW1 8LL. Bookings on [www.lovetheprincess.com](http://www.lovetheprincess.com)

### FACTFILE

- Tommi's Burger Joint  
30 Thayer Street W1. Tel 07825 557 945 (no bookings)
- Open Monday-Saturday  
11.30am-11pm. Sunday noon-10pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: there ain't none, baby
- The Feeling: ★☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆ (if old) ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (if not)
- COST £30 for one course for two with a drink. Not great value.



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