



Vive la grande diversité

A recent event highlighted the geographical variety of French wine

If you're a Francophobe – or if you have no interest in winning a selection of superb wines – I suggest you stop reading now.

But if you are a regular follower of this column, the chances are you like good French wine as much as I do, and you'd welcome the chance to put some excellent bottles in your cellar in time for Christmas.

Why is France so close to my heart? Apart from the fact that it's the place where I first tasted wine seriously, the happy day I spent a few weeks ago sampling the recommendations of leading wine writers and sommeliers explains why. Absolutely Cracking Wines from France is a very special experience: 50 people making those recommendations, 150 wines divided equally into three price brackets running from £5 to close to £35. Unlike just about every other trade wine tasting in the UK, the bottles are there because people who know and love wine want to drink them, not because they're the choice of a wine-promoting organisation of whatever kind.

What also makes it so unusual is the geographic scope, which emphasises the diversity of France. Sure, this year bordeaux, burgundy and champagne were there (though not many examples). The Jura, France's smallest wine region, was in contrast heavily over-represented by wonderful wines, and others came from Corsica, Savoie, Provence and – in quantity – the Rhône, Languedoc-Roussillon, the Loire and the south west. Even sweet wines showed that unusual span: just one sauternes, but seven from southern vineyards.

How can I direct you to individual wines among that



■ Autumn in Jura, a region whose wines punched way above their weight at Absolutely Cracking 2013

Picture: Vins du Jura

generous choice? There isn't space here to list more than just one of my favourites (which were numerous), but log on to www.frenchwinesbulletin.com/media/65688/Absolutely_Cracking_Wines_Booklet.pdf and you can read about every one, and why it was chosen (the selectors' names aren't there, but they include Jancis Robinson MW, Andrew Jefford, Charles Metcalfe, Gérard Bassett, Andrea Briccarello, Christine Parkinson, even yours truly). And go in for the competition below, where thanks to the generosity of French wine and food promoters Sopexa, the event organisers, two winners will each receive a six-bottle case of white, red and sweet wines from the tasting – those I've selected are numbers 25, 55, 99, 122, 140, 151 and 34, 54, 69, 82, 133 and 148 in the booklet.

Independent merchants

Another way to choose is through where you shop. Overwhelmingly, the lead source was The Wine Society – one in six of the recommendations came from its splendid French selection, with many in the sub-£9 category. No one else came anywhere near, but next in the list were all excellent independent merchants: Les Caves de Pyrène, whose quirky,

organic-biodynamic-natural list obviously thrills anyone wandering away from the mainstream, traditional but very far from stuffy Berry Bros and Rudd, lovely Lea & Sandeman and well-directed Roberson. The supermarkets didn't get much of a look-in, with only a handful of bottles from their shelves, even those of Waitrose and Marks & Spencer.

For a single recommendation, rather than one of my own choices, here's a memorable wine – a perfumed, elegant and warmly fruited red burgundy selected by Andrew Jefford, who was the inspiration for Absolutely Cracking, via his groundbreaking book *The New France*. It's Domaine Joblot Givry Premier Cru Clos du Cellier aux Moines 2010, £24 from www.bigredwine.co.uk.

■ For a chance to win one of the two six-bottle cases of wines, each worth about £100, simply answer this question: Who organises the Absolutely Cracking Wines from France event? Send your answer, together with your name, address and telephone number, to chance2win@hamhigh.co.uk no later than noon on November 7, putting Absolutely Cracking in the subject box. Entrants must be over 18.

An adventure in brunchland at a café called Alice

Our reviewer finds West Hampstead offers disappointingly few midday eating options

Delia's back!" That was the shock announcement which

accompanied a large and airbrushed picture of the grande dame of culinary simplicity on the cover of a recent issue of *Waitrose Weekend*, that rather pleasant little comic that they dole out buckshee. And I was really concerned, I can tell you: oh my God, I thought: Delia's back! Whatever can be wrong with it? Because at her age, you know, the lower lumbar region in particular can be all too prone to any manner of lurking malaise, while the putative slipping of discs hardly bears thinking about. But it turns out that it's all OK: Delia is still fit and spry (judicious diet, I can only suppose) and merely has returned to the bosom of Waitrose. Because we all of us, don't we, rather take succour from

Waitrose's motherly bosom, not to say their rather pleasant little comic. And on the front of an even more recent issue they had this: "The Foodie Bucket List: 50 things to do before you die." Because they always do that, don't they? With all these endless lists: movies you must see, books you have to read, places you just gotta visit ... and all, apparently, before you die. Well ... duh! You ain't going to be doing too much of anything after you're dead, matey, so I think that really we can take that bit as read.

Not too ambitious

It was a pretty disappointing list, actually. One of the must-dos was "sip coffee and croissants in a Parisian corner café". Leaving aside the fact that it is difficult to sip a croissant ... surely everyone on earth has done this at some point...? Or how about this one: "Indulge in bread and butter

“I would have had fish and chips, but it was pollock. I ask you. For £12.50, you can rise to haddock: pollock has all the allure of beer-battered dishcloth, while possessing the solitary virtue of not being quite so disgusting as whiting

王府井 Silks & Spice
Yum Cha
Restaurant, Bar & Karaoke

FREE DELIVERY
020 7428 0565
FOR ORDERS OVER £15 WITHIN 3 MILES
DELIVERY FROM 17.30 UNTIL LATE

50% off
Dim Sum

Every Monday, Tuesday
& Wednesday after 5.30pm

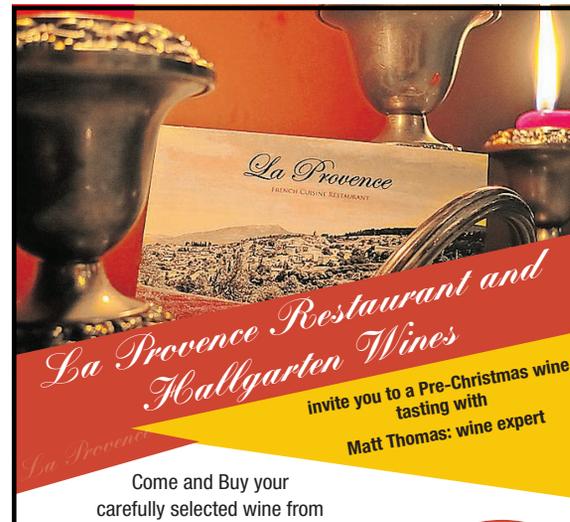
Yum Cha Silks & Spice

is an Oriental restaurant and bar
with 4 karaoke rooms

We specialise in Dim Sum and also Far East Asia cuisines.

Yum Cha Silks & Spice 27-28 Chalk Farm Road, London, NW1 8AG.

Table Booking and General Enquiries: 020 7482 2228 Deliveries and Takeaway Orders: 020 7428 0565



La Provence Restaurant and
Ballgarten Wines
invite you to a Pre-Christmas wine
tasting with
Matt Thomas: wine expert

Come and Buy your
carefully selected wine from
all around the world at Trade Prices.

Tuesday 12th of November 2013 from 6pm
116 Heath Street, London, NW3 1DR
02074333055
info@laprovencheampstead.co.uk

Enjoy our freshly
made canapés and
French bubbles
For £20

Joseph Connolly at The Alice House



a fair while, so I thought that would do us. But they only had breakfast and brunchy things on offer, and I was more in the mood for a starter and main. So we sloped along West End Lane: this restaurant has closed down ... this restaurant doesn't open for lunch ... this restaurant has closed down ... this restaurant looks just too damned awful ... this restaurant has closed down ... and here is a pub, the Black Lion: and do you know, on a sunny afternoon, not one person was in the generous outside eating area ... and the very gloomy interior was empty as well: something of a worry. So we ended up at The Alice House, a rather groovy place very popular in North Kilburn – sorry, West Hampstead, I mean. We sat on their decking platform and watched the cars and filthy lorries roar on by, these occasionally affording a glimpse of the glittering shops opposite – The Children's Society, Oxfam, All Aboard, Cancer Research UK...

Went the whole hog

And guess what: they only had breakfast and brunchy things ... but I was damned if I was moving again, so went the whole hog and actually ordered the classic English breakfast. Haven't had one of those since last I was in a hotel – when you must, of course, because it's paid for and it's a buffet and you take too much and then you leave nearly all of it. I would have had fish and chips ... but it was pollock. I ask you. For £12.50, you can rise to haddock: pollock has all the allure of beer-battered dishcloth, while possessing the solitary virtue of not being quite so actively disgusting as whiting. My wife had a red onion and Oxford Blue puff pastry tart with a baby spinach, pear and candied walnut salad. Though, prior to all that, the waitress came along with a dripping blue J-cloth and gave the sticky table a good and proper slunge. Which left us with a table that now was both sticky and sopping wet.

The tart came as a rectangle of puff pastry quite prettily strewn with the leaves and cheese. "I would have preferred shortcrust,"

my wife said. "This isn't really a tart at all as all the ingredients are quite separate. And I could have done with more onion and less pear. The walnuts are lovely, though." And my brekker...? Well – two fried eggs that were like two fried eggs, a couple of excellent bangers, nicely crisped smoked bacon, soggy grilled tomato and rather too dry Portobello mushroom: it was all as all right as this sort of thing will tend to be. I sipped prosecco, and my wife had an "Alice lager" – which, very disappointingly, did not come with a label attached to it reading "Drink me". Then she had a crumble made with "locally sourced apples" (Waitrose, do we think...?) which came in a small iron cocotte next to a dinky jug of custard, both on a little bread board. But ... she couldn't pour custard into the crumble because it was up to the brim: a problem that might have been circumvented had they ditched the plank, the cooking pot and the jug and simply put the whole damn thing on a plate...! Ah well: that's the way the apple crumbles.

And then the decision was made to walk all the way back up to Hampstead Village. It was on the list of things I had to do. Before I die.

■ Joseph at The Alice House in West End Lane

pudding"? Or this (do try to keep a straight face): "Rediscover greengages." It's not too soaringly ambitious, this list, is it? "Be thrifty and make your own soup." "Try the classic taste combo of British ale with a Scotch egg." Who in God's name writes all this guff...? Not the sainted Delia, we presume.

Anyhoo, we were there in Waitrose, my wife and I, picking up the latest rather pleasant little comic ... and then the thought of lunch snuck up on me. It was a warm and sunny day, so we thought we might amble down to West Hampstead. Now, Finchley Road ... well, you can't really accuse any building of "spoiling" Finchley Road because it was comprehensively destroyed

about 50 years ago ... but still and all: this JW3 thing, Jewish Community Centre. Have you seen it? God almighty! Did it come first in the "Let's Build Something Spectacularly Ugly And Truly Stupid-Looking Beyond Belief" competition? It would have been a shoo-in. We have a horizontal slab of murky glass, and a vertical slab of brick, with a void before them. They have attached to the brick bit several rows of concrete strips, like a titan's matchsticks, for no practical purpose whatever except to provoke exclamations from passers-by on the lines of: "Oh look! There is something spectacularly ugly and truly stupid-looking beyond belief!" Still: what can you expect for 50 million quid? And on the opposite

corner is another newish building which is hideous in merely a different way. One bit of the roof suddenly slopes up for no reason whatever, while the rest of the roof simply can't be bothered. Modern architects, I'm telling you – I'm just about sick to death of them. They are either throwing up dingy and misshapen little hovels in place of streets, or else disfiguring the London skyline with their increasingly insulting and dominant inanities.

But West Hampstead still is comfortingly human-scale, and just about shabby enough (any shabbier, and you might begin to wonder). I'd heard that The Wet Fish Café (which, predictably, has nothing especially to do with fish, wet or dry) had been going

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

FACTFILE

- **THE ALICE HOUSE**
283-285 West End Lane, NW6
Tel: 020 7431 8818
- **Open Monday-Thursday**
9.30am-11.30pm, Friday-Saturday
9.30am-1am, Sunday 9.30am-11pm
- **Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆**
- **Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆**
- **The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆**
- **Cost: Pretty reasonable.** Two of you will be fine with £50 for two courses and a drink or so.



Bengal Indian Cuisine

- 20% off for dining • 10% off collection
- Free Home Delivery to local area
- 5 Course Banquet night on every Wednesday for only **£9.95** per person
- Special Chefs Masala sauces
- All special occasion catered for including Weddings, Birthdays, Anniversaries

* discounts and home delivery on all orders over £12.00.

Opening Hours Sun - Thurs: 12 noon to 2.30pm & 5.30pm - 11.00pm
Fri - Sat 12 noon to 2.30pm & 5.30pm to 11.30pm

153 Tottenham Lane, Crouch end, London N8 9BT

020 8341 1756 • 020 8341 1819

