



Raise a glass to Croatia

Diversity or homogeneity – which is best for wine-growing regions? The answer of course depends a lot on individual viewpoints: the supermarket buyer wanting a raft of reliable, regular bottles will grasp the latter; a wine enthusiast of broad and exploratory palate will choose the former.

For that, how about Croatia? The political boundaries may be quite new, but wine growing in this eastern fringe of Europe has a very long history – the island of Hvar, off the Dalmatian coast, claims to be the world's oldest continuously cultivated vineyard, dating back 2,500 years. And now, after the best-forgotten chaos of the socialist era, there's a renaissance.

Croatia may be responsible for only 0.5 per cent of the world's wine, but those bottles offer a remarkable variety. Some statistics: four main wine regions of very different climatic and geographical character, divided into 16 subregions and then into 66 appellations.

Then there are the indigenous grapes – 60 alone in one region, Dalmatia – and that's where life starts getting hard. Crljenak, zlahtina, grasevina, skrljet hardly trip fluently off the average wine-drinker's tongue, nor do such company names as Zdjelarevic or Krauthaker. And even in the same area, with the same variety, the results can be hugely different, a result of individual producers' approach.

I found this very recently, when 22 Croatian wineries, from the big to the boutique, showed their wares to trade buyers and press in London, in an effort to build on the present tiny base of sales here. Some wines were simple, fresh and fruity, others creamy



■ Vineyards of Matosevic on the Istrian peninsula Picture: Dani Celija/Matosevic

and almost tropical in flavour; some light bodied, others rich and full.

A lot were very good, made with style and care. For me, one star came from the small Matosevic winery. The acacia-barrel-fermented Alba Antique 2009, from malvasia istriana grapes grown on the Istrian peninsula, has restrained flavours and generous minerality, a very smart wine. Excellent, too is Cattunar's late-harvest, rich yet dry and fresh Collina 2010, a classic example of the same grape, same region contrast.

White wine country

Croatia is very much a white wine country, with red making up less than a third of total production. But that doesn't stop it offering a perhaps even more startling range of indigenous red varieties, including crljenak, the original primitivo/zinfandel.

On Dalmatia's sunny coastal slopes plavac mali – one of whose parents is primitivo – and potentially very fine babic reign, again in varied styles. From plavac mali I tasted a dry rosé, old and new oaked reds and also one of Croatia's icon wines, a posh bordeaux-style creation: a fascinating spread.

Where can you buy these wines? Given their scarcity,

north Londoners are particularly fortunate. Theatre of the Grape in Junction Road, Tufnell Park (there's a second branch in Greenwich), has probably the largest range in London. "The wines are such an original experience – that's why we've gone out on a limb to bring them to serious wine drinkers," explains Tufnell Park manager Jason Millar.

They went down very well indeed at a customer tasting earlier this year, despite their generally high price bracket; perhaps surprisingly, the most expensive sold best. When those are as stylish as the perfumed, complex and real "taste of Croatia" Suha Punta Gracin babic 2009 (£35.30), the enthusiasm is understandable.

More on the Theatre of the Grape list which I've tasted and enjoyed are Bolfan Rajnski rizling 2012 (£14.60), clean, with rounded apple-fresh fruit, and Jako Vino Stina posip 2012 (£23.90), pale with pretty stone fruit scents and an elegant crisp palate.

Other London stockists of Croatian wines include Vini Vivi Wines (Mill Lane, West Hampstead), Lea & Sandeman, Harvey Nichols and Volic Fine Wines (Shirland Road, Maida Vale).

restaurant of the week

Talking theatre while the chefs follow the script

I bet you didn't sleep the night before the new Michelin awards were unleashed upon an agog and slaving public...!

Well you did, actually – because you were happily unaware of their imminence. As is everyone in the world who is unconnected with the biz – but oh my God, if you're actually one of the restaurants involved in this annual bunfight, it's just like Oscars night, and then some. The big news – if you think it's news at all – was that Heston's really excellent and truly expensive Knightsbridge restaurant Dinner gained a second star. This will have occasioned ecstasy in the kitchen, and glee among the accountants: it was already very hard to acquire a table, and now it will be harder (as well as, in all likelihood, even more truly expensive). Equally earth-shattering – should your personal earth be prone to such sudden implosion – was the news that Joel Robuchon's Atelier was – oh God! – relegated to one-star status, from two. Heaven only knows what that might have occasioned in their kitchen: anything from a rueful shaking of the toque to full-blown

hara-kiri, I should have said. Because to us, it's only plate of food ... but to them, it's life itself.

Kinder on the wallet

What always garners very much less publicity are the humbler, though still highly professional, restaurants, who pick up a Michelin Bib Gourmand – a desirable accolade, though an unappealing appellation, it is true, conjuring up as it does a vision of a fat and drooling pig strapped into a high chair. But there are some really good places on the list: far easier to book, and very much kinder on the wallet. And last week, I went to one of these in the further reaches of Camden: Salt Yard, in Goodge Street. Don't ask me why it's called Salt Yard: it's not in a yard, nor is it seemingly saline – but it is a very cosy and welcoming place, with a charcuterie bar at street level, and a rather more proper restaurant down below, where the kitchen gets visibly busy and well stuck into it. For here is fundamentally a tapas place ... though one where Spanish is deftly blended with Italian, which is rather a rare thing.

My guest was Lee Menzies, a

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Joseph Connolly at Salt Yard



■ Joseph with theatre producer Lee Menzies at Salt Yard in Goodge Street

theatre producer who has run his eponymous company for 30 years and been responsible for any number of hits – serious drama, such as *Hedda Gabler* and *Journey's End*, along with true crowd-pleasers in the mould of *Donkey's Years*, *Enron*, *Top Hat* (at the moment on tour) and now the new musical *From Here To Eternity* – with lyrics by Tim Rice – just opened to enthusiastic reviews at the Shaftesbury. “Opening was a huge relief”, says Lee. “We had 23 previews, tweaking all the time. Throughout those and the rehearsals I wanted to hug and kiss people, as well as punch some in the face. Often the same people...” This huge production is truly something: from first chat to first night took five long years, and there are more than 70 people on the payroll (and this excludes the 40 women who made all the

dresses). I had to remark that he appeared remarkably calm about it all. “Well,” he said modestly, “I’ve done it before, you know...” Indeed: and theatre is in his blood – his grandmother was part of the original D’Oyly Carte troupe. “She slept with the man himself, of course. How you got the good parts, in those days.”

Thoroughly choreographed

The basement is low-ceilinged, though not oppressive, the decor bland to unexceptionable ... and the view into the kitchen through the serving hatch quite fascinating. No fewer than seven people toiling away in there, for what is a pretty small restaurant. By 1.15pm the place was packed, though all in the kitchen was serene and professional: thoroughly choreographed. I was hearing a lot of “Yes, chef” and “At

the pass!”: all very good. So to kick off we had some chargrilled bread and olive oil with a shared plate of Jamon Iberico: this five-year cured ham was sweet, savoury and wholly sensationally delicious ... if a little pricey at £15.50. We glugged a Puglia red with that: the wine list is very good, though at first glance rather horribly priced ... but if you dig a bit, you can find one or two goodies at under £30, which is as low as they go.

The tapas menu is divided into fish, meat and vegetable – about a half-dozen of each – though I see from my notes that we managed to bypass fish altogether, through no particular intention. Everything we did have, however, was outstanding – and delivered at a steady pace (none of the usual interminable wait between platelets) by a friendly and very professional waitress, who knew

the menu and wine list backwards. Meatballs were a special, so we had to have them. “I don’t normally care for meatballs,” Lee said, “though these are wonderful – the best I’ve ever had.” Also superb was the crispy little brick of confit of Old Spot pork belly with rosemary scented cannellini beans, and chargrilled chicken with morcilla (black pudding), pancetta and black bean stew. I think though that the highlights for me were a soft duck egg with potato puree, artichoke pesto and crispy artichoke ... and quite the most perfect tortilla. God, how good a tortilla can be, if it’s made with care: here was a lovely round cake of it, oozing so gorgeously eggily. Rather too much food, as ever – but who really cares? I asked Lee where he likes to eat out (which he does every day). “Well we’ve just moved offices – right

next door to my club, the Garrick. From desk to bar is 57 seconds: I’m hoping to get that down. Then there’s the Ledbury, of course, which is near where I live ... and a Thai place round the corner from me where you bring your own wine. Run by an Irishman, rather oddly.”

Lascivious centre

He then ordered a cold chocolate fondant with crème fraiche ice cream – and I was intrigued to find out whether they could make a cold fondant (which is an unusual thing) still splurge out its lascivious centre. And yes – it did work, somehow ... and although it was rather more of a mousse, still it was nonetheless entirely lovely. And over a 10-year-old tawny port, which Lee rather favours, I asked him what his greatest theatrical hit has been. “Oh easy,” he said immediately. “*Beyond Reasonable Doubt* – Jeffrey Archer’s first play.” So there you go ... and next spring, he is producing a rather different author: Chekhov. “And of course,” he added, “I am hoping that *From Here To Eternity* will prove to be even bigger.” Of course. And even as we were leaving, I found myself planning the next day’s lunch, you know. Shameful, really – but I suppose this is all I shall ever amount to: just someone who goes out to lunch. Yes, this is me ... from here, to eternity...

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

■ SALT YARD

54 Goodge Street, W1
Tel: 020 7637 0657

■ Open Monday-Friday noon-11pm.

Saturday 5pm-11pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Cost: As ever with tapas, as much as you like. Most little plates are £6-£8 apiece.



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