



Festive fizz at lower cost

Let's bite the bubble... The festive season and fizz are inseparable, but does it have to be champagne? There are plenty of alternatives, which can give as much pleasure – often at less cost. So consider some of the suggestions below.

First, though, a few thoughts on champagne itself. This is the season of big discounts, but beware. I always recall the tale a champagne grower told me several years ago, of how a supermarket's customers were wowed by the quality of an unknown champagne on pre-Christmas offer. Many returned to buy more, only to be dismally disappointed by the liquid in what appeared to be identical bottles.

What had gone wrong? The supermarket chain in question (in France, but this could happen anywhere) had sourced a good cheap champagne on which it had stuck a label of its own choice. When supplies ran out, it found a far inferior wine but labelled it identically. No fraud, simply some rather dodgy marketing.

I'm not saying you're going to be stung like that if you buy champagne you've never heard of, but the risk exists. So if good champagne is an essential for Christmas and New Year, look out for offers on names you know and like.

Now for the alternatives. One happy option is to be patriotic and buy English sparkling wine. The best has been appealing for ages, and the quantity of good English fizz available is soaring. A dozen examples were shown off – blind – at a masterclass in London recently and I suspect all the participants could easily have mistaken them for quality champagnes.

As with champagne, English sparkling styles vary from the light and elegantly fruited to the denser



■ Mike Roberts in the Ridgeview vineyard

and yeasty. Smugly, I recognised one of my favourites in the line-up: Ridgeview Grosvenor blanc de blancs, subtle, refreshing and delicious. Ridgeview founder Mike Roberts and his team in Sussex have been pioneers (with Nyetimber, just a little further along the chalk seam which, across the Channel, underlies Champagne's vineyards) in putting English fizz on the world wine map, and both are still at the head of the pack.

These top wines are champagne-priced, however – generally from about £25 to £30-plus. Good selections are on the shelves at Jeroboams, Berry Bros, Lea & Sandeman and English produce champion Wine Pantry in Borough Market. Other producers I particularly like include Hennes and Gusbourne.

Next best thing

For the next best thing to French and English classics, at more approachable prices, look to wines made from the same grapes (pinots noir and meunier, and chardonnay) and by the same second-fermentation-in-bottle method. Closest to champagne in location, and often in style, is crémant de bourgogne. One of the best I've tasted recently is Simmonet-Febvre P100 blanc de

noir, rich but also refined (£15-£16, Whole Foods Market Kensington, www.privatecellar.co.uk).

Heading to other continents, grape varieties and method can remain the same, as in the elegant, lightly creamy, lengthily effervescent Tyrrell's pinot noir chardonnay brut 2009 (£18, www.vintagemarque.com, or the aromatic, fresh Torres Chile Cordillera brut 2012, (£14.50, also Vintage Marque).

But there are so many more, beyond cava and prosecco. At that London tasting which hosted the masterclass, sparkling products of 17 nations and 80 different appellations or regions were being poured. I tasted great wines from such other French regions as the Loire, Limoux and Jura; from Portugal (Filipa Pato 3B rosado, £11.50, The Wine Society), Tasmania (Jansz Premium cuvée, £14.50-£16.30, www.slurp.co.uk, Theatre of Wine; Jansz Brut vintage, £20-£25, www.slurp.co.uk www.flagshipwines.co.uk), New Zealand (Nautilus brut, £18-£20.50, www.invinitywines.co.uk, www.nywines.co.uk), Austria, Luxembourg, South Africa, Canada, Brazil, even Russia.

Hunting bargains? There's 25 per cent off six bottles (including fizz) at Sainsbury's until Tuesday (December 10).

restaurant of the week

Taking a famous veggie to eat on street of meat...

...might not have been wise, but AC Grayling did not go hungry for lack of non-fleshy food

Some London streets are decidedly meatier than others – and Wellington Street in Covent Garden would appear to be one of the meatiest of all. There are quite a few burger places (including the estimable Byron) and most of the restaurants seem actively to specialise in the more overtly carnally delightful aspects of dining – Sophie's Steakhouse for one, which is pretty much opposite the grill I was going to for lunch: Christopher's – one of the original American pioneers which brought to London authentic US beef cooked as it should be, back in the days (1991) when London truly did need all the enlightenment it could get. And just next to Christopher's is an attractive shop which notionally deals in wine and cheese, though the real draw is the genuine foie gras, which

they actually have the courage to advertise in the window: amazing really that the glass is not daily a scattering of crystal shards – because people do get awfully exercised about foie gras, as well we know. So all in all, Wellington Street, rather aptly, might be said to be where the veggie meets his Waterloo. Yes and so who was I taking to lunch at the grill ...? Why, none other than this country's foremost philosopher, Professor AC Grayling ... who is, famously, a vegetarian. I sometimes really do wonder if actually I ought to be in this job...

Christopher's occupies a very handsome corner building, the Martini Bar being on the ground floor, and jolly inviting too. But if you are lunching, a charming lady in natty black-and-white will escort you up the rather grand staircase to the dining room proper. Earlier this year,

“Anthony does not indulge. ‘Alcohol gives me terrible headaches. It's a rare affliction – one in two million people.’ That means just 30 in this country: I suggested he contact them so that they could all meet up and not have a drink

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Joseph Connolly at Christopher's



■ Joseph with AC Grayling at Christopher's in Wellington Street

Picture: Polly Hancock

the restaurant was closed for a four-month refurbishment, and I am delighted to say that as a result it looks absolutely the same. The room is solid and comfortable, the walls and leather upholstery tending to bronze, the uplit highly ornate cornice little short of magnificent. A reassuring, masculine room with proper napery on the well-spaced tables, the service among the very best in London. It's the New York thing, you see: affable, though immensely capable: the sort of place that could not countenance a hitch, and nor would the diner ever expect such a thing. At the next table were three American businessmen – the only ones in the room to have removed their jackets (it must be a principle, because it wasn't hot). They had each cut up their steaks like good little boys, the knives now cast into the wilderness as

they stabbed the cubes with their forks. Strange, isn't it? Echoes of nanny in the nursery.

Man of many parts

But never mind them: what about my guest? Anthony Grayling, whom I have known for really quite a long time, is a man of very many parts – though most recently best known for being the Master of the New College of the Humanities in Bedford Square. In just one year, the undoubted success of this very fine venture has (or should have) silenced the naysayers who dubbed it an example of elitism, this largely due to the annual fees of £18,000. "Well," says Anthony, "we have doubled the intake – more than 100 students now, and we are taking on more staff. It must be gradual, though – we mustn't expand too quickly." Anthony is the author of more than 30 books

– rather more diverse than you might expect: not just *Wittgenstein*, *Descartes* and *Friendship* (his latest) but such as a literary companion to China – and is in constant demand to lecture all over the world. "I tend to write two books in tandem ... but have to read. I get up at five in order to do this." Yes ... and often in the original French, German and Italian (although he confesses to his Sanskrit and classical Chinese being "not good enough"). His love of reading will be called upon even more in 2014, when he is chairman of the Man Booker Prize (so that's another 160 novels, for starters).

And talking of starters ... is there actually anything on this blessed menu that a veggie can stomach...? Well yes – loads, in fact (praise the Lord) and so Anthony chooses burrata (wonderfully creamy Italian cheese) followed

by rigatoni with arugula (rocket), chilli, pesto, "sun-blushed" tomato and pecorino. I thought I'd go the Yankee route with a Maryland crab cake with more rocket, tomato jam and red pepper mayo ... and then it just had to be 30-day aged NY strip steak – Black Angus from Kansas (which rather sounds like a fellow in a limerick). And just a glass of American merlot for me ... because Anthony does not indulge. "I discovered in my twenties that alcohol gave me terrible headaches. It's a rare affliction – one in two million people." That means just 30 in this country: I suggested he contact them so that they could all meet up and not have a drink.

'Deep South Hampstead'

"So very creamy – full of taste!" That was Anthony's enthusiasm for the burrata – and it did look fine, on a gunmetal plate offset by a mound of peeled and cooked cherry tomatoes. My crab cake was tightly packed and properly crabby, the red pepper mayo just a little hot. Anthony lives near the Old Kent Road – "or," he says, "as I like to call it, Deep South Hampstead" – with his wife Katie Hickman, a writer of travel, social history and historical fiction, as well as their daughter and son. I then wondered, out of the blue, whether he had ever considered adding the arrow of politics to his considerable quiver ...? "Blair asked me once ... I said, 'Oh good God, no.'" Not that Anthony believes in a God, good or otherwise: "I was once lecturing in Austin, where I thought atheism might be a safe topic. I said it might be good publicity if someone tried to shoot me ... but my host said that in Texas, assassination attempts tend to be successful. So I shut up. As to the west coast of America ... someone once told me that the only culture there is yogurt..."

Mebbe ... but they do produce a fine steak: mine was superb – butter-tender, and packed with a deep and layered flavour. The fries, I'm guessing, were done in dripping, but really were not crispy enough. Anthony's rigatoni looked terrific – and, apparently, it was: "lovely ... a high note of pesto ... wonderful". He also enjoyed

creamed spinach, and I had a vast bowl of steak mushrooms which were obscenely meaty (and that's a good thing). Anthony has a lot of truck with intellectuals of the left – such as our own dear and lamented Michael Foot. "I was writing about Hazlitt – one of Michael's heroes – and he gave to me all of his research. Wonderfully kind man." And so what of the future, ay...? "I would like to do an intellectual history of the 17th century ... a book on modern warfare ... the history of philosophy. Not just western, as Russell did, but Chinese and Indian as well. Books are queuing up to be written..."

And on my way home, I put to myself the very same question: so what of the future, ay...? And I decided that, well ... you know ... meals are queuing up to be eaten. Scoff and let scoff: that's my philosophy.

Postscript: And I didn't mention hair, even once.

■ Professor AC Grayling gives a talk entitled "*Friendship Among Friends*", drawing on his new book, at the London Jewish Cultural Centre on December 9 as part of the ongoing Hampstead and Highgate Literary Festival. He evokes the rich traditions of friendship in literature, culture, art and philosophy from Achilles and Patroclus to Huck Finn and Jim. The event runs 8-9pm at Ivy House, North End Road NW11. www.hamhighlitfest.com 020 8 5117900.

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