



Perfect for festive tables

Before I head to every high street in Ham&Highland for last-minute recommendations to grace festive tables, here are two wines which reward the longer journey to find them very generously indeed.

The first is a Loire sauvignon blanc, Touraine Les Sauterelles 2012, Domaine de Pierre, which has all the quality and character of much pricier bottles. Grower Lionel Gosseume takes exemplary care in vineyard and cellar, and the resulting wine is fragrant, densely elegant on the palate with superb fruit, long and fresh – simply a pleasure to drink and with enough body to partner the turkey for those who prefer white. It's £9.95 at Lea & Sandeman (Chelsea, Kensington, Barnes, Chiswick – order at www.leadandsandeman.co.uk by 8pm on Saturday for delivery before December 25).



■ Vines in the southern Rhône valley, source of great seasonal red wines

Temptations

It's hard to find a better seasonal red than Notre Dame de Cellettes 2011, Domaine Sainte Anne, Côtes du Rhône Villages, smoky and savoury on the nose, bursting with herb-scented fruit, pure, rich, concentrated yet balanced and fresh. Buy a case now, and the leftovers will be even better in 2014 and 2015. The seller is Haynes Hanson & Clark, Elystan Street, Chelsea (www.hhandc.co.uk), the price £14.85 (case £160.25).

You don't need to stop with these two wines, though – both merchants have many more temptations.

Local specialists are equally worth visiting – Jeroboams, The Winery (amazing that a tiny shop in Maida Vale has the UK's best range of dry German rieslings), Theatre of Wine, Nicolas, Moreno: all have great selections

– and staff will describe them far better than I can. But from the near-infinite choice on country-wide shelves, here are some recent pleasures. If the differing numbers of wines per seller seems unfair, it simply reflects what I've been able to taste.

Starting at Majestic (prices apply for two bottles or more): essence of apple-rich-yet-crisp chenin blanc in Domaine des Aubuisières 2012 vouvray, just off dry and a perfect aperitif; pretty, aromatic, serious for the price Gavi 2012, La Toledana (£8); great value, classic red-fruited Louis Latour Bourgogne Pinot Noir 2012 (£11) and smart New Zealand alternative pinot, richer but still true to the variety without overwhelming oak, Craggy Range Te Muna Road Vineyard 2011 (£18); two Rhône Valley stars: from the north, wonderfully scented syrah Crozes

Hermitage Petite Ruche 2011, Chapoutier (£14, selected stores), and, to the south, dense, stylish Domaine Grosset Cairanne 2012, Côtes du Rhône Villages (£12), aromatic, herb-fruited La Grange des Combes 2011, St-Chinian-Roquebrun (£10); and two excellent wines for their prices from fashionable Ribera del Duero, Montecastrillo 2011 (£8) and Torremilanos Crianza 2009 (£16); all the fine new Pedro's Almacenista sherries – if you buy only one, choose the oloroso (£12); and far-more-tempting-than-sauternes Cloudy Bay late harvest riesling 2007 (£16 half-bottle).

Fragrant

Marks & Spencer: Saint Mont 2012 (£8), crunchy, aromatic white from Gascony; attractive modern-style Perez Burton Rioja 2011 (£10); great value post-dinner Martinez Marsala Superiore Riserva Dolce (£6.50) and very special Dry Old Amontillado sherry (£7.50 half bottle); also, look out for any of M&S's unusual and interesting eastern Mediterranean wines available in your local store.

Morrisons: Specially Selected Pic St Loup 2011 (£9), herby-fruited red.

Oddbins: Manz Platónico, mouthfillingly rich and warming red blend from Portugal (£10).

Sainsbury's: Grande Réserve Bergerac 2012 (£9), where semillon fragrantly rounds out the sauvignon blanc.

Waitrose: classic syrah in Jean-Luc Colombo Les Gravières Crozes-Hermitage (£10.50); Ibéricos Crianza 2010, the Torres family's modern, fresh, well-priced rioja (£10.50), also the sweet temptation of Torres Floralis, deep gold, unctuous yet uncloying moscatel (£7.40).

Finally, a thoroughly enjoyable white wine for a toast – to itself: Torres Viña Sol is 50 years old, but fresher than ever (widely available, including Majestic, £6, Waitrose, £6.70).

restaurants of the year

The best and the worst of eateries reviewed in 2013

And so – in the immortal, if platitudinous, words of the blessed St John of Lennon – this is Christmas ... and what have you done? With another year over: Well I can tell you what I've done, matey: eat. And write. And eat. And write. And eat even more. Even the odd drink. Is it any way for a grown man to be spending every waking moment? Well – better than some, I suppose. And so come this oh-so-special time of year (and here is no Clever Dick tongue-in-cheek and cynical throwaway: I actually really do

love Christmas, always have) all of our minds inevitably turn to yet more eating still ... not to mention the booze. But have you now got everything else safely and neatly out of the way? Sent the charity cards in order to bestow upon you an inner glow? Trebled the expenditure by means of affixing stamps? Or have you sent a round robin email, extolling your triumphs and keeping very quiet about all that secret horror? Maybe tacking on that this year instead of lining the pockets of greedy retailers you have decided to make a donation to a charity of your choice. And did you actually



■ Joseph with reader Leslie Malnick, who won a meal out to celebrate our critic's 200th review, at One Blenheim Terrace
Picture: Nigel Sutton

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■ Joseph Connolly with fellow novelist Howard Jacobson at The Wells in Hampstead, which came joint top with nine stars
Picture: Nigel Sutton

remember to do that little thing? Or, because you are just so frantic – absolutely up to your eyes, darling! – has it somehow slipped your mind?

'Tempting but expensive'

Bought all the presents? Kept the receipts, having learned from last time? Pacing yourself on the drinks and party front? Or thinking oh God to hell with it: it's Christmas, right? And what of the Big Day itself? Ordered the turkey? Waitrose has been urging us to do this since about June, when the bloody thing was an egg. Or will you go to a hotel or restaurant? Sometimes tempting, always ruinously expensive. I myself shall be at home, as ever: I will have had my fill of restaurants ... because that is what I do. And not just for the sake of this column (although that alone chalks up 50 a year) but also in order to keep up with old favourites, while maintaining the essential warmth of friendships.

So where have I been ...? Well here it is: another raft of restaurants ... let's see how much I can remember of them. I actually appear to have eaten rather well: solely in terms of food (omitting the vital elements of service and the feeling – though please do consult the full reviews, all of which are viewable on my fab and newsy website) I see that 30 scored seven stars or above. What can this mean? Am I over generous in my markings? Was I merely fortunate? Or are we these days just neck-high in super places? Well ... I do try to find a decent restaurant: despite what some of you appear to imagine, I have never sought out a dump in order to suffer atrocious food and service in order to serve up the experience for your undoubted pleasure (although, as you know, it does occasionally happen ...).

So at the very top of the heap, with nine stars apiece, we have BALTHAZAR – a terrific new

brasserie in Covent Garden, and a credible simulacrum of its New York namesake – and, much closer to home, THE WELLS in Hampstead Village. Run by Beth Coventry (sister of the esteemed *Evening Standard* restaurant critic Fay Maschler) here is currently the best place to eat in Hampstead. And with eight stars ... there were loads ... but that doesn't, of course, render them all equal. The best of them, in terms of professional chéfdom and surroundings, were MICHAEL NADRA in Primrose Hill, AUBAINE in Hampstead, GRAIN STORE in King's Cross (the Bruno Loubet place where vegetables are to the fore, meat and fish secondary), CHRISTOPHER'S (very superior American in Covent Garden), SALT YARD in Goodge Street (where excellent Spanish tapas are combined with Italian variations) and – maybe surprisingly – ZEST, in the new JW3 centre on Finchley Road: rather joyous,

yet very professional. The oddly named 28:50 in Marylebone is also up there and a dream if you are into unusual wines. There were other eight star places that are particularly good at the less ambitious thing they are attempting: THE FOUNDRY in Camden Town, BISTRO LAZ and THE FLASK, both in Highgate, GREENBERRY CAFÉ – a very cool and popular joint in Primrose Hill – and LA PROVENCE, in Heath Street. I also gave eight stars to the traditional chippie THE GOLDEN HIND in Marylebone – but only for the fish itself: the rest rates only four. If you want a burger, then BYRON is your man: they are all over London, but the one I reviewed is in the O2 Centre. I also gave eight stars to PENKS in Queen's Park ... though since then it has evolved into CALDO, to which I awarded only seven.

'Perfectly dreadful'

And talking of seven stars ... there was ONE BLENHEIM TERRACE in NW8, where an unfeasibly fortunate reader, Leslie Malnick, bagged the prize of lunching with me in order to celebrate my 200th review, way back in February. Also QUEST, a new one in Hampstead, PLUM + SPILT MILK and THE PARCEL YARD, both in King's Cross, as well as THE STAG near South End Green, BISTRO AIX in Crouch End, the REFORM SOCIAL & GRILL in Marylebone, the very successfully revamped GEORGE in Belsize and the slightly weird CAPOEIRA, opposite John Barnes: by no means a glam place, but rather good at Brazilian lumps of meat. Then there was LEMONIA – a much-loved institution in Primrose Hill where I had never before been (now seven stars is by no means bad, but I had been led to expect more).

Next comes a clutch of six stars. How good is 60 per cent in an exam ...? Probably not. So: the rather lowering Jewish restaurant REUBENS in Baker Street, the trendy but disappointing FISH & CHIP SHOP in Islington, the so-so Italian GETTI in Marylebone, the equally so-so pub in Dartmouth

Park, LORD PALMERSTON, and THE ALICE HOUSE in West Hampstead. Then there was the fairly crazy TARA TIRI in Swiss Cottage – an all-you-can-eat mish-mash – and the pious though more or less idiotic NATURAL KITCHEN in Marylebone.

We shall canter through the five stars, because I doubt you'll be bothered with them: CAFE ALSO in Temple Fortune, TOMMI'S BURGER JOINT in Marylebone (unless you are 15, or deficient in some other way), ROSSOPOMODORO in Camden Town (surrounded by better places), and a couple in Belsize Park: JAMON JAMON (Spanish, obviously) and CHIMICHANGA (Mexican, I'm afraid). Shall we descend yet lower ...? Not too many: a pizza thing in Hampstead, L'ANTICA, Covent Garden's LE GARRICK (it thinks it's MON PLAISIR: it thinks wrong) and the pretty hopeless CAFE ROUGE in Hampstead (as everywhere else). Just three stars for them ... while RICHOUX in St John's Wood comes in at two: perfectly dreadful.

Now next year is going to be a little bit special. In February, to chime in with five years of having been your reviewer, I am publishing a book called *The A-Z of Eating Out* – and, believe it or not, there has never before been a book on the subject. In order to make the *Ham&High* and all you readers a part of this thing, I shall be announcing a competition: someone will win lunch with me somewhere rather fab, and books will be up for grabs. Now how utterly thrilling is that ...?! Can you wait ...?! I rather suspect not. But in the merry meantime ... I wish all of you the very happiest and most indulgent of Christmases: may your bells forever jingle.

■ All the reviews referred to above may be read in full on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk. All Joseph Connolly's 11 novels are now available on Kindle and in paperback. You may fill your stockings with them, if said stockings are not already taken up with your legs.

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