



# Paying homage to syrah

One of the pleasures of wine writing is virtual journeying. I'd loved to have spent a fortnight last summer meandering through France's Rhône Valley from source to sea, but that was not to be. Over recent weeks, however, I have made most of that journey, simply through bottle and glass.

As a result, this column is largely a homage to a single red grape. Syrah is the great grape of the northern Rhône, showing the quintessence of its style when tested to survival limits on those steep, stony slopes. The appellations are evocative, the wines generally splendid: Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage at the very top, Cornas, Crozes-Hermitage, Saint-Joseph offering delights more approachable in price.

Further south, as the valley widens, so does the choice of grapes, with grenache frequently supplanting syrah – though most often as the main component in blends in which syrah is still crucial. Plenty of these southern wines are ready to enjoy younger than those of the north, but offer a similar flavour of place. Here huge flat pebbles – “galettes” – are the geological curiosity, and again the names are as characterful as the wines. Surely no wine-lover could have invented Vinsobres, but in no way is it a low-alcohol wine, more a sturdy expression of sun-drenched fruit.

## Tempting

While some Rhône wines are (often justifiably) expensive, all along the valley there is a tempting quality-for-price ratio, and as the weather is rather more reliable than in fashionable vineyard areas elsewhere in France vintage variation can be less of an issue. That said, 2009 to 2012, the main vintages on sale



■ Saint-Joseph vineyards above the Rhône ©: Christophe Grilhé, Inter Rhône

now, were all particularly fine years for the Rhône.

Two tastings in particular, one large and wine-ranging, the other small and specific, prompted me to write this column. Majestic's winter line-up for wine writers to sample included two Rhône highlights. From the north comes Chapoutier Crozes-Hermitage Petite Ruche 2011, £14 (there's currently 20 per cent off all Rhône wines if you buy two bottles, and these are the reduced prices), a pure and fragrant combination of syrah's violet floral character and its smoky, meaty edge, with lingering fruit and fresh on the finish – I described it as a “bacon sarnie” wine, but there's so much more food-matching potential.

The southern star is Domaine Grosset Cairanne 2012, £12 (Cairanne is one of the villages – as is Vinsobres – which have the right to put their own names rather than simply Côtes du Rhône Villages on the label), a wine of dense dark fruit, elegant tannins and serious ripeness unspoiled by any hint of stickiness. Majestic has plenty more Rhône delectations, including some top bottles at the fine wine store in St John's Wood and good syrah from elsewhere.

Haynes, Hanson & Clark in Chelsea ([www.hhandc.co.uk](http://www.hhandc.co.uk)) offers extremely fine wines from two other southern villages: Rasteau Labartals 2011, Domaine des Coteaux des Travers, £14.20, fifty-fifty syrah and carignan, seriously rich and stylish, and grenache-dominated Gigondas L'Olivia 2011, Bertrand and Guillaume Gonnet, £17.20, big but finely fruited.

Topping these, though are a truly classic syrah, Domaine du Colombier Crozes-Hermitage 2010, £17.25, wonderfully fragrant, pure and long; the floral, elegant Domaine Jean-Claude Marsanne Saint-Joseph 2010, £20.60; and a treat to keep, Domaine Niero Côte-Rôtie 2010, £38.40. On a budget? Try a wine I've yet to sample: Saint-Joseph grower Guy Farge's Bouquet de Syrah 2012, vin de pays de l'Ardèche, £12.50, which seduced Telegraph wine writer Victoria Moore.

Next week there will be more of the wines which made my virtual journey memorable. But don't wait. Choose your price bracket, talk to a friendly merchant (any independent worth its salt will have some excellent choices, as will serious supermarkets) and set off on your own exploration.

# A visit to city's oldest eatery, unchanged by passage of time

Established in 1798, it remains the peak of Englishness with traditions strictly adhered to

W e are held in the grip of a chill and raw January ... so let's go somewhere that counters the winter with warmth and a sort of eternal festive wonder, yes? Now I sometimes am invited to the openings of various new restaurants, but confess to having missed whatever bash they might have thrown in order to celebrate the very first night of Rules in Covent Garden, largely because it happened, you see, some time in 1798, and that predates even me. For this venerable establishment carries the distinction of being London's oldest restaurant (as distinct from coffee house or gin joint) – and, very remarkably, during the intervening 215 years, Rules has been in the hands of just three families, and it remains independently owned. On the eve of the First World War, Charles Rule – a direct descendent, and proof if you need it that the restaurant's name should rightfully bear an apostrophe, but doesn't – did a rather curious thing. Having visited Paris and

taken a shine to the restaurant Alhambra, he discovered that it was owned by a fellow Englishman called Tom Bell, who in turn was a great admirer of Rules. So they swapped. Just – as Tommy Cooper, had he been around, might so very easily have said – like that. And so things stood until 1984, when Bell's daughter sold Rules to a chap called John Mayhew, who, 30 years on, still is the gov'nor. The restaurant caters to just 90 covers, so it is rather impressive to learn that they employ an identical number of staff. Which is reflected in the prices, of course ... but before we become rather boring and accountancy about all that side of things, let us just marvel at its timeless beauty.

## Wonderfully inviting

For here is a place that has never changed. I do not have to tell you how good and rare a thing that is ... and foreign tourists (particularly Americans) simply can't get enough of it. Easy to see why: the exterior in Maiden Lane is burgundy and gold, and a fellow in a long brass-buttoned coat tips his top hat and ushers you in: so

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## Joseph Connolly at Rules



■ Joseph at Rules in Covent Garden

far, so just like a Disney vision of Old London Town – a vision that is undimmed by the quite dazzling interior. Here is a traditional and wonderfully inviting space that is panelled, coffered, red-carpeted,

leather and velvet banquetted and parchment-shaded chandeliered to within an inch of its being. A smartly turned out fellow standing at a lectern smiles and says “Welcome to Rules”, and

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a smattering of similarly natty minions cluster about him to echo the sentiment. You either go for all this, or you don't – and very many do: the place seems always to be full of a mixture of dark-suited gentlemen who adore the manly and old-fashioned Englishness of the food, parties from the suburbs celebrating Gran's birthday and said tourists who largely seemed baffled by the menu, but stoically overcome it in order to be able to take selfies amid this opulent oh-so-Briddish glory, while maybe wishing only that a Coldstream guardsman might come to attention next to a red telephone box, as a Routemaster is gliding sedately past the gold-blocked window.

If it's privacy you're after, you might want to book a booth or a corner, as other tables can be a bit too packed-in – but wherever you sit, still you may feast upon the glittering mirrors, methuselahs and melchioris of champagne, stag masks and stuffed birds: not just game, but raptors too. And then, of course, you can feast upon the grub. The menu itself is an oversized piece of card – rather disappointing, because in a place like this you really want a red leather ledger – but mercifully the waiters no longer tap your order into a “hand-held device” as they did a few years ago: burgundy-jowled regulars vehemently objected and so they were binned (the devices, not the regulars).

The food is utterly, thoroughly

English, relying upon fine ingredients and simple cooking. At a price. Rules is famous, for instance, for its beef ... but roast rib is available only for two people (always maddening, that) at £34.95 ... each. Add on sides, all at £4.50, and you're looking at a serious outcome. Particularly so when you see that starters can climb above £15, and most of the wines are north of £50 (often considerably so). So we thought we wouldn't kick off with a glass of house champagne apiece (thereby at a stroke slashing the eventual bill by £34) but ordered a bottle of young claret, Le Pey, at roughly the same price – I feeling quite giddy with delight at having managed to pull off so economical a coup. Two blokes at the next table were telling the waiter (as if the waiter gave a damn) that they were in the “wine trade”. They each had a pint of Black Velvet (Guinness and champagne) in a silver tankard.

### Replete and content

Anyway: for my wife, a starter of Dorset crab salad in curried mayonnaise with fennel and apple, while I went for the classic potted shrimps – pricey (£13.95), dense and meaty, but fridge-cold. Silly, really: a place such as this can be confident of shifting quite a few potted shrimps over a lunchtime session, so why not take them out early? My wife thought the crab – largely white meat – “wonderful ... and the level of currying is subtle, just right. Fresh bean shoots, thin crunchy apple ... lovely”. For mains, she was eager for the steak and kidney pie, and I was having a 28-day aged Cumbrian sirloin with chips and Bearnaise sauce. Also sides of roast potatoes and cabbage (“buttered greens”). The two blokes in the “wine trade” had cruised into a fine bottle of Chablis.

The steak and kidney came as a proud and golden coronet – tender meat, packed with kidney, and a little boat of good gravy to render the whole thing fine and sinfully yummy. My sirloin was large and thick, so not so very dissimilar to the two blokes in the “wine trade” who now were scything their way

through a decanter of gorgeous claret that was listed at £130. A very fine sirloin, by the way – cooked to a perfect medium rare, with a decent sauce and real and proper English chips that transcended mere “fat”, soaring to the level of clinically obese (and were all the better for that). But it was with profound and aching regret that my wife then surveyed the list of English puddings: all the proper thing, any one of them capable of adding a hundredweight to your circumference without batting an eyelid. But alas, the steak and kidney had done for her ... so just fresh mint tea, and a couple of goeey and excellent complimentary chox. So, following a visit to the upstairs loo (where it says on the staircase “Please keep one hand free to hold on to the banisters” – and the Lord alone knows what they imagine you might conceivably be up to with the other one) we toddled away, perfectly replete and content – regretting only, perhaps, that we were unable to linger to witness the two blokes in the “wine trade” wading into copious port and possibly falling flat upon their big pink faces.

So there you have it: if it is certain grandeur you are after, and stolid English tradition, well then Rules in Covent Garden still very much, um ... rules.

■ Joseph Connolly's eleven novels are available on Kindle and in paperback. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

### FACTFILE

#### ■ RULES

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