



More reds of the Rhône

Liz continues her virtual journey through the famous French region

Promise kept: we're still in the Rhône Valley, voyaging from delight to delight.

Let me introduce you first to one of the young generation of winemakers, Laure Colombo. Her father, Jean-Luc, has been a determining influence in boosting the reputation of Cornas, one of the northern, syrah-dominated crus, and Laure shares his vinous passion.

More than that, though, the Colombo family is ensuring that the kind of journey described this week and last is accessible to many wine lovers. OK, a six-Rhône-wine lunch doesn't feature regularly in most diaries, but the one I was treated to on Laure's most recent visit to London very much made the point about the broad scope of the family's wines – and, as ever, emphasised that wine delivers its greatest pleasure alongside food.

I'll skip over the whites, nice as they are (fresh, floral yet serious Clairette-based Les Abeilles Côtes du Rhône blanc 2012, rrp £10, Islington Wine, www.cellarviewwines.com; and appealing, aromatic viognier/roussanne blend La Redonne 2012, £13, Waitrose) and continue the red theme. Les Abeilles rouge 2011, rrp £10, Islington Wine, www.cellarviewwines.com) is the wine Laure chooses for simple enjoyment – although with scents of herbs and dark fruits, soft concentration and a touch of spice it's exactly what Côtes du Rhône should be but isn't always.

Bigger pleasures come with the pure syrah northern wines: Saint-Joseph Les Lauves 2009 (rrp £21, <http://dickenshousewine.co.uk>, www.robersonwine.com)



■ Laure Colombo in the vineyard

delicately scented, a splendid companion to chargrilled venison; Cornas Terre Brûlées 2010 (£35, www.waitrosedirect.com), where grapes from vines up to 60 years old from 20 different plots are nurtured into a soft, smooth and aromatic nectar; and the elegant, rich intensity of Cornas Les Ruchets 2010 (£60, Berry Bros), from the first vineyard Jean-Luc bought when he came to the Rhône from Marseille in the mid-1980s and decided to make wine to match his mother's fine cooking.

Many more growers, however, have been on my itinerary, making wines evoking the special character of the Rhône Valley. Starting in the north, my smartest encounter was with Saint-Joseph L'Olivaie 2010 from the famed Coursodon estate (£33, Berry Bros), still an infant but with wonderful promise. There are lower-priced pleasures also at Berry Bros, including a Saint-Joseph in all but name – the all-syrah-things-nice Côtes du Rhône Domaine Georges Vernay

Sainte-Agathe 2011 (£20), scented, silky, concentrated yet only 12.5 per cent alcohol.

Then came three great examples of Crozes-Hermitage, largest of the crus: dark, serious and complex Les Hautes Granites 2010 J Boutin (£17.75, Oddbins); soft, dense, elegant Cuvée Albéric Bouvet 2010 Gilles Robin (£24, Lea & Sandeman); classic, well-priced Cave de Clairmont 2009 (£12, www.tanners-wines.co.uk).

From further south, I encountered two of those delightfully named vinsobres: Cellier des Dauphins 2011, rounded and ripe (£10.50, Asda), though eclipsed by Domaine de l'Ancienne Ecole 2011, drier and beautifully balanced (buy direct from France on www.mon-vigneron.com, 66 euros for six plus 15 euros delivery). There is plenty of pleasure just off the main valley, too – for example the syrah-rich Vidal Fleury Ventoux 2012 (£8.75, Oddbins).

Starting point

Every serious wine seller will offer more tempting bottles, but here are two merchants who choose wisely. At the Wine Society, Domaine Jaume is a good-value starting point (from £6.75) in a range which soars on and up – watch out for the imminent 2012 vintage offer; at Stone, Vine & Sun (www.stonevine.co.uk) the Pleasures of the Rhône mixed case (£183) is a treat.

Finally, just a taste of syrah – the grape which prompted this pair of columns – from one wine nation beyond France. Syrah has huge potential in Chile: the smooth, dense and long Errazuriz Max Reserva 2011, from Aconcagua Valley's volcanic soils (rrp £14, www.winedirect.co.uk, www.cambridgewine.com), is one rich proof.

restaurant of the week

Dull steakhouse provides plenty to beef about

When a 'rare' fillet turned out to be medium, we knew we were being given a raw deal

Occasionally I get to thinking that eating in St John's Wood can't solely be about Oslo Court, but it truly does seem so. Extraordinary how few and lacklustre the restaurants are in NW8 ... but I keep on trying – and this time it was the turn of Rotisserie, just off the High Street. The exterior is grey – well of course it is grey: did you not know that a law was recently passed in this country whereby all aspirant restaurants simply must be painted grey? Yes OK – but you don't expect grey glass as well: the place looked not just doomy, but decidedly shut. Is it shut...? Is it...? Better find out, shall I...? And at that point, a little homily from Hercule Poirot occurred to me: "It is the brain, the little grey cells, on which one must rely. One must seek the truth within – not without." Wise, or what? So I stopped just standing on the pavement and pushed the door ... and lo! It swung open! Now I was

no longer to be without – for I had found the truth within!

Metallic art

It's a longish, L-shaped space; some of the floor is oak, the rest a creamy travertine. Walls are boring with silly bits of forgettable metallic art, and within the low ceilings are intermittent things that assail you: if you want to bypass the very hot blast from the heaters, you sure ain't going to be dodging the whine and popping of the junk on the speakers. The place was almost empty on a Tuesday lunchtime, so I let rip the Michael Winner in me and sat at a table set for five. And I had but begun to study the menu and wine list (curious affairs – like medieval ledgers inset with hammered copper panels, what can I tell you?) when my guest arrived: Geoffrey Wansell – broadcaster, esteemed reviewer of crime fiction for the Daily Mail, and author of many books, the latest of which is called ... guess what? Poirot and Me. I

“The steak knives that were laid before us were decidedly offensive weapons: of such a scale and fiendish toothiness that I feared we might be in a 'Kill Your Own Cow' place



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Joseph Connolly at Rotisserie



Picture: Polly Hancock

■ Joseph with guest Geoffrey Wansell at Rotisserie in St John's Wood

know: spooky, ay? It's actually meant to have been written jointly with David Suchet (the "Me" of the title), but we all know what that means. And before I got to chatting about Wansell, Suchet, Poirot, life, the universe and everything, I had to come clean about my attitude to detective fiction: with the exception of Holmes, I can't be doing with it. My problems are two-fold: in the case of the more traditional whodunit – Agatha Christie, say – I just couldn't give a bugger whodunit. Some cove you have never heard of is found dead in chapter one: well excuse me for not giving a fig. And in the more modern sort of crime thriller, one is subjected to buckets of sadism and gore, and that's no good to me

at all: it disturbs my lunch, and we can't have that.

Now all that is out in the open, we can settle to grub. The menu is more or less as you would expect from a place called Rotisserie: wall-to-wall bloke food, with the sole sop to veggies being butternut and goat's cheese salad. Were it not for goat's cheese, I often think that vegetarians could well expel a collective sigh of hunger and despair, before all dropping down dead on the floor. The menu states that the place is "famous for our steaks" – though famous quite where and among whom it would be hard to say, Rotisserie not generally being upon the tongues of trendy international foodies. But Geoffrey and I thought it

would be churlish not to take them at their word – so: a fillet for my guest, he specifying that it should be "as rare as rare can be", with a beef tomato and onion salad. I was going for the sirloin, medium rare, with frites. There is a two-course set lunch at £18.95 – a pretty good deal, as one of the 10 mains on offer is a ribeye, which goes for £17.95 on the carte. For a starter, Geoffrey was having shrimp tempura, and I went for whitebait, with a lemon aioli. Clearly they were using the term "shrimp" in its American sense, because they were actually pretty big prawns – and so very scaldingly hot that Geoffrey very nearly spontaneously combusted. "Very tasty, though," he said. "Fresh,

light, subtle batter ... oh look: there's a random chip in here..." My whitebait were on the large side, inadequately floured and not remotely crispy enough: there is something intrinsically disgusting about devouring whole little fish if they are not entirely crunchy.

You might recall that towards the end of last year, due to the TV screening of the very final episode, you could not move for Poirot. And Suchet. Or are they interchangeable? Could they be one and the same person...? "There are certainly elements of Poirot in Suchet," says Geoffrey – who has known him for 25 years. "He is tidy, professional, devoted to detail. There is too a moral commitment and conviction." When they first met, Geoffrey was producing a film called *When the Whales Came* starring Paul Scofield and Helen Mirren, with a smaller part for Ronald Pickup – who couldn't make it, so it went to Suchet. "He had already been offered Poirot, but wasn't sure. I said it was the chance of a lifetime. His brother John, the newsreader, said he'd be mad to take it. He took it."

Drilling noises

The steak knives that were laid before us were decidedly offensive weapons: of such a scale and fiendish toothiness that I feared we might be in a "Kill Your Own Cow" place. And just as the starters were served, appalling drilling noises attacked us from somewhere close behind. God – if it was drilling noises I was after, I would have stayed in Hampstead, where daily the builders in every single street (and particularly my own) are driving me mental. Geoffrey's fillet was a thick and decent piece of meat ... but was it "as rare as rare can be"...? A million miles away: medium, I'd say. He couldn't be bothered to send it back. Nor could I: my "medium rare" sirloin was medium to well. Useless, really – in a place that imagines that it is "famous" for its steaks. Bearnaise pretty good, frites flabby ... and the drilling, the drilling, it went on and on. Was there a bank next door? Were they maybe breaking in?

Just before Christmas, Wansell and Suchet formed a double act, packing out provincial theatres with a sort of Poirot Q&A. "One person asked an excellent question," Geoffrey recalled. "He asked what would Poirot think of Suchet? David assumed the Belgian voice and said, 'Monsieur Suchet is ... acceptable. Though I ... I am brilliant'." And the punters were fascinated by Suchet's admission that in order to perfect the little walk, he clutched a coin in his bottom – this recalling to me, at least, Marilyn telling us that she shortened one of her stilettoes in order to achieve that magical wiggle. Geoffrey said to the waiter: "A large espresso, please," and the waiter said: "Large or small?" and Geoffrey said: "Large..." and the waiter said: "Do you want milk in it?" and Geoffrey said: "No..." It's a very dull and dozy place really, Rotisserie: at the very best just about OK. So much so that I can't think of any sort of summing up, so I'm going to leave it to Poirot: "There is in the hay a needle, and among the sleeping dogs there is one on whom I shall put my foot, and by shooting the arrows in the air, one will come down and hit a glass house!"

Says it all, really

■ All Joseph Connolly's 11 novels, including the latest, *England's Lane*, are now available in Kindle and paperback (Quercus). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **ROTISSERIE**
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- Open Monday 5.30-10.30pm,
Tuesday-Saturday noon-10.30pm,
Sunday noon-9.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
(and zero, if there's drilling)
- Cost: More than it should be.
Our bill for two courses and two glasses of wine was near £100.



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