



Sweet smell of success

Family-run business in Perpignan which was founded in 1895

Sadly at this time of year there are no direct flights from London to the destination I'd love to recommend as a memorable place to celebrate Valentine's Day. But in the hope that you're ready to change planes in Paris, or delay the romantic moment until April, I'm going to tell you about La Table d'Aimé. Why this week rather than next? To give you time to find here some of the wines you might drink there, for a sneak preview of the experience.

Aimé has nothing to do with the French verb for love. Aimé Cazes was the son of the man who in 1895 founded the wine business which still involves the Cazes family, and La Table d'Aimé is the restaurant named in his honour at the estate headquarters on the edge of Perpignan, barely 10 minutes drive from the airport which serves France's Roussillon coastline and hilly hinterland.

The restaurant isn't a fancy, bank-breaking place. It serves lovely local, mainly organic, food, carefully prepared and partnered by an excellent-value list of Cazes wines. But what makes it special is the smell. Alongside the restaurant courtyard lie the cellars housing the wines which are the famous legacy of Aimé Cazes – vins doux naturels, sweet wines made by stopping with grape alcohol the normal fermentation of grapes before all their natural sweetness is consumed. When the sun shines, as it does here for 325 days a year, the doors are opened and into diners' nostrils wafts a heady temptation.

Cazes makes four of these special sweet wines, all vintage: pale gold muscat de rivesaltes, red rivesaltes grenat (from red grenache) and amber-hued rivesaltes tuilé (red grenache) and ambré (white grenache). It's a cuvée of the last which is the



■ Lionel Lavail in the Cazes cellars

most prestigious, carrying the name of Aimé Cazes and a wine with an extraordinarily long and delicious life.

Vintages in those centenarian casks in Perpignan go back to the 1930s, their contents gently oxidising and developing increasingly complex flavours. I was privileged to savour the infinite delights of Aimé 1978 as director general Lionel Lavail explained the Cazes philosophy: in essence total commitment to organic and biodynamic growing (it's the largest biodynamic estate in France), to raising the profile of an under-appreciated region, to making wines of fine quality at reasonable prices. "As a vigneron, I don't just sell what's in the glass, but all that is around it," he said.

Cuvée Aimé Cazes 1978 (£80-£105) is stocked by Hedonism Wines in Mayfair, or order online from www.thedrinkshop.com, www.excelwines.co.uk, www.slurp.co.uk (they also sell other Cazes wines, sweet and dry). Buy rivesaltes ambré 2000 (£16) at Prohibition Wines, Muswell Hill; muscat de rivesaltes 2009 (£12) at The Hampstead Butcher & Provi-

dore; Le Canon du Marechal 2012 (£10 approx) dry white and red at Whole Foods Market Kensington; Château de Triniac Côtes du Roussillon Villages (£7, two-plus bottles) at Majestic.

There's something about fine sweet wines which sticks in the memory – and for that reason alone perhaps they're a better choice than fizz for Valentine's celebrations. Vin santo reminds me of holidays in a Tuscan castle (owned, I later discovered, by a wine importer from Camden Town). I can't track down Castello Vicchiomaggio's here, so try Ricassoli Castello di Brolio vin santo del chianti classico 2004 (£24 half-bottle, www.farehamwinecellar.co.uk) – long-lingering essence of dried fruits, orange peel and spice. And monbazillac, temptingly-priced alternative to sauternes, has perhaps the sweetest memory of all as the wine that brought me into wine writing following a delightful visit to Château la Borderie. Sadly, the wines are no longer available here; the best monbazillac I've tasted recently is Château Pech la Calevie 2009 (£12, The Wine Society).

restaurant of the week

I almost missed my cue when kept in the dark

Lunch with a theatre critic ends up being quite a performance for reviewer Joseph

The diverting curtain-raiser to my lunch with Michael Billington, the doyen of theatre critics, was not being able to find the bleeding restaurant. Because it's one of those places with a maddening name – not a number, like 34 or 82, where you have to try to remember what street it is in, but the name of the street itself: Great Queen Street, actually, in Covent Garden ... but of course I had made no note of the number. Anyway, I stumbled across it in the end – tiny sign and very dark grey exterior – but inside, oh good Lord – far, far darker than that. That old phrase 'Stygian gloom' loomed large in my mind, as I was groping my way to a table. I didn't think they did all that any more in bistros – make it so black that people are holding the menu up close to their nose: one or two were using the glow of their Smartphones to make any sense of it.

And suddenly, Michael was sitting opposite me, eager for

sustenance (pretty sure it was him, anyway – rather hard to tell amid the enveloping peasouper). And so first: the Prologue: Michael's lifelong love of theatre started at Oxford, where he was a member of the Dramatic Society. He quickly decided he wanted to be a critic: "I saw that film *All About Eve*, where George Sanders is this very well dressed and suave theatre critic who knows absolutely everyone and is forever being cruelly witty and sipping champagne with his assistant, who is Marilyn Monroe. I thought ... yes: that will do me". He started off at the *Liverpool Post* in the early 1960s when everyone told him he just had to get down to the Cavern at lunchtimes to see The Beatles ("I didn't go: you had to queue"). He worked on several papers after that, including *The Times*, before settling at *The Guardian*, where he has been reviewing plays for 42 years – this making him our longest-standing critic by a comfortable way. He has written many books on such

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ARCHANT

Joseph Connolly at Great Queen Street



■ Joseph and Michael Billington amid the gloom

as the state of British theatre since the war, as well as studies of Peggy Ashcroft, Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourn, in addition to being the official biographer of Harold Pinter, and last year garnering the OBE. None of this would you ever hear from the man himself though, because apart from being quite the most affable and entertaining chap you could ever imagine, he is also extremely modest about his considerable achievements.

As so the stage is set (if not lit), and let us raise the curtain on Act One: the menu, which they might have considered printing in Braille, was full of unusual and

enticing things. We decided on starters of 'crab custard' (a sort of puree on toast) and – for Michael – roast purple carrots, salsify and watercress. As to the mains, he was attracted by devilled partridge, but wanted to know what the accompanying 'migas' was. I, being a professional restaurant critic, hadn't a clue, of course – all too shaming, but there it is. So we summoned the waitress. Turns out it's stale bread. Crumbled – with lard in it, and black pudding ... which Michael thought sounded all right. I was having confit of duck leg with sticky shallots and Jerusalem artichoke. Michael is out at least three nights a

week, seeing new plays ... and I expressed amazement that there could actually be that many openings. "There are far more – my assistants see loads. Not all in the West End, of course. But apart from that, I lead a monastic life". For the record, he actually lives not within a closed order, but with his wife in Chiswick. "But it's not like George Sanders. Robert Robinson once described drama critics as the sad little men catching the late bus back to Muswell Hill".

And can it really already be Act Two ...? Our mains had arrived ... but where were Act One's starters ...? The waitress looked mortified ... and then it was my turn to feel

like Idiot of the Year because what with all the argy-bargy about migas ... I had omitted to go so far as to actually order the starters ...! Professional restaurant critic strikes again: I ask you – how is it possible to forget to order the food, for God's sake ...? I do worry. Anyway – Michael was most gracious, and tucked into the partridge. Can't describe the presentation because I couldn't actually see it, obviously – but he said "the meat is superb, very tender ... but there are a lot of competing flavours going on: too much on the plate". The side of greens was fresh and crunchy – and my confit was very good indeed: crisp skin, and plenty of pink and yielding meat. Roseval potatoes are a love-some thing – red, and wonderfully potatoey – and the vegetables were pretty faultless. Cotes de Rhone came in tiny Duralex tumblers, like the little things you put Optrex into.

Tears

And during Act Two – following on from our spectacular non-starters – we talked of Pinter: "I was not always an admirer, says Michael. "In the 1970s, I dismissed *Betrayal* as just another slice of Hampstead adultery. When it won that year's Best Play Award, in his acceptance speech, Pinter said 'I am more surprised by this than anyone. Anyone except ...' – and he scanned the audience during a protracted Pinteresque pause until he found me – '... Michael Billington ...!'. My daughter, who was with me, burst into tears". I too have been at the wrong end of Pinter's ill manners (which always were in stark contrast to those of his ever-charming wife, Lady Antonia Fraser) – but Michael told me that he melted with age and ill-health. "He became very loyal and supportive. Like Osborne, really". And he meant John, not George.

In Act Three, two things happened: puddings (but of course – no starters, remember?) and the arrival of the *Ham & High* photographer. Polly could not believe the level of darkness, so mounted the flash ... and oh my

God ...! Momentarily, it was like the fireworks on New Year's Eve. All around, people were wide-eyed – perfectly startled to discover just who they were having lunch with. The puddings were actually superb: steamed lemon pudding and buttermilk with lemon curd for Michael ("excellent – really, really good") and for me, chocolate fritters with clotted cream: about as black as the restaurant, and actually nearly savoury – pretty fantastic, I have to say.

Michael, like all the best chaps, has no plans to retire: "what would I do in the evenings ...?". And in addition to his enthusiasms for cricket and opera, there are books to be written: currently *The Hundred Greatest Plays*, in which Shakespeare notches up just seven – and, shock horror: *King Lear* isn't one of them ...! Michael actually rates *Henry IV* (parts I and II) as the greatest of all. And so to the Epilogue of espresso (in the same tiny Duralex glasses) and a soup-con of chat about Michael's all-time pin-ups (Catherine Deneuve and Grace Kelly). Then we happily surrendered to being blinded by the light, while stepping back out into the winter sunshine. Curtain.

■ All of Joseph Connolly's eleven novels are now available on Kindle and in paperback. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

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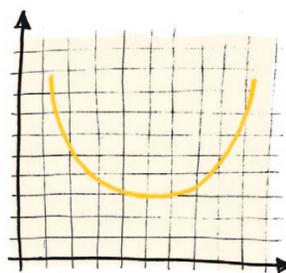
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