



Crowd-pleasers not great

Big-selling brands are not necessarily the best as tasting proves

Not long ago, I came down to earth with a big bump. No, I hadn't toppled over as a result of too much alcohol; I was spitting energetically during a tasting of wines which are among the best liked by the majority of UK wine consumers.

All credit to Wine Australia for offering the wine media the chance to sample 100 wines from its eight top-volume brands here, while posing the challenge "does size matter?" No, size doesn't matter – there are big-brand wines which I'm happy to drink. But, with few exceptions, not these. And I certainly wasn't alone in the room in my opinion.

Privileged

The word that matters in that last sentence is "opinion". The wines on the whole were what you'd expect from companies which aim to make crowd-pleasing liquid that's consistent and problem-free and sold at a fair price (before discounts, most are in the £8-£10 range, which gives everyone from grower to retailer a reasonable return). It's the style which I find difficult to swallow – an ever-prevalent sweetness, a predictability, a lack of any quirkiness which can make the difference between dullness and delight.

And it was true not just of Australia's offerings. There was also a big-brand chardonnay line-up matching Oz against the rest of the world and, a bottle from New Zealand apart, to me the rest were similarly unpalatable.

This is the experienced wine critic in me speaking, and I readily acknowledge that I'm hugely privileged in the variety



■ Father and son winemaking team d'Arry and Chester Osborn, of d'Arenberg, makers of fine, quirky wines

Picture by Kate Elmes

of wine I taste. But wine isn't a staple food, it should be an extra pleasure, and the job of people like me is to encourage wine-drinkers to find that pleasure. I just wish that instead of two or three of these big-brand bottles more people would buy just a single one of what Australia does so well.

That point was made splendidly in the same place on the same day, with a tasting of aromatic whites. Some were blends, some – like the idiosyncratic but serious and want-to-drink Tahbilk marsanne (2010 £10, Jeroboams, The Wine Society) – made from a single grape variety. And they were wines with a past and a future.

There were three vintages of each, going back as far as 2001, and often the older wines shone even more than the currently-available year. Stella Bella Suckfizzle semillon-sauvignon blanc 2005, for example, was delicious – superb style and length with an almost riesling-like acidity on the finish (2011 £14.75, <http://thevinorium.co.uk>); d'Arenberg's The Money Spider roussanne 2004 had an edge of smokiness, a spicy maturity of fruit and so much to think about (2011 £12.25-£12.60, www.hailshamcellars.com, www.slurp.co.uk; The Lane Gathering

sauvignon/semillon 2007 gained extra sophisticated scents and flavours (2010 £21, Corney & Barrow).

Back here in Europe, there's a somewhat similar experience with Les Grands Chais de France, the country's biggest wine producer/negotiant – with those oddly shaped J.P. Chenet bottles. The only one I've tried recently is a chardonnay, which I didn't enjoy. But Les Grands Chais also owns a number of big-name rather than big-brand estates, and again there's so much more pleasure in a single bottle than in several Chenets.

Try, for example, the classy dry chenin blanc La Chapelle 2011 from Château de Fesles in the Loire Valley (£14, Waitrose), or something very much out-of-the-ordinary, Domaine de Savagny Côtes du Jura Tradition (£12, www.templarwines.co.uk). It's not a classic, fino-sherry-like Jura vin jaune, but it is made from the same grape – savagnin – and has salty minerality alongside lemon-and-honey fruit. Certainly the antithesis of a big-brand wine, and very versatile in its food pairing.

NB – want to compare current prices of big (and smaller) brands in supermarkets? Log on to bringabottle.co.uk.

restaurant of the week

Standards of perfection fall at Raymond's

The celebrity chef would have been upset if he'd known about the frosty reception and burnt snails served up at his restaurant

You may have spotted elsewhere in this newspaper that I've just this week published a little squib called *The A-Z of Eating Out* – which might very well have been subtitled "My Life on a Plate", as that is precisely all my existence seems to have become: eat, write and occasionally sleep – and yes, as life sentences go, it is a comparatively mild one. So I thought I would invite to lunch the director of publicity at Thames & Hudson, Rosalie Macfarlane, who is charged with the task of arranging events to promote the book: there's one coming up at Waterstones in Hampstead, actually, on March 4: cancel everything, including trivia such as weddings and funerals, so that you may be sure to be there. Brasserie Blanc was the venue – I had heard enticing

things about the outside terrace with its wondrous views ... so was unsurprised when the day rolled around to find that of course it was one of relentless downpour; this rendering any glimpse at all through misty glass rather grey and disconsolate. But the site of this restaurant is undeniably spectacular, occupying as it does the entire width of the upper floor of the rear of Covent Garden market. You overlook the cobbled square, the flank of the Royal Opera House, the edge of the Transport Museum, and the estimable brasserie Balthazar, where I have enjoyed many jolly lunches and evenings.

Authentic

I like Covent Garden – odd to think that a lot of it is in Camden. The architecture is almost uniformly excellent, yet varied – and although yes of course

“I could not help thinking that it is a very good thing indeed that Raymond is not in fact dead, for otherwise, had he witnessed my reception, he would surely have turned in his grave

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Joseph Connolly at Brasserie Blanc



■ Joseph with Rosalie Macfarlane, director of publicity at Thames & Hudson

Picture: Polly Hancock

it is ridden with tourists, this somehow doesn't spoil the place at all: it remains an authentic part of London. Interesting shops, good restaurants, St Paul's, the wonderful Inigo Jones "actors' church", where I seem to attend rather too many memorial services – and my club is just around the corner, so what more could you ask for, actually? The old covered market itself used to be given over to artisanal shoplets and individual crafts ... and while these sort of linger in the weekday stalls, the chief retail outlets are now rather more Burberry, Chanel and Dior. Penhaligon's is another – and right next to this is Brasserie Blanc. Now being on an upper floor, this means a tall and steep staircase: do not think of attempting to go to Brasserie Blanc unless you are as youthful, spry and perky as myself. The

word "Blanc" is writ large, and the stairs are lined with black-and-white pictures of Raymond himself, looking French. He is a very great chef, of course, as well as affable and a fanatical perfectionist – while Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons is one of Britain's finest restaurants – so I could not help thinking that it is a very good thing indeed that he is not in fact dead, for otherwise, had he witnessed my reception, he would surely have turned in his grave. I say "reception", but of course it was the reverse of that. An unsmiling, even challenging woman subjected me to a snapped-out series of questions regarding my perfectly simple booking, before dismissing me into the hands of someone else. No offer to relieve me of my dripping hat and coat.

The interior is that of a large

conservatory with tall and beautiful arched windows leading out on to the sodden terrace. Inside we have a pale tiled floor, whiteness and paper tablecloths. Coincidentally, Rosalie began her career in publishing in the street just next to where we were sitting, as publicity assistant at Harper & Row. She always knew that something in the arts world was what she wanted, freely acknowledging that four years at St Andrew's reading medieval history did not automatically qualify her for any very obvious opening. Her first author was Diana Kennedy: "she was dubbed the Elizabeth David of Mexican food, and said that England was a hopeless place because you couldn't get avocados, so how can you make guacamole ...?" Rosalie has been publicity director at Thames & Hudson for five years,

and before that held the same position at Little, Brown where she had gone after Macmillan ... and even before that, she was with Macdonald. And do you know whose very first book she publicised there ...? Well do you ...? No – not mine, actually – but Raymond Blanc's ...! Well Lordy: the serendipity of life, eh? "He was," she recalls, "very engaging and passionate ... but polite." (unlike his receptionist here, then).

'Rich and velvety'

And so to grub: there is a very good value set lunch at £14 for two courses, £16.45 for three – with the option of a glass of wine for £2.50 more. We, however, fell headlong into the very varied carte. Rosalie chose Muscat pumpkin and kirsch soup with Gruyere croutons, while I went for something quintessentially Gallic: Burgundian snails. The soup was "very smooth, rich and velvety," she said. "Quite assertive – maybe the kirsch". As she had an afternoon meeting (I never have meetings: face it, who would meet me?) she was cleaving to the straight and narrow: "Do you have elderflower ...?" she asked the very attentive (Polish?) waitress. "We did have – but now we can't find a supplier". Raymond Blanc can find no supplier of elderflower cordial: okay ... so cranberry, then – and I had a glass of house Merlot (all wine is available by bottle or glass, which is excellent). My snails ...? Didn't eat them. Tried one. Couldn't. Disgusting. Burnt, you see. The whole of the garlic butter surface was literally black and bubbling from its horrible zapping: how was this ever allowed to reach the table ...? The snails themselves were not in the shell (tinned, then) tiny, pappy and bitter: the worst escargots I have ever encountered, and burnt to boot. The waitress was very concerned when I told her, and immediately promised that it would not appear on the bill. And it didn't ... but still, though: how was this ever allowed to reach the table ...? Raymond would have been horrified.

The mains, though, were pretty good. Rosalie's grilled Loch Fyne

salmon was well presented, the thick pink fillet in a black square skillet atop a plate, with a small bowl of choron sauce (sort of Bearnaise, with tomato). She enjoyed that – and I liked my half roast free range chicken with "smooth mash", Chantenay carrots and "rich gravy". The chicken was only slightly dry, but tender and flavoursome, the carrots fresh and delicious, the mash not really very smooth, the "rich gravy" decidedly on the impoverished side, rather visibly threadbare. So it was all ... above okay ... but not quite anything more. Rosalie then enjoyed a peppermint tea – rather boringly presented in a china, not glass, pot – which meant that there were no fresh and swirling leaves. And then it was time to go: I fetched my still damp coat and hat from the shelf behind me where I had been forced to wedge them, and glanced at the receptionist. I received in return a completely blank stare. Not Blanc: blank.

Postscript: Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, and several people have asked me where to go. Well you don't. Stay at home. The 14th February is not for restaurants, unless you actively look forward to being royally ripped-off amid a welter of pink and cloying embarrassment.

■ Joseph Connolly's new book is *The A-Z of Eating Out* (Thames & Hudson). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **BRASSERIE BLANC**
35 The Market, WC2
Tel: 020 7379 0666
- Open Mon-Sat noon-11pm. Sun noon-10pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (0 for reception)
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Set lunch £14 for two courses, £16.45 for three. Otherwise, about £95 for three course meal for two with modest wine.

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