



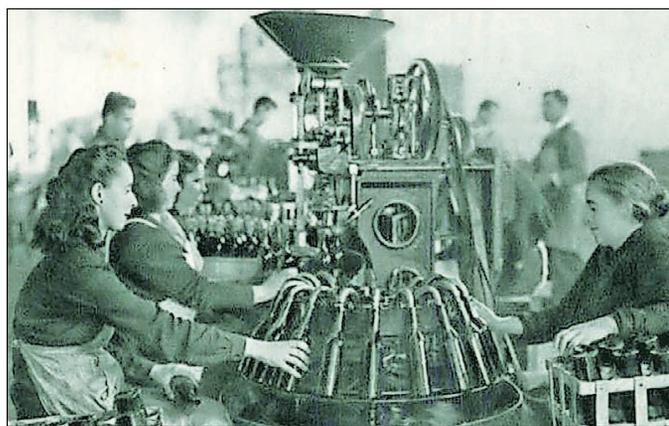
# Never mind the bottles...

**O**ne feature of winery tours which drives wine writers to distraction is the obligatory admiration of the bottling line. The statistics of its capacity and cleanliness might be impressive, and its owners inordinately proud of its capabilities, but once you've seen one modern bottling line you rarely want to see – let alone hear – another.

That is a rather unkind reaction, though. Look back at how bottling was done long ago, and understandably you might query why wine poisoning wasn't as prevalent as food poisoning. Ah, but alcohol does have a bug-killing quality...

On travels through the wine world, I've seen all kinds of bottling lines, descending in size from the goliaths which fill, seal, label and box tens of thousands of bottles an hour to much more rustic affairs which roll up to the winery and rattle through a few hundreds of bottles over a day or more. The best of those mobile lines in my experience appeared as two massive lorries, which within an hour of arrival had been linked up to provide an entirely self-sufficient operation, its four operators clearly knowing their individual roles with hardly a word needed. The only problem was that it was a time of bottle shortage, the only ones available were Chinese and they were too inconsistent in shape for the line to run smoothly.

But look behind the mechanics of wine bottling and lots of other issues emerge. Should wines be bottled at source, where their makers can complete their control over the liquid from grape to glass? Or should wine – especially from distant lands – be imported in bulk and bottled in the country where it is to be drunk, saving on the extra packaging and extra cost of



■ Bottling Gonzalez Byass sherry in the 1920s, when bottling lines were in their infancy

transport in bottle? And what about the weight of the bottle? Should any wine producer, in this time of green awareness, be so profligate as to use those ultra-smart, kilogram-plus fashion icons when something much slimmer performs the task equally well?

## Random selection

I've just been weighing – approximately, on the kitchen scales – a random selection of recently emptied bottles (there would have been a wider survey, but the recycling van has just been round), and there isn't always a correlation between price and weight.

The lightest 75cl bottle came in at 410 grams – a pretty, soft, off-dry Anjou rosé from Famille Bougrier (£7, The Wine Society), whose skinny clear-glass packaging still looks smart. The heaviest was also from the Loire Valley – Château de Fesles La Chapelle Anjou blanc (£14, Waitrose), a bottle from last week's column, hefty at 675 grams but still way below the point at which a lot of posh bottles tip the scales. Completing a Loire trio, L'Arpenté Chinon 2012 (£13,

www.yapp.co.uk), whose classic youthful cabernet franc scents, flavours and crunchy red fruit I'd also much enjoyed, was edging towards the rosé, at 450 grams.

Weight doesn't necessarily equate with price, for the most expensive of this little experiment was the ultra-classy late harvest Hugel gewurztraminer 2007 (£33, The Wine Society), a wine which wonderfully balances indulgent sweetness with acidity, all tasting of roses. Yet its bottle came in the middleweight category, at 550 grams.

Half bottles don't save half the weight. Even the light-feeling-once-empty Edmeades Perli late harvest zinfandel 2006 (£13, www.hailshamcellars.com) – one of the most unusual wines to fill my glass this winter; deep black-purple in colour; complex scents ranging through pencil sharpenings to roast coffee and flavours echoing the scent, with added tannin and a muscular sweetness – weighed in at 300 grams.

Is there a moral here? Surely that the quality of a bottle's contents is far more important than how much that bottle weighs.

## restaurant of the week

# Thumbs up for the new Sicilian on the block

What was once a dingy pub has become a top-quality restaurant with delightful decor

**A** new and proper eating place in NW3 is always a good (and very rare) thing – and although

Ballaro, a Sicilian restaurant, has been open but a couple of months, maybe three, already the buzz has been positive: so off I go, of course. Ballaro – named after the famous food market in Palermo – is on the site of the old Haverstock Arms in between Belsize and England's Lane – and a very sticky and tedious pub that was, whose very Irish landlord would yammer on for hours about how chummy he was with Chris Evans, while surrounded by deeply bored men absorbing alcohol in serious quantity. The only lovely thing about it was the glorious mural on the flanking exterior wall – a colourful rustic scene depicting a horse and cart, and further enlivened by the real-life red

telephone box before it. Not only has this been expunged, but yellow London stock brickwork has been reinstated and made dignified by very smart dummy blind window cases. The phone box is now rather sadly pretty much obliterated by a rather plastic side extension with clear acrylic walls – probably there for the smokers, but anyone actually dining there I think might rather feel themselves to be not just on show, but on sale.

## Cool cream space

The interior is an absolute delight: impossible to believe that in this bright and Mediterranean space there once lurked the murk of a dingy boozier – which, I am reminded, was for a short time rechristened The Havers. This was embarrassing and ridiculous in equal measure as anyone inclined to actually say it would surely have pronounced it like

“My pannacotta was a pretty and glossy tapered cylinder atop a great and wide scarlet smear: it looked as if someone who recently was engaged in unsuccessfully juggling with sabres had been summarily dragged across the plate



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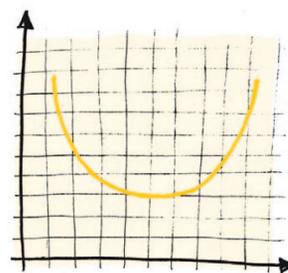
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## Joseph Connolly at Ballaro



■ Joseph with Tony Hillier at Ballaro in Haverstock Hill

Picture: Polly Hancock

the actor Nigel's surname, and not as in the first two syllables of Haverstock, which was surely the misguided intention. Anyway: all gone now – and instead we have a cool cream space very much enhanced by a deep-buttoned bar front and comfortably cubic chairs all in the same apple green leather, extra zing being added by two red bar stools and a purple orchid. No cloths on the tables, but excellent damask napkins and fine stemware – with, on the rear wall, a rather eye-smacking and some might say vainglorious montage of highly coloured photographs of fruit, bread, vegetables and fish overlaid by enormous cartoons of the two chaps whose gaff this is, the larger of the two – in butcher's striped apron and, er ... snorkel and flippers – being Carmelo

Carnevale, the very talented chef who 10 years ago was in charge of the kitchens in Mark Birley's chain of clubs (Annabel's, Mark's Club, Harry's Bar and so on) before drifting to Amici in Soho, and after that a stint as a private chef to a duchess and then an Arab prince. But now his considerable form has fetched up in NW3 – so let's see what he can do then, shall we?

### Legendary local hero

My guest for lunch was a legendary local hero – Tony Hillier, chairman of the estimable Heath & Hampstead Society since 2003, a post he has just now retired from. Although he was born in Finsbury Park, he attended UCS in Frognal, lived in Highgate during his time at Oxford, then Belsize having obtained his first job (at the Bank

of England). After that, and for the past 37 years, came a large house in Downshire Hill ... which he and his wife Sylvia, a successful physiotherapist, only recently sold – and now he is back in Highgate again. So truly a local lad, I think we can agree.

There is a tremendous bargain here in the set lunch – £12.50 for two courses, and the choices (four starters, five mains) looked terrific. We decided, however – while grazing upon the complimentary black and green olives, home-made crispy things and superb marinated artichoke hearts – to go à la carte. So, for Tony, carpaccio with watercress and chicory, followed by tagliolini nero with crab, lemon zest and cherry tomatoes. I was having burrata – a suddenly

very fashionable sort of luscious mozzarella from Puglia – and then home-made spaghetti with a slow-cooked ragout of osso bucco in Nero d'Avola (Sicilian red wine) – of which I also ordered a bottle, this striking me as an eminently wise thing to do. Tony enjoyed his lean and pink carpaccio, and finished with relish all his fresh and crunchy leaves. My burrata was over-cold and not as gorgeously unctuous as I have known it – slightly separated within, and sitting in rather too much olive oil. My pasta course, however, was quite gorgeous – nice spring and bite to the actual spaghetti, and the small chunks of soft-cooked veal in a winey meaty sauce were very scrumptious. Tony's tagliolini was quite a picture – a thick coil of black thin tagliatelle, studded with the white and pink of crab: "very good indeed" was the verdict: certainly it was gone in a flash.

### Oxford days

Tony is a bit of a ringer for Paul Scofield, don't you think? Just struck me – anyway, he was telling me about his Oxford days. He won an open scholarship to Balliol (at the age of 16!) "and though I indulged in Walter Mitty fantasies about becoming a brain surgeon, the head at UCS said I should study classics. So I read Greats. Fruity Walton, we called him." And, I asked Tony, was he fruity as in homosexualist...? "No – fruity as in fruit-and-nut case." At Oxford Tony was a contemporary of Richard Ingrams, Willie Rushton, Peter Osborne and John Wells who had started up a satirical magazine called *Mesopotamia*. "It was a forerunner of *Private Eye*, and I found myself in charge of advertising: sold a full page to the Family Planning Association, which I thought was pretty good." So – not a brain surgeon, but a financial planner for Schroeders, then Rothschild, "because I didn't fancy accountancy. I later attended Harvard Business School, which they call the West Point of capitalism. I got an MBA: they say it will fit you for any managerial role. This is a myth."

We thought a couple of classic

Italian puddings would be in order: tiramisu for Tony, which he said was "nice and soft". Boozy, I asked him...? "Oh yes: nice, soft and boozy." My pannacotta was a pretty and glossy tapered cylinder atop a great and wide scarlet smear: it looked as if someone who recently was engaged in unsuccessfully juggling with sabres had been summarily dragged across the plate. As we talked about local things, I was reminded of just how much wonderful work has been achieved by the thoroughly essential Heath & Hampstead Society under Tony's chairmanship. His last great battle concerns the controversial mooted damming of Hampstead Ponds: dubbed "Dam Nonsense" by him because, as he says, "simply the City of London engineers have got it wrong. Under their scheme, the irreparable damage that would be inflicted upon the Heath is quite appalling. We have set out our case, and we await a response."

And, in the meantime, there is clearly a good and serious new restaurant in town. The service at Ballaro is friendly and attentive, and although the carte can be expensive, the kitchen very much knows what it is doing. From Sicily, with love: an offer you can't refuse.

■ All of Joseph Connolly's 11 novels are available on Kindle and in paperback (Quercus). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## FACTFILE

### ■ BALLARO

154 Haverstock Hill, NW3  
Tel: 020 7586 1107

■ Open Monday-Friday noon-2.30pm, 6pm-10.30pm. Saturday 11.30am-11pm. Sunday 11.30am-9.30pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Bargain two-course set lunch £12.50. Otherwise, about £110 for three-course meal for two with wine.

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