



Making sherry heavenly

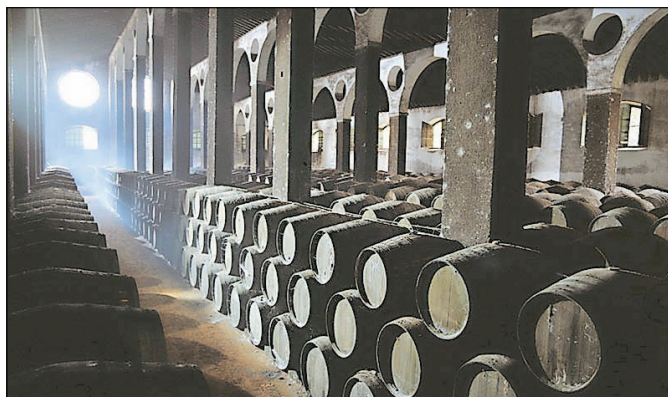
There's a certain reverence attached, understandably, to fine wines. So what better place to nurture them than in a cathedral? These particular cathedrals of southern Spain are not conventional places of worship, but they were constructed specifically for a purpose which is very important indeed in local tradition, as much today as when the builders set to work in the 19th century.

I'm writing about the lofty, arched warehouses – bodegas – where sherry is born, raised and matured. They are known as cathedrals, and the region's largest is La Arboledilla, 120 metres long, 33 wide and 14 high – longer, for example, than the cathedrals of Wells or Westminster. Two huge rose windows emphasise the analogy.

The Barbadillo family built La Arboledilla in the 1870s, in the coastal town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, home of the driest of dry sherries, manzanilla.

The salty tang that characterises good manzanilla is put down to the influence of the sea breezes which are funnelled through the sherry warehouses. But there is far more to its production process than adding grape alcohol to a light, fairly neutral table wine made from palomino grapes and leaving it stacked in barrels in this humid atmosphere.

The essential is that, in those partially filled barrels, the wine develops a thick layer of natural yeast which totally alters its flavour. And change continues over time, as the young sherry moves through the solera of barrels – newest on top, successively older below, with the finished wine drawn off from the bottom barrels which are



■ La Arboledilla, the 'cathedral' where Barbadillo manzanilla matures

replenished from those above, and so on up to the top of the stack.

So far so – comparatively – simple. But what Barbadillo's Tim Holt demonstrated to members of the Circle of Wine Writers in London last month was how the location of the cathedral and the position of the barrels within it alter both flor growth and the taste of each barrel's contents.

That's not an experience which consumers can share, as the essence of the solera system and of the sherry blenders' skill is to ensure a consistent result before bottling. But it's one which we privileged writers found revelatory.

Sea breeze influence

Barbadillo Solear manzanilla (£5.50 a half-bottle in Waitrose, Oddbins and independent merchants) begins life in barrel in Sanlúcar's lower town, where sea breeze influence is strongest and flor grows best. After a year, it is moved to bodegas in the high town, and after four more years to La Arboledilla, sited on the coastal-facing edge of the high town, where those breezes still blow in. Compare the developing manzanilla from barrels at the

seaward end of the cathedral with that from the landward end and there's a noticeable difference – to me the "seaward" wine was saltier, fresher, more mineral.

The experience was far from over. Next came samples from the wine's final solera stage (it's now approaching seven years old), in yet another bodega. The first was from a barrel high in the warehouse, the other from one a metre lower. Again, they were clearly different – I found the "lower" wine more intense and altogether finer.

We couldn't, of course, finish without the final product, the progeny of all these maturation stages – fresh, delicious and with long-lingering saltiness that makes it a perfect wine with food as well as pre-meal nibbles.

Then Tim Holt moved on to demonstrate the development of manzanilla pasada, aged longer, sold with minimal treatment as Solear En Rama (seasonal availability, about £12, Oddbins) and to the huge treat of four examples of a rarer, even more fascinating sherry style, palo cortado – the oldest, Reliqua, dating back a century. But for more on palo cortado, you must wait for another column.

restaurant of the week

Lunch with war historian was quite a triumph

Renowned author Max Arthur meets up with our reviewer for some Franco-Italian cuisine

So what's the deal with Crouch End and Charlie Chaplin, then? Last time I lunched in this pleasant county town was at Spiazzo with the editor of this paper – and on the large flat screen was *The Kid* on a loop. Now in Melange – a mere panini's throw away – I am confronted with an eternal showing of *The Gold Rush*. Weird. On this occasion, my guest was Max Arthur, renowned and garlanded military historian, who has been a chum of mine for ... ooh – could be 20 years now, you know: time, it just will keep on flying. We were members of the Scribblers Club, a gang of fellows who earned a crust in the inky trade (there were newspaper editors and publishers as well as hacks) and we would gather every month or so in the Chelsea Arts Club to break

bread, drink wine and occasionally fall over. Max has lived in Crouch End for the past 12 years, having spent the previous 17 in Keats Grove, Hampstead – although he is a Sussex lad by birth, and frequently visits Brighton, because he misses the sea. Which is roughly all I can tell you about the boy, for he is ferociously secretive about any details of his personal life. He was born, I would hazard, some time during the 20th century ... and I do know a bit more, but if I told you, I would have to kill you, and then bang goes my readership.

First-hand accounts

The Services have always played a large part in his life, for he is the author of all those invaluable first-hand accounts of both world wars, most notably *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*. His next

“Max has led a very singular life: left school at 16 with no O-levels, National Service in the RAF, navy on a building site, property developer – which, he says, ‘was much too safe. I wanted to be frightened...’ Uh-huh ... and so he became an actor, for God's sake

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Joseph Connolly at Melange



■ Joseph with historian Max Arthur at Melange in Crouch End

Picture: Nigel Sutton

is called *The Silent Day*, and deals with survivors' reminiscences of D-Day in Blighty. Last year, Max was made an OBE for services to military history ... and yet all his friends seem to be in the arts. "It's because," he says, "writers and journos tend to have a sense of humour ... and military men generally don't."

Melange has a grey exterior (naturally) but is very bright and inviting within: one wall of bevelled white tiling with shelves of old wine crates and tomato tins (plus the Chaplin cinema) and very spraucy metallic buttoned leather

banquettes. Chairs are either classic metal bistro, or else lemon and upholstered. The waitress was smiling, pretty and efficient, so I had no need to ask her where she came from: she came from Poland, as do all of London's smiling, pretty and efficient waitresses. Also from Poland, incidentally, is Max's cleaner, who told him not to bother wearing a coat in the lashing rain as the restaurant was so very near ... so he didn't, and arrived looking as if he had just swum the Channel in one of his good jackets. While he went to dry off, I asked for a prosecco: this

came in a huge saucer glass, as if I had ordered treble Babychams all round. On its rim was spliced a strawberry: I'm telling you – I felt like Del Boy's girlfriend.

Varied menu

The place is called Melange because here, apparently, is a "taste of France and Italy" – though there didn't honestly appear to be much Italian on the menu: ravioli, risotto ... that was about it. An attractive and varied menu, though – with much made of their 30-day aged steaks. There is a good-value set lunch (two

courses for £11.95, £2 more for a pud – and just a further £2 if you want a 7oz sirloin) but we were going for the carte. Max started with Roquefort and walnut salad, and I went for antipasto misto. The Milano salami was as it always is – acceptable and a little slimy – the Parma ham a lot better and the buffalo mozzarella rather too cold and a little flabby. Max's salad was gloriously presented, the petals of cos lettuce forming a flower and cradling clusters of good crumbled cheese and nuggets of nut.

Spinning a yarn

Oral history is a fine and irreplaceable thing (one thinks of Mass Observation during the Second World War) but when it is a case of very old men looking back ... was Max sometimes wary of them spinning a yarn...? "I think I can tell. I have interviewed more than 3,000 veterans now, and encountered only a couple of rogues." I personally think it amazing they can recall anything at all – I can't even remember quite what I am writing this very second, nor how this paragraph was actually meant to go ... so I think I'll end it now.

Max followed with fish stew: always wise to call it that and resist the temptation to go with bouillabaisse, because then you are not chained to a classic recipe. So there was possibly bream, with mussels and squid in a good and garlicky tomato sauce with new potatoes: he very much enjoyed that – and could not resist spooning up the last of the sauce. Then he said hello to the party in the corner, whom he knew. Then he said hello to a chap over there, who is his neighbour: this is very much the local place to go to, then – I was the NW3 foreigner, who nonetheless was liking very much my vast lamb shank in an excellent veal jus: no trace of fattiness, which this dish can be very prone to, though just a little over-salted. Superb creamy mash, with crunchy green beans. A light and fresh sangiovese was nicely bridging the gap between our disparate meals.

In Max's book *Last Post*, he interviewed the remaining

soldiers from the First World War. "They ranged in age from 104 to 113. They're all gone now." And so – what next? "I'm going to India. There are some Sikhs there who claim to have served in the Great War." And ... how likely is that...? "Well ... I'm going to sort them out. And see." Max has led a very singular life ... and I cannot resist giving you a few snippets: left school at 16 with no O-levels, National Service in the RAF, navy on a building site, property developer – which, he says, "was much too safe. I wanted to be frightened..." Uh-huh ... and so he became an actor, for God's sake – actually working for years with Jonathan Miller on the BBC Shakespeare series. Each one of these gobbets was prized out of him: one of his screen heroes is Gary Cooper – the strong, silent type: but next to Max, the Coop was a blabbermouth.

We closed with a shared tiramisu: fresh and bouncy enough, but not unctuous, and with seemingly no booze in it at all: it had just something of the Victoria sponge about it. A good meal though, in excellent company. And next time I come to Crouch End, I am hoping to maybe catch up on a little bit of Buster Keaton.

■ Joseph Connolly's latest book is *The A-Z of Eating Out* (Thames & Hudson £16.95). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

■ MELANGE

45 Topsfield Parade
Tottenham Lane, N8
Tel 020 8341 1681

■ Open Monday–Thursday and Sunday 10am–10.30pm. Friday–Saturday 10am–11pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: £11.95 for two course set lunch, £13.95 for three. Otherwise, about £90 for three course meal for two with wine.

