

Making wine in London

Who's this mad Aussie winemaker who trucks grapes from France and Italy to turn them into wine in a former health clinic in West Brompton? His name is Gavin Monery – and he's not so mad after all.

He has a very respectably vinous CV, including a spell at legendary biodynamic Cullen Wines in his homeland's Margaret River region, vintage work with respected growers in Burgundy and the Rhône, and experience at a huge industrial-scale operation which turned him right off big-volume wine. Most of all, he makes the kind of wine which everyone who respects the grape should drink: showing off elegance and fruit quality rather than high oak, high extract, high alcohol.

And the place where he's working does have more appropriate past lives. Originally built in the 19th century as a gin distillery, after the health centre interlude it was, until a year ago, the warehouse for committed independent importer/seller Roberson Wines – whose boss, Cliff Roberson, is one of the backers of London Cru, the capital's first winery.

But this perfect little winery isn't out to be niche or distant from the drinkers of its products. Absolutely the opposite.

"We want to be part of the process of convincing people to care more about the wines they drink and where they come from," is Monery's message. "We hope that the opportunity to get involved with the wine-making process, to touch, see and taste the product from grape through to the finished bottle will inspire people to care that little bit more about wine and how they



■ Gavin Monery supervises the sorting of syrah grapes prior to crushing
Courtesy: Ian Stirling Photography

choose to enjoy it." That second sentence explains what the project is about, beyond simply making wine. It's a place where people who appreciate wine, and those whose interest in good food hasn't yet taken them seriously into what they drink with it, can get involved in the process. "It's something creative and innovative to show them, in a fun way," adds Monery.

Short tours

For starters, there are short tours most alternate Saturdays, where participants follow through what happens from the time the grapes arrive (in refrigerated trucks, from growers who make good wines themselves but have raw material to spare) to the final ready-to-bottle wine, seeing the press, the fermenting tanks, the other equipment involved and finishing with a tasting of the new wine straight from barrel or tank.

Once a month, there's a longer experience, Winemaker for a Day, which goes into much more detail about how the individual components of wine combine to create the whole. Participants blend three wines of their own, and take home a bottle of the one they like best. Private and

corporate events can be booked, too.

The very first grapes arrived at London Cru last autumn – chardonnay, syrah and cabernet sauvignon from southern France and barbera (for both rosé and red) from northern Italy. There should have been other varieties too, but weather intervened. The 17 tonnes imported will become some 14,000 bottles of wine, but for the 2014 vintage both quantity and choice will increase.

The 2013 wines aren't ready yet, but samples are promising, with the biodynamically grown cabernet sauvignon surely set to be a star. Retail prices are likely to be about £15, and Monery is well aware that, for success at that level, quality will be crucial.

But he's clearly passionate about what he's doing, and confident that both the wines and the London Cru experience will flourish. After all, similar urban wineries work in New York, Hong Kong, even Stockholm. And is it any less green to import grapes and make wine here than to truck in filled bottles?

■ For event details and more information, see www.londoncru.co.uk.

restaurant of the week

Fine food among all the handbags and gladrags...

Department store restaurant offers a perfect spot for watching the big spenders at work

Have you been watching *Mr Selfridge* on the telly...? One of the better soaps, to my mind – largely because it is so very lovely to look at. The clothes, of course – but the recreation of the ground floor of the store is really very beautifully done, and the exterior shots too I think are mighty convincing. Of course, due to the restraints of the small screen, we only ever tend to see Accessories and Fashion, but the glamour of the store is very well evoked – and it occurred to me the other week, when I was standing in the midst of the real big deal in Oxford Street, that old Harry Selfridge would be very pleased by the way the store has evolved. He is portrayed as a very

dapper, affable and generous gentleman (extremely English, for an American) who constantly is consulting the fob watch in his waistcoat pocket. One or two of Selfridges' incarnations along the way, however, would hardly have delighted him. I can just about remember when the glorious bronze lift doors were still in place at the main entrance, these manned (womanned?) by ladies dressed as Buttons. These doors are now in the V&A, though one wonders why they aren't still in Selfridges. Now while Harry would have welcomed a "bargain basement" – he always wanted the store to be enjoyed by everyone – there was a time in the 1960s and beyond when the basement was a right old shabby rag-tag of extreme unlikelyhoods: Dulux

“From our eyrie, we had a sight of St Laurent, Gucci and Chanel – but most immediately, Balenciaga. During the time it took us to have lunch, that Balenciaga counter alone sold three bags to three separate individuals! That's probably, what ...? Eight or nine grand's worth?



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LOVING LOCAL

Joseph Connolly at Hix at Selfridges



■ Joseph at Hix at Selfridges in Oxford Street

paint. Cat litter. Key cutting. Flowerpots. Shoe repairs. Rough and ready “whitewood” furniture (this before the age of chipboard and melamine flatpacks). Reject crockery. Remaindered books ... and a very dingy tea shop.

Glittering display cases

Well Lawks-a-mercy – the store sure ain’t like that these days, matey: as you step in from the Orchard Street entrance, you are confronted by a tranquil sea of white marble interspersed with crimson carpeting, all the glittering display cases as far as the eye can see thoroughly given over to luxuries for women: top-end jewellery, watches, scent, make-up ... and then, as you penetrate deeper towards the Duke Street end of things, the holy of holies: handbags. My

wife isn’t into all of this – quite mercifully, or how could I afford essentials, such as lunch? Because yes indeed, lunch was the quest, as ever. And suspended within a glass-clad mezzanine above the designer handbag department is a further outpost of the foodie empire that is down to Mark Hix. Hix is a very affable fellow (though not, he would agree, as dapper as Mr Selfridge, and nor does he consult a fob watch in a waistcoat pocket: as if). He is a chef’s chef, with a true mastery of cooking, having spread from his original gaff in Soho as far as the City (an oyster and chop house, and also something called Tramshed, which serves only chicken and steak) by way of Brown’s Hotel in Mayfair ... and Selfridges.

This particular set-up is billed as being a restaurant, champagne

and oyster bar, the décor being plain and nondescript in a fairly self-conscious 1950s throwback sort of a way. There is a nod to contemporary art in the form of a fat central pillar decorated with a fork, in Michael Craig-Martin’s distinctive pop style, and one of Tracey Emin’s neons. Ah yes ... Tracey Emin, that frankly fabulous artist who renders such as Raphael and Matisse hardly more than Sunday daubers. Because she has progressed way beyond unmade beds, tents, beach huts and spindly and dismal drawings (she now holds the post of Professor of Drawing at the Royal Academy, as should come as no surprise at all): she is currently most famous for neons. Some or other trite and embarrassing two-bit slogan set in neon tubing – which, obviously, she didn’t

actually make. But as her good chum Damien Hirst would rush to agree, these days there is a vast amount of money to be made out of not making things. Anyway, this one says “HIX” in red, white and blue capitals: you might think it merely colourful and a bit wonky, while the cognoscenti will tell you that it is not just high art, but a snip at a quarter of a million.

Pleasingly different

The service here is attentive and efficient – and clearly the tables to bag are those overlooking the drifting tides of moneyed ladies pawing the expensive handbags as if they were new-born lambs (as opposed to recently slaughtered ones). The menu is pleasingly different – cast out of your mind the department store plaice and chips and a nice cup of tea: here is cool. They offer caviar called “mottra” which is said to be truly sustainable because (you may want to look away now) it is “massaged” out of the sturgeon. Well I didn’t order this because (a) it costs £60 and (b) I wasn’t sure I really longed for the fruit of the womb of a disgruntled fish that had been rubbed up the wrong way. They have boiled egg and soldiers (£4.50...) and also “Detox at Hix” (pricey, and aimed at the handbag ladies). My wife started with Caribbean crisps with guacamole and also a small lettuce heart and wild herb salad. I was having “Hix Cure” smoked salmon – which was thicker cut than you would expect: more like sashimi, actually, but with a good and smoky flavour. The crisps were great – served as a bouquet of flowers, and accompanied by strips of what looked like crisped-up and gossamer banana, but turned out to be some or other vegetable instead, and very bitter indeed. The “small” salad was huge, with beautiful varied greens, and utterly fresh.

To follow, my wife had a small Burford Brown eggs Benedict: perfect yolk, perfect hollandaise – into which she was freely dipping my frites – mine, I tell you...! Because I had ordered the Hix rib steak burger – which was generous,

fine beef and perfectly pink ... but underseasoned and lacking that all-important juicy ooze: good, then – but not great. The frites – those that were left to me – were first class. And as my wife was enthusiastically consuming the rest, she was visibly rapt at the scene below her: the shifting eddies, the constant milling of women seemingly mesmerised by their handbag-hovering, before they pounced. From our eyrie, we had a sight of St Laurent, Gucci and Chanel – but most immediately, Balenciaga: and do you know what...? During the time it took us to have lunch, that Balenciaga counter alone sold three bags to three separate individuals...! I know. That’s probably about, what ...? Eight or nine grand’s worth? Well there you are. I think solely to prolong the theatre, my wife then ordered a Yorkshire rhubarb pavlova with ripple ice cream. This was pink, white, pretty and about the size of the starship *Enterprise* (as well as much enjoyed). And then, just to round everything off very nicely, that dapper and affable Mr Selfridge approached our table, consulted the fob watch in his waistcoat pocket and pronounced the meal a gift, from him to us. Well no he didn’t, actually: but it would have been nice.

■ Joseph Connolly’s *The A-Z of Eating Out* is published by Thames & Hudson. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- HIX AT SELFRIDGES
400 Oxford Street, W1
Tel 020 7749 5400
- Open Monday-Friday 11am-10pm, Saturday-Sunday 10am-10pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆ (or 10, if you’re into handbags)
- Cost: You can pick and mix here – few would go for the full three courses with wine, but if you do ... about £110.

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