



Fooled by flavours of Oz

How the mighty can fall... Not that I've ever considered myself mightily good at blind tasting, identifying any or all of place, grape, producer and vintage from an anonymous glassful. But I had hoped for rather better results at the Tasting Blind Club.

The club is Wine Australia's innovative effort to increase knowledge and understanding among sommeliers, other wine trade people, educators and the wine media, with the best taster rewarded with a trip to the vineyards.

First test of the evening when I joined in was to identify the (same) grape in three white wines. Elimination wasn't difficult – certainly, the wines weren't chardonnay or sauvignon blanc, nor marsanne, Semillon? No. Verdelho? Unlikely. So that, in my list of familiar Australian white varieties, left riesling, though neither flavour nor acidity level seemed right. Too late, the crib sheet revealed the answer: pinot gris.

My utterly wrong conclusion – I didn't even know that Australia had commercial-level plantings of the grape – was, it seems, a pretty general one. But that was little consolation.

Next came what was obviously a line-up of chardonnays, quite varied in style. This time the challenge was to spot the wine from the Mornington Peninsula, a coolish vineyard area, known for burgundian-style whites and reds. I failed here too, though the wine I decided on in fact came from Burgundy! That was the joker in the pack, the answer to the final test: find the only non-Australian wine among the 22 lined up under their all-concealing wrappers.



■ The essence of Australia: a kangaroo in the Wakefield Estate vineyard

Then, the first batch of reds. Pinot noir was easy to recognise, especially when the first wine had buckets of smoky-edged cherry and berry fruit. But vintage rather than variety was the question. What year was wine number 13? Brown-tinged colour and leathery flavour prompted me to credit it with much greater age than it actually had – it was a mere 2010 tripling, not a 2006 patriarch.

Final demand

Final red-face moment came not from over-indulging in the heftier reds which followed, but from failure in the final demand: name the two main grapes in these blends. Number one was easy – blackcurrant, sometimes menthol-edged cabernet sauvignon. The second fooled me. I didn't find the violet/savoury character I expect of syrah – probably because Australia's take on the grape it calls shiraz is more big-fruit driven. Merlot, I decided...

Embarrassment apart, the evening was a pleasure. There were a lot of lovely wines, and even the biggest and boldest had charm as well as force. A dozen regions were represented, and the wines' retail prices ranged from £10 to £36.

The Tasting Blind Club is a great idea to promote fine Oz wines to the trade people who

influence consumer choice. And no wonder many participants are taking it very seriously: that prize trip, to be awarded after the club's final session on April 14, is highly desirable.

Much as the Wine Australia people might like to open the experience to consumers, that's not practicable. But plenty of the wines I enjoyed are available, so do your own non-blind sampling with any of these (prices approximate, and vintages may vary):

The Lane Block 2 pinot gris 2012 (£15, www.corneyandbarrow.com); Willunga 100 pinot gris 2011 (£10, www.slurp.co.uk); Chapel Hill chardonnay 2011 (£14.50, www.elwoodwines.co.uk, www.surawine.co.uk); Vasse Felix chardonnay 2010 (£16, www.sohowine.co.uk, 2012 Majestic, www.nywines.co.uk).

Wakefield Estate pinot noir 2012 (£11, Oz Wines 0845 450 1261 www.ozwines.co.uk); Lethbridge Ménage a Noir pinot noir 2010 (£21.50, www.australianwinesonline.co.uk); Willunga 100 cabernet-shiraz 2010 (£10.80, Highbury Vintners, N5); Dandelion Vineyards Pride of the Fleurieu cabernet sauvignon 2011 (£12.75, Prohibition Wines, N10); Jim Barry Pb shiraz-cabernet 2006 (£38, independents including www.slurp.co.uk; www.nywines.co.uk, www.theseccellar.co.uk).

restaurant of the week

Journey back in time at oasis of calm elegance

Brian Masters, a biographer of serial killers, joins our reviewer to murder a good lunch

A rather grisly piece of Muswell History to kick us off with, I'm afraid – but I promise not to dwell. I don't want to put you off your lunch – and, more particularly, I don't want to put me off my lunch, should such a thing be possible. Currently for sale is 23d Cranley Gardens, where Dennis Nilsen murdered and dismembered three men, having previously meted out similar treatment to a dozen more, each of whom he had met upon the day of their deaths. In this attic conversion, he did unspeakable things – the flat having been recently advertised as “a charming property that is centrally located and within walking distance of Muswell Hill Broadway and its bars and cafés”. Estate-agent-speak par excellence, don't you think? Anyway, it was

sold for £250,000, and is now back on the market for a hundred grand more. It says a good deal about the age we live in that while for decades this horrific history has been carefully hidden, the current estate agent, Barnard Marcus, says that “internal inspection is highly recommended”, and further says that it sees the flat's past as something of a selling point: clearly, somebody is out to make a killing.

Acclaimed author

I mention all of this unpleasantness only because my guest to lunch the other day was acclaimed author Brian Masters, a very versatile writer of non-fiction who nonetheless will forever be associated with the biography of Nilsen which he published in the 1980s, this followed up by another on Jeffrey Dahmer, and yet one

“A uniformed concierge relieves you of coat and hat, leaving you to pad about the low-key and carpeted hush of the place. Young people, of course, might feel that they had strayed on to the set of a movie they desperately do not want to see – but for oldies, it's heaven

Champagne fit for French kings will make your mum feel like a queen this Mothering Sunday

With Mothering Sunday fast approaching, you might consider supplementing the traditional bunch of flowers with a bottle of bubbles.

Wine Rack in Belsize Park sells a range of Champagnes that both look and taste the part for a Mother's Day gift.

Laurent-Perrier's Cuvee Rose (£44.99) comes in an elegant bottle inspired by French king Henri IV and its salmon pink bubbles are pretty much the benchmark for special celebrations.

Created by the Champagne house in 1968, this clean, slightly sharp wine made from 100 per cent Pinot Noir is an International Wine Challenge

award winner and regularly makes it into wine writers' top recommendations for its intensely fruity mouthful of freshly picked berries - strawberry and redcurrants - with a hint of morello cherries.

Historic vineyards

Also boasting a regal association, the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes for Cuvee Grenat Vintage 2007, Prestige Des Sacres are grown in some of the oldest vineyards in Champagne, previously owned by the Archbishop of Rheims.

From the ninth century until the revolution the superb cathedral at Rheims was the site for the coronation of the French kings and nobility attending would

traditionally be served Champagne from the Archbishop's own cellar:

Steeped in history, this delicate and complex wine of golden yellow hue is aged four years in the bottle and delivers a fruity, fresh glassful with notes of apricot and vanilla.

It is currently on offer at a very good value £24.99.

For mamas with slightly sweeter tastes Lanson's Ivory Label Demi-Sec is at Wine Rack for £25.99 and its blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier is created in a style favoured in the 19th century but refined in the 20th.

■ Wine Rack, 206 Haverstock Hill, NW3. 020 7431 3610, belsizepark@winerack.co.uk.

Bridget Galton



Joseph Connolly at Durrants Hotel



■ Joseph with author Brian Masters at Durrants Hotel in Marylebone

Picture: Polly Hancock

more about Rosemary West, wife of Fred. Along with about 20 other books as diverse as a study of Sartre, biographies of Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire, John Aspinall the zookeeper and a diverting history of the Swinging Sixties. "Still, though," he says, "interviewers have been wary: if I have written about murderers, they feel there must be something about me to expose." And, I asked of this most affable and humorous fellow: is there something to expose...? "Oh good Lord - I've been exposing myself all my life...!"

We were sitting in a restaurant in Marylebone: and so, you might imagine, obviously somewhere on-trend and swishly chichi. Because

Marylebone, let me tell you, is very much having a moment when it comes to not just the brilliant mix of shops, but also its rather terrific restaurant scene: just opened is Chiltern Firehouse - a fire station converted into a very fashionable hotel and restaurant, where I shall shortly be going - and coming in May is Fischer's, the much-awaited Jeremy King and Chris Corbin venture (they of Wolsey fame) on the site of the old Cotidie in the High Street. And so in what decidedly cool and zingy eatery were Brian and I, then? Well actually, Durrants Hotel. Oh my goodness - what a contrast with everything around: a fabulous oasis of Edwardian calm, elegance, professionalism and

peace. I would say that Durrants has discretion written all over it, but it is far too discreet for anything so blatant as that.

The entrance to this fine Georgian building - the hotel has been in the same private ownership for nearly 100 years - is opposite the red brick blankness of the rear of the Wallace Collection, and the welcome is sublime. A uniformed concierge relieves you of coat and hat, leaving you to pad about the low-key and carpeted hush of the place. A splendid small and panelled bar, airy reception rooms ... and the grill room, rich in highly polished mahogany panelling, enlivened by crystal wall sconces, gilt-framed oils

and cabinets of silver. Red velvet swan-neck chairs are teamed with black buttoned leather banquettes to form a feeling of wellbeing and comfort. Young people, of course, might feel that they had strayed on to the set of a movie they desperately do not want to see - but for oldies, it's heaven. The worry about rooms like this, though, is whether the food and service will measure up, or whether both will be a throwback to the overboiled carelessness of the provincial 1970s: well let us see.

Interesting menu

"My test of an interesting menu," said Brian, "is whether I see on it something I've not had before. Such as this double-baked parmesan soufflé in a gruyère and chive sauce. I'm having that." I was eyeing it myself, but settled for simple smoked salmon - which was plentiful, and with a good texture and gentle smokiness ... but a little too cold. The soufflé, in its lake of green-flecked gruyère goo, looked beautiful - and was, said Brian, "delicious, very tangy - like Campari, it opens up the taste buds". The menu (bound in plump faux ostrich skin) offers a set two-course lunch for a modest (given the surroundings) £19.50, or three for £22.50, and - joy of joys - there is a daily choice from beneath the vast and silver-domed trolley. That day it was roast corn-fed chicken with lentils, kale and a lemon thyme and garlic sauce - so I collared that, adding on "real chips". The able head waiter, in dinner suit, assured me that they were excellent - and they nearly were: thick, hand-cut and stacked precisely square, looking quite like mini fish fingers, but not quite crisped enough. Brian was having, from the carte, grilled smoked haddock with a vegetable salad. "Although," he said, "I could do without the salad. Healthy things are always so boring..." The half chicken was stunningly good - true, tender and flavoursome roast chicken, just as you remember it - and Brian's smallish tranche of haddock came set upon a fan of endive and sun-dried tomatoes, bits of which he dutifully ate:

the perfect haddock vanished in no time. He had just a glass of Californian chardonnay "because I don't really drink at lunchtime. I tend to start at eight in the evening, and rarely stop." And I had just a glass of Bordeaux: well OK then - we both had two.

Brian is a natural researcher - the book he is most proud of being a history of actors who belonged to the Garrick Club - but is disinclined to take on another project. "Unless they offered me Amanda Knox - Foxy Knoxy, I'd be interested in that. She's probably guilty. But whatever you are researching - a murderer, an 18th-century aristocrat - you simply must uncover the ultimate truth ... and then in the evening, completely switch off and have fun." Brian has lived in the same large house in Shepherd's Bush since 1966, for which he paid (non baby boomers look away now) £4,500. Currently he is rereading Proust for the fifth time (twice in the original) and is resisting the allure of a third autobiography. "Christ almighty - I'm not Victoria Beckham." Which, oddly, I had spotted.

A very good lunch, in a rather special and underrated place. And then the two of us stepped out of the 19th century, and back into 21st-century buzzy Marylebone. Well - not really...

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

FACTFILE

■ DURRANTS HOTEL

George Street, W1
Tel 020 7935 8131
Open for lunch and dinner daily.
■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Cost: Two-course lunch £19.50, three-course £22.50 (both £10 more on Sunday). Three courses à la carte for two with wine, about £130.

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