



# A taste of things to come

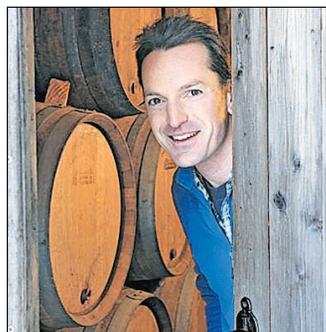
Two young beaujolais growers provide hope for the region's future

**T**ime for a little musing on the future of wine. Not, for once, on the effect of climate change or the quality-diminishing result of continuing pressure to discount retail prices. Instead, let's focus on the individuals who plant vines, nurture them, harvest their fruit and turn it into wine that is a true pleasure to drink.

What's prompted this? The opportunity to taste some bottles of very attractive cru beaujolais (the crus are 10 villages with privileged vine-growing land which are allowed to label their wines by village name only). The theme linking them is that they were made by young growers.

A little digging into the region's statistics and the reason for promoting these under-40s is clear. Just 20 per cent of beaujolais growers are 39 or younger. What does that mean for the future of a region which is pushing so hard to overcome the sad legacy left by oceans of barely drinkable nouveau? I've not researched further in other wine-making areas of long tradition, so perhaps beaujolais is an exception, though I doubt it.

Still, there's cause for hope with these wines at least. Among those I tasted, there were two stars – one quite robust, yet aromatic and fresh, its richness countered by perfect acidity, a wine surely to win round consumers scared of light, high-acid reds, however well made they may be. The other is a classic: delightful, flower-scented, crunchy with red fruit and morello cherry flavours yet a serious example of exactly what fine beaujolais should be.



■ Julien Sunier

The first is Régnié Cuvée des Braves Domaine Rochette 2012 (£14.50, Lea & Sandeman). It's one of 29-year-old Mathieu Rochette's two top cuvées – he has vineyards in four of the crus, including Morgon's highly regarded Côte du Py – and is aged in small casks, which adds to the wine's structure and ageing potential while avoiding any overt oakiness. Mathieu is fanatical that his gamay grapes (gamay is the only red variety allowed for beaujolais) should be of perfect quality, but beyond that he argues that "terroir makes all the difference". I hope I'll get the chance to taste some of his other crus.

#### Engaging creed

Wine number two is Fleurie Domaine Julien Sunier 2011 (£19.50, Berry Brothers & Rudd) whose 35-year-old maker holds to the engaging creed that "a good bottle is an empty bottle". Julien has spent time with one of the region's big names, but his own enterprise is small, though his rented vines are in Régnié and Morgon as well as Fleurie. Both vines and his vast vegetable garden are organic, and he makes his wines with minimal



■ Mathieu Rochette

intervention – natural yeasts, no filtration, as little sulphur as possible. Again, expect delights beyond that lovely Fleurie.

Despite the nouveau legacy, the UK is the third most important export market for beaujolais, and emphasis is increasingly on quality rather than quantity – something anyone who appreciates decent wine must cheer. And there's good news on the vintage which will be on sale soon. Unlike many French wine regions, the sun shone on beaujolais at all the right times in 2013, and the wines have great potential.

But older vintages can be massively rewarding, for fine beaujolais ages with impressive style. At Berry Bros, where the choice is outstanding (prices from £11), there are bottles from 2009 which have still not reached their prime. Let me finish, though, with one widely available wine, a beaujolais villages containing grapes from cru vineyards, which will start any gamay novice on the route to great pleasure: Louis Jadot Combe aux Jacques 2012, with an appetite-whetting tart edge to its smooth fruit (currently £8.25 at Waitrose, rrp £10.50, also at Tesco and independents).

# Where you can find mussels just like in Brussels

There is more to Belgium than Poirot, beer and chocolate, as trip to Chalk Farm shows

**O**K – I'm going to have lunch in Belgium in a minute, but first I just have to express my utter spit and loathing for "customer service" centres. You know the bastards I mean: those paid-for telephone numbers into whose reverberating void you vividly express your near demented dissatisfaction, only to be met by the blankness of absolutely nothing at all. In the old days, manufacturers went into hiding: no phone numbers, no addresses – it was simply a case of caveat emptor. Now they smugly employ a raft of morons who are masters of the monotone and are painstakingly trained in the art of persistent stonewalling. Case in point: in my study, where I churn the words, I have a heater. And during one of those colder days lately it ceased to heat, but started to smoke (far too young – it's only two years old). So I phoned the

manufacturer, whom I shall not name except to say that it is bloody Dimplex. Told my story to a little girl; she said: "That shouldn't happen." Then I listened to some Vivaldi (spring) before being transferred to a second maybe slightly older little girl, to whom I was required to repeat verbatim my tale of woe. "Hm," she said, "that shouldn't happen." And then, while spring turned to autumn, I finally got to the "supervisor", a bloke – school-leaver; I imagine, having recently qualified with honours in pig-headed obstructionism: no inflexion in the voice, yielding no ground, offering nothing, and robotically repeating a series of mantras. The gist of it was this: "That shouldn't happen. But as the heater is out of warranty, I can send an engineer, not sure when, who may or may not be able to correct the problem." This, I clarified, in place of an apology or redress, and presumably at my own expense...

“The menu is an attractive typographical sheet, spattered with jokes of varying quality. I liked the two cows discussing ice cream: "It's cold" – "yeah," says the other, "it's Friesian"

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## Joseph Connolly at Belgo Noord



■ Joseph at Belgo Noord in Chalk Farm

“Yes indeed,” he agreed with glee, “£150.” So I laughed a fair deal at that, and then he added, deadpan, “plus VAT”. I asked him whether he knew that in Homebase an identical heater was on sale at £99.99 (including VAT) to which he replied that he had no knowledge of this fact, and nor could he comment further. And thus ended the service to a customer of bloody Dimplex.

Anyhoo ... I'm going to have lunch in Belgium in a minute. Actually, last year I was in Brussels plugging the French edition of my last novel, and I rather loved the place. On the menu in most of the restaurants was horse – but I was chicken

and ate beef. Belgians are all a bit fed up with their country being famous only for Simenon, Poirot, beer and chocolate, while finding it difficult to nominate anything else for consideration. Well here's something: moules frites – a lovely dish, and one of the reasons why I'm going to have lunch in Belgium in a minute. Well – I say Belgium, but of course I mean Chalk Farm, because it's nearer: yes, Belgo Noord by name, in groovy downtown Chalk Farm – opposite the Roundhouse and a couple of doors away from a hotdog place called Joe's – which, in common with myself, its namesake, appeared to be half demolished. You go through a dark narrow

doorway in Belgo, half expecting to see a postcard pinned to the wall advertising “Model, Top Floor”, and up a little staircase and past an extraordinary great twisting of aluminium duct pipes, like a giant's metal spaghetti – and also like the junk that Richard Deacon is currently showing at the Tate, though infinitely nicer. Then down a little staircase and into a large and hangar-like space with a big low bar with a huge lit-up glass-fronted fridge packed with Belgian bottled beer. Half the space is lit by a massive skylight roof held up by what look like titanic artists' palettes (complete with mega thumb-holes). Walls are dried blood, and studded with enamel

ads for beer. Fans of Arp, Miro and Matisse (cut-out period) will adore every organic swooping curve of the place, including the sinuous zinc-topped tables.

The menu is an attractive typographical sheet, spattered with jokes of varying quality. I liked the cartoon of two cows discussing ice cream: “It's cold” – “yeah,” says the other, “it's Friesian.” Many beers are listed on a flip chart, and the waiter is dressed as a monk. Which can't be easy for him, can it really...? No actual Friar Tuck tonsense, it's true, but still and all. And the get-up didn't actually fit: that morning, he had got into a very bad habit. My wife collared the kilo of moules in the classic cream sauce (there is a choice of Provençale – tomatoes and garlic) so I went for half a spit-roast chicken with wild mushrooms, herbs and cream. Both, of course, with frites. And before that we were sharing a confit duck salad with soft-boiled egg, smoked lardons, black pudding and croutons. It's not really a place for dieters – but then nor is the world in general. My wife ordered a cloudy wheat beer, about which she said: “I don't dislike it,” and I let down the Belgian side by having a glass of Côtes du Rhône.

### Fat and delicious

The duck was good, the egg nicely gooey, the lardons had bite, the black pudding thick with blood – a good thing – though the frisée, in common with myself, was considerably overdressed (I was the bloke in Chalk Farm who was wearing a tie). The moules arrived in the usual great steel basin and were fat and delicious, and so was the sauce – great for chip-dipping, and then quite unabashed scooping. The chicken too was very yummy – yielding and flavoursome – and although good, the mushrooms were not as advertised, but of the button variety: not wild, then, but very middle class and well behaved. Frites...? Good, not quite crisp enough. During a pause, I gazed about me: there are on the walls lots of strips of wood with semi-perforated holes, ranging from

four in number up to 30 – for carrying shots of schnapps ... and I was so very tempted to order 30 schnapps, just to see how they were going to manage that, then. Chiselled into the wall is a series of weird and wonderful words, such as “slapjaw”, “bloater” and “pissala”: not, actually, synonyms for the state of inebriation, but medieval descriptions of various foods (to which I could happily have added others I have come across – “rumblegut”, “shit-tit” and “tomturdy”).

It's a good place, this – and I can see that it would be wonderful in the evening when it is no doubt packed with people young enough to work in customer service centres. The seats are bloody uncomfortable, mind – and it did occur to me to ask the monk to bring me a hassock from the confessional ... but maybe, following a blowout, you are meant to feel penitent. And to round off, we shared a vanilla ice cream, with proper Madagascan pods – Judge's, from Hampshire: very good, but a bit sorbet-like in consistency, and not of the standard of Marine Ices a few doors down. When we stepped back into the icy air, it was brought home to me that Belgo Noord had been a little over-efficiently heated: this not down to bloody Dimplex, then.

■ 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](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## FACTFILE

- **BELGO NOORD**  
72 Chalk Farm Road, NW1  
Tel: 020 7267 0718
- Open Monday-Saturday, noon-11pm; Sunday, noon-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
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