



This success is no oddity

Oddbins buyer Ana Sapungiu has helped the chain to flourish anew

In the chequered recent history of what was for so long the favourite high street shop of many committed wine drinkers there remains some stability: for example, the woman currently in charge of choosing Oddbins' 500-plus bottle range.

Ana Sapungiu joined nearly a decade ago – selling wine in the Balham branch – when control had passed out of independent hands to giant French company Castel. Through troubled times she stayed, progressing from store manager to sales support at head office and most recently to buyer.

Why focus on an individual rather than on what is offered by the 34 current shops (there were once almost 300)? Because Oddbins has always been about people as well as bottles. Sapungiu stresses how present owner Whittalls Wine Merchants (part of private alcoholic drinks distributor European Food Brokers) has kept as many staff as possible, while applying what appear to be rather sounder business principles than those of some of its predecessors.

"I've seen Oddbins through a lot of changes – and now it's in the best shape I've seen," she told me.

So what is the current Oddbins? A core of 18 shops in London – including Kentish Town Road, Crouch Hill and West End Lane, West Hampstead – plus nine in Scotland and seven more scattered across England. There are plans to open more in London and beyond, possibly by the end of this year, but only on the right sites.

The range of wines is prompted by customer preference and has a clear European bias. Average bottle price is between £8 and £9,



■ Jenny Smith, manager of Oddbins in West End Lane Picture: Nigel Sutton

which gives great value-for-money possibilities. Discounting has gone (except for five per cent off a dozen-bottle case), which sensibly favours the majority of customers who want to buy only a bottle or two at a time.

But in has come innovation. First was the "name your price" challenge, when customers could choose what they paid for a limited selection of wines. "I was really sweating behind the scenes," Sapungiu admits – but she could have stayed cool, as the average offer came within 50p to 70p of the price Oddbins would have set.

Best amateur taster

Currently, the third year of The Palate, the competition to find the UK's best amateur wine taster, is in its final planning stages. Last year, 10,000 customers entered; this year, as the event is rolled out at a broader list of wine-related happenings, there surely will be more who want to carry off that rather special title.

And the Oddbins year is divided into themed quarters. Greece was one successful choice last year, with some of the featured wines now permanently in the range.

The latest theme, innovation, is about to start. Sapungiu confesses it has been harder than she expected to find truly different ideas, but there should be, for example, a southern French red made in a sherry-style solera and a sparkler sealed by a screw cap.

Such special efforts apart, all branches carry the 350 core wines, with managers free to select more from a further tier of 150 according to their customers' demands. Spain and Italy come hard on the heels of France – where the Rhône and good regional wines usurp classic bordeaux and burgundy – and for basic drinking, Oddbins' shoppers turn most often to Portugal, Gascony and Chile.

These shoppers are not just loyal regulars from the good old original days. Increasingly, young women are joining them (and they've won both Palate titles so far). It means, fortunately, that the easy blend of informality and knowledge – and a little quirkiness – which staff provide is still a selling point. Long may that be so, and long may Oddbins continue to offer an individual wine experience on the high street.

restaurant of the week

You can't beat battered fish in good company

Melvyn Bragg joins our reviewer for lunch at a new addition to Hampstead's dining scene

The old cliché, intended to comfort wounded and sensitive journalists (go ahead – laugh

if you must) was that today's misquotations, erroneous news or atrociously subbed feature was tomorrow's fish-and-chip wrapping – so no hack really should get over het up about it. Except that a new and stupid edict has just been enacted – probably by Brussels, where they wouldn't know a decent fish and chips if it battered them in the face – whereby a chippie can no longer recycle old newsprint, but must now be doling out plates and cutlery. Not that such a ruling will bother the new Fish Café, slap bang at the centre of Hampstead Village – because here is a rather more upmarket affair. But – crucially – not too much so: here is no mini-version of Scott's. This very easy-going and comforting

place is true to the roots of honest and sturdy English peasant fare, while making a rather cool and civilised fist of it.

On that broad section of pavement close to Waterstones, there stands a large square and Mediterranean blue umbrella – and in the summer, the tables clustered around it will be hotly contested. It's so good just to see the place open and running, actually, because there were extraordinary delays apparently due to objections over potential cooking odours, these supported – uncharacteristically – by the Heath & Hampstead Society: "pungent and obtrusive smells", according to them. You may recall that this paper ran a story featuring Melvyn Bragg campaigning on the restaurant's behalf ... and so I ask you: who better to invite there for lunch? I know from experience what an excellent dining

“My starter was presented as if it still were 1974: slices of plain tomato and cucumber surrounding a nicely gooey mound of white crab and yielding avocado, overlaid with ribbons of raw carrot – good flavour, very nostalgic appearance



Joseph Connolly at Fish Café



■ Joseph with Melvyn Bragg at Fish Café in Hampstead High Street

Picture: Polly Hancock

companion he is, we both live just down the road ... so how much more villagey do you want it? Also on the pavement is an A-board proclaiming "Fish and chips £5." Well blimey: a fresh, hot and filling meal in NW3 for a fiver...? No wonder the takeaway side of the business is thriving all day long, and up till 10.30 in the evening.

The interior is like a noodle: very narrow, and seemingly endless. There is the frying bar close to the entrance, and you edge past that into the surprisingly generous seating area. I was given a good table at the very back, beneath a witty juxtaposition of an actual capstan and Hokusai's wave: I'll be fine here, I thought, just so long as no one calls me Captain Birdseye. Furniture is pale and rough-hewn, everything

else bleached and evocative of the sea: there are oars, a ship's lantern and a very jaunty lifebelt in red, white and blue reading "Fish Café, Hampstead, London": rather covetable.

Remarkable career

Lord Bragg of Wigton hardly requires an introduction, nor a summation of his truly remarkable career – but let me say simply that quite apart from his superb radio and television work, he has published 21 novels and 14 works of non-fiction, as well as screenplays for Ken Russell films, such as *Tchaikovsky* and *The Music Lovers*. He is the recipient of awards, honours and fellowships that are literally countless – I know this for a fact because I tried to count them and

literally couldn't – is chancellor of Leeds University and has been a Labour working peer since 1998. There's loads else, but that'll do: just to have written it down makes me feel quite thoroughly useless and idle.

As we perused the menu – which comes in the form of a place mat – Melvyn idly observed that when this site was the not too distinguished Base, it was the favourite of the Arsenal squad (of which he is a supporter). I wouldn't recognise an Arsenal player if he fouled me – though that is also true of every other footballer on the planet. My guest decided quickly: minestrone, grilled cod, chips, mushy peas and broccoli. It's a more expansive menu than you would imagine: all the fish you might expect (as well

as Dover sole at £23.50, which you mightn't) along with meat pies, chicken and steaks. I was having avocado, crab and mayonnaise salad, battered haddock with the same veg as above ... whereupon Melvyn decided he wanted his cod similarly battered, rather than grilled: wise decision. And then added on a couple of pickled onions.

My starter was presented as if it still were 1974: slices of plain tomato and cucumber surrounding a nicely gooey mound of white crab and yielding avocado, overlaid with ribbons of raw carrot – good flavour; very nostalgic appearance. Melvyn approved of his soup – sprinkled with parmesan – and very much enjoyed a large and silky flaky cod, steaming within a very good batter. My haddock was, if anything, even better: a very fine and fresh fish. I would say that the chips (a mountain of them) should have been much crisper ... but these were traditional fish-and-chip shop chips, and I should really have doused them with Sarson's, I suppose. A petit chablis hit the spot.

Favourite restaurants

Melvyn's favourite London restaurants tend to coincide with my own (Wolseley, Sheekey and so on) though he does eat quite a lot at the House of Lords ("the Bishop's Bar, often – where I've never seen a bishop") or else at his West End office desk, where he will invariably have a chicken and avocado sandwich, a yogurt with berries, an apple and a chocolate brownie – all from Pret A Manger. "I do," he admits, "love chocolate." Which he proved by ordering chocolate ice cream – and I had a very good apple pie (more of a flan – very light, with cinnamon) and vanilla ice cream. Melvyn does look enviably fit – largely through walking. "I will often walk from Hampstead to the BBC – that takes an hour." He also walks a lot when at his cottage in the Lake District, which he has owned for 44 years. "Despite the 50 million annual day-trippers to the Lake District, you never see a soul there."

I was reminiscing over the

greatest hits of *The South Bank Show*: Paul McCartney in the very first episode in 1978, singing *Mull of Kintyre* – at the time, the highest-selling single ever. "The Telegraph was very snifty: they asked why is Mr Bragg expecting us to accept The Beatles as art...?" He is currently working on more projects than I can remember: *South Bank Show* editions on Angel Blue (a stunning black American operatic soprano who paid her college fees by winning beauty contests and once – amazingly – lived in Hampstead) as well as Simon Russell Beale's *King Lear*, and Daniel Radcliffe. I asked him if there was anyone he had wanted to feature, but didn't...? "Samuel Beckett. He just wouldn't, partially because he had a lisp, you know. And Graham Greene. Who later was interviewed by someone else, the bugger." And is he just concentrating on television...? Don't be silly: the great *In Our Time* radio programme continues, and he has just begun a new novel set in the 14th century.

So: a good old-fashioned fish-and-chip lunch in peerless (?) and amusing company in the latest outpost of Rinaldo Mollura's growing empire – the stars being two great local landmarks, Villa Bianca and the Coffee Cup. And with Fish Café, he has another hit on his hands: isn't Hampstead lucky?

■ Joseph Connolly's new novel, *Boys and Girls*, is published by Quercus (£18.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

■ FISH CAFÉ

71 Hampstead High Street, NW3
Tel: 020 7433 1430

■ Open Monday-Saturday noon-11pm, Sunday noon-10.30pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Fish and chips to take away: £5. Three-course meal for two with wine, about £85.



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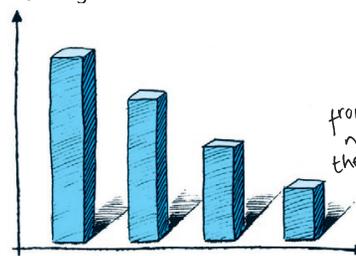
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