



Two excellent reasons to lift a glass in celebration

This was to have been a column suggesting some tempting wines for the Easter holiday. Instead it has turned out to be a very specific celebration.

This year, The Wine Society is 140 years young – and I write “young” deliberately, as any large-scale, long-established wine business less old and staid would be hard to imagine. And 2014 is also the 150th birthday of a company whose bottles have been sold to Wine Society members for 108 years.

So the glass you should raise to mark both anniversaries is the society’s Celebration Crémant, from the cellars of Gratien & Meyer overlooking the Loire river at Saumur.

Besides the delicate, fragrant, fine-bubbled, thoroughly delicious Celebration (£11.50), G&M also provides the society’s non-vintage Saumur brut (£9.50) and Saumur rosé (£10), all made in the same way as champagne, though the grape mix is different – while chardonnay dominates in Celebration, chenin blanc and cabernet franc give the Saumurs their character. In its more easterly extension, the company is responsible for the society’s champagne brut (£29) – another fine way to toast a special occasion. There’s even a de-alcoholised fizz, Festillant (£4.25), where the grapes come from Gascony.

But the story of G&M is sad as well as happy. Alfred Gratien set up his sparkling wine business when he was only 23 but already astute enough to exploit the



■ **Gratien & Meyer, imperiously sited high above the Loire river**

potential for bringing the Loire’s products to the lucrative Paris market on the newly built rail network. He acquired 10 kilometres of the passageways cut into the limestone cliffs along the river (from which the white stone for the chateaux had been extracted) and prospered.

Expansion into champagne soon followed, and a partnership with wine connoisseur Albert Meyer. But Gratien died young, and it was left to Meyer and his descendants to develop the vision of the company founder: very successfully, as a flourishing 21st-century business proves.

Great discoveries

Fizz apart, there’s much to celebrate in the Wine Society’s list, from stars in the under-£6 sector, where decent wine is increasingly hard to find, to all kinds of smarter bottles, always remarkably well priced. As you’d expect, the classics are just that, but there are great discoveries to be made beyond.

For example, recently I’ve tasted such unusual wines as a fiano, normally a southern Italian grape from Argentina (Faldeos Nevados Fiano 2012, £7.75), not one but two pure cinsaults from Chile, a fabulous 2005 cabernet sauvignon from Australia’s

Margaret River region (Glenmore, £22, available May), massive but marvellous Montefalco Sagrantino, Scacciadivoli 2007 (£20 very well spent), rkatsiteli from Bulgaria (Cuvée Bella Rada, Borobitz, £12), and more.

Some more conventional recommendations: whites: Old Vines in Young Hands Branco 2013 (£6), a crisp, long blend of Portuguese native grapes; the impressively classy Château Mont-Redon Côtes-du-Rhône Blanc 2012 (£8.95) and the very fine Tyrell’s Belford Hunter Valley semillon 2009 (£21) which shows how much intense character a bone-dry wine can have.

Reds: spicy, plum-rich concentration in bargain-price Castillo del Barón Monastrell 2013 (£5.50); Quinta do Portal Colheita 2011 (£13), silky depth and fragrant black fruit; Momo Vendimia Seleccionada Ribera del Duero 2010 (£10), great-value expression of one of Spain’s smartest regions. See more on thewinesociety.com.

Shopping elsewhere, I’m hugely enthusiastic over a wine which is the unlikely mix of grapes I’ve ever encountered. Wente is the largest grower in California’s Livermore Valley – a vineyard area once as important as Napa – and has been making wine there since 1883. Murrieta’s Well Whip 2012 (£22, vintagemarque.com) is its newest offering, a headily aromatic blend of chardonnay, gewurztraminer, sauvignon blanc, orange muscat, viognier, pinot blanc, semillon and muscat canelli which, while brilliant on its own, is also a serious food wine. This time, celebrate modern innovation.

restaurant of the week

How my winner was won over to fish and puds

Reader Susan Bennett joins our reviewer for lunch after beating all comers in competition

Cast your mind back, if you will ... to a time that was actually more or less a couple of minutes ago: February, to be precise – when this newspaper announced a competition. There were three simple questions (opinions, rather than facts) and the glittering prize that was dangled before the hungering masses was not just a free lunch, nor even a free lunch at J. Sheekey, one of London’s very best restaurants – but a free lunch at J. Sheekey, one of London’s very best restaurants ... with *me*...! Largesse indeed, I’m sure you’ll agree. There was a fair pile of entries, which I found to be variously diverting, absorbing, flattering, rude, weird and mind-numbingly dull. One of the questions was to name a favourite restaurant, and nearly all of them

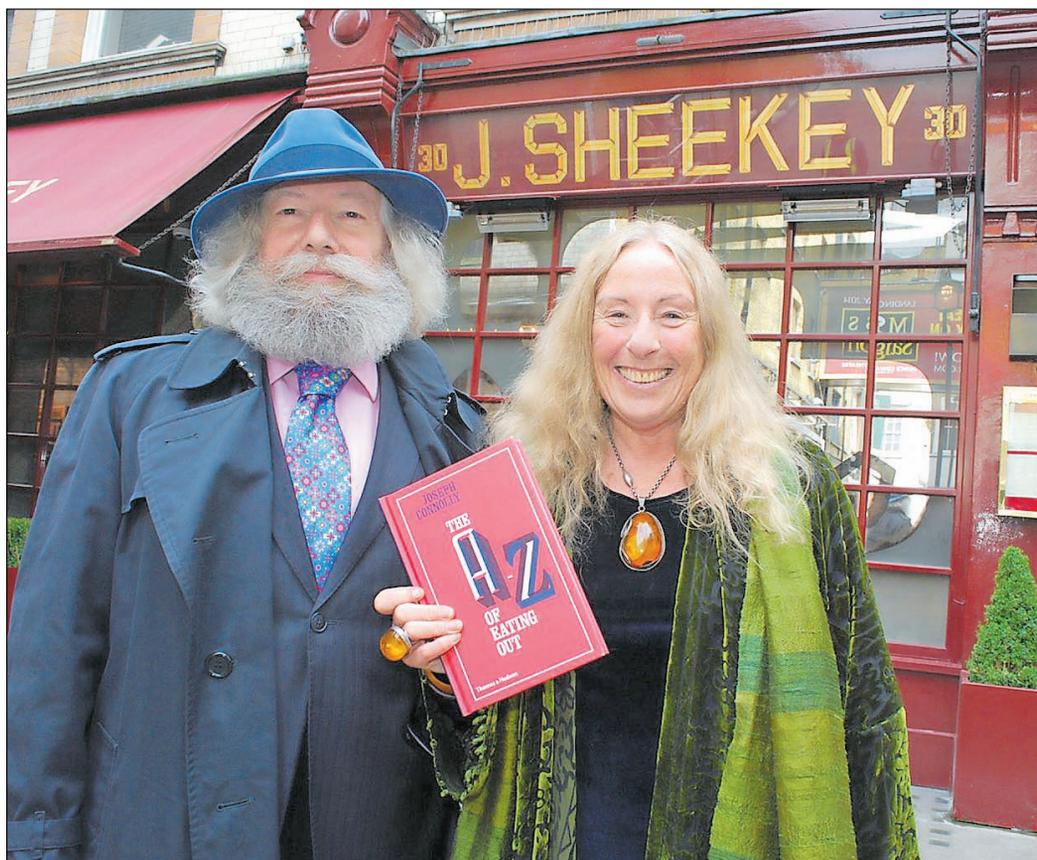
came up local: Singapore Gardens, La Provence, The Chicken Shop, Bistro Aix (twice) and quite a few others, all of which I have previously reviewed. Among a few upper end West End gaffs were also, rather oddly, a Japanese in Chesterfield and a Chinese in Liverpool. Pretty much everyone wanted to eat out more than they did (no surprise) and as to whether they wanted to be a restaurant critic, reactions varied from “very much so” via “not really” to “God, no”. I can easily understand these views, as I experience all of them, from time to time. One fellow wanted to be a restaurant critic so that he could “meet Michael Winner and have a laugh!”. Wouldn’t be that much of a laugh, though: dear Michael croaked more than a year back.

Three runners-up were forced to cope with a signed copy of my

“Then Sue told me that she didn’t like puddings. Then Sue ordered golden pineapple and mango with coconut and lime sorbet. This was beautifully presented on an oval frosted glass plate, and she plainly adored every mouthful



Joseph Connolly at J. Sheekey



■ Joseph with competition winner Susan Bennett outside J. Sheekey

Picture: Polly Hancock

book *The A-Z of Eating Out*, while the winner, Susan Bennett, got one too – in addition to lunch: did her cup runneth over, or what? She reigned triumphant because her letter demonstrated a sense of humour and enthusiasm. Also, she said that in photographs, I never smile (not quite true) and that she would love to have lunch with me if only to discover whether I was in possession of any teeth. Well, as I am not quite yet at the pureed food stage, I thought I ought to prove it to her. She arrived early (eager, you see) and quite resplendent in long flowing hair – even more so than mine own – and rather glamorous in an olive silk devoré velvet sort of coatlet, bought from Zana's

unique boutique in Flask Walk, Hampstead. There was also much chunky amber about her person, which was all very becoming.

Cosy wood panelling

The first thing that Sue told me as we took our places in London's pre-eminent fish restaurant was that she didn't really care for fish – this due to her present husband Earl, a graphic designer, having "wooded her with herrings" (I thought it better not to dwell) and she had been further put off by the whiff of it at countless Jewish weddings: I am merely the reporter. But she loves seafood, however – so didn't take too long in settling upon a half lobster mayonnaise as a starter,

to accompany our celebratory glass of champagne. She very much appreciated the cosy wood panelling in this rather wonderful place, hung as it is with black-and-white portraits of actors gone by. Sheekey's has always been a favourite of theatre people, and the adjoining oyster bar has doubled the attraction. I always used to start with whitebait here, but it's off the menu (as is, bewilderingly, their famous fishcake) so I had potted shrimps – good and meaty, not fridge-cold as is often the way, and with hot toast folded into a linen napkin. Sue was impressed by the half lemon wrapped in muslin that accompanied her lobster – which was evidently very much enjoyed,

as was all the probing into its recesses with an array of silver pinners and pencil thin forks.

Sue lives in Muswell Hill ("a couple of decent restaurants there – but we go to Green Cottage near John Barnes, sometimes twice a day") and has been married to Earl since 2001 – "though we were engaged for 25 years, in case it didn't work out". She became a folk singer while still attending North London Collegiate (where later she taught art). At the tender age of 17, she found herself as half of a duo called Suzon & Jane (she being Suzon) playing in Paris in the 1960s with Jacques Brel. "My parents didn't seem to mind," she says. While busking on the Pont des Arts, two men approached. "One said nothing, but was staring intently at a fly on his hand." I didn't mention that that was what Norman Bates did in the closing frames of *Psycho*. Anyway, the fly-watcher turned out to be Allen Ginsberg, and his pal the fellow Beat poet Gregory Corso. Back in Blighty, she was on stage with Long John Baldry ("we're both from Edgware").

Gorgeously gooeey

I told her that whenever I am at Sheekey's, I have the fish pie – the best in London – whereupon she recalled seeing Mary Berry recently make one on television, and was intrigued: so much so that she ordered it. God, it's so good: perfectly browned crunchy topping to the mash, and a gorgeously gooeey melange of haddock, salmon, sole and maybe hake (it sometimes varies) and perfect, I think, with a light red – so we had a splendid Chiroubles (posh Beaujolais). Sue said the pie was utterly delicious: she could not understand why she had been down on fish for so long. Later in life, an injury to a finger prevented her from playing the guitar, and so – having discarded being a silversmith and a weaver – she discovered pottery. "As soon as I touched the clay," she says, "it was like coming home." Her pots have been stocked by Harrods and John Lewis, and she has also made commemorative wares for

the film industry. "I once made one for Moses. You know – Charlton Heston. Then I became an art teacher, but after 17 years, I left: it all had become a production line." These days she is (deep breath) assistant county organiser for the National Gardens Scheme for north-west London – yes but get this: to the exclusion of Hampstead, Highgate and the Suburb. "My own garden is soon to feature in *House Beautiful*. It isn't beautiful – the house. But the garden is."

Then Sue told me that she didn't like puddings. Then Sue ordered golden pineapple and mango with coconut and lime sorbet. This was beautifully presented on an oval frosted glass plate, and she plainly adored every mouthful. We chatted about how every morning she does the *Telegraph* cryptic crossword and I do the *Times* ... and about her dearest friend, Sister Anne, a nun who is 109 years old and also, quite naturally, the daughter of a Belgian viscount. "I've written to a cardinal to get Anne the recognition she deserves. Bugger hasn't replied."

So there was lunch: and if, as I wander through the valley of life, I can along the way cure a fellow pilgrim of her aversions to fish and puddings, then it shall not have been in vain. I think the winner enjoyed her winnings ... and at least she now knows that I have teeth.

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

FACTFILE

- **J. SHEEKEY**
28-34 St Martin's Court, WC2
Tel: 020 7240 2565
- Open Monday-Saturday noon-3pm, 5.30pm-midnight. Sunday noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: About £150 for three-course meal for two with wine.

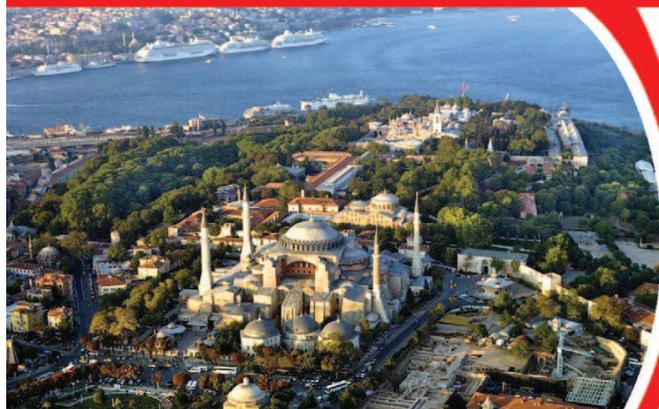
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