



# A brand you can rely on

Pays d'Oc labelling may be under fire, but its wines are delicious

**W**ay, way back, in my early days of wine writing, I was about to leave a tasting when a winemaker called out to me: "Do you want to taste the best red wine in the world?" Who could resist?

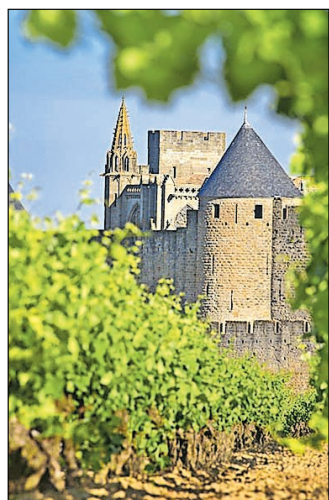
That wine – and it was very good, though perhaps a little oversold by its maker – was Cuvée Mythique, a southern French blend of a host of red grape varieties most of which I'd never before encountered, its bottle sporting a black owl logo on a plain terracotta background.

More than two decades on, the wine is still around. The blend is simplified and the winemaking reflects 21st century taste, but terracotta label and owl remain. And it is still an excellent example of how wines from "minor" regions can challenge the classics.

Not that its source, Pays d'Oc, is a "minor" region. The vineyards of the 20,000 growers cover 100,000 hectares and the grapes fill 840 million bottles a year, two-thirds of all French country wines – the category defined as wines of protected geographic indication (Pays d'Oc IGP is what you'll see on the bottle).

But largely gone is Languedoc's wine-lake rubbish. Instead, plantings are more on hills than plains, high-yielding poor-quality varieties have been replaced by smarter ones, and increasingly dedicated growers are enjoying the freedom that IGP allows to blend imaginatively, or stick to single varieties, and label informatively.

Many of the resulting wines are delicious and, importantly,



■ **Wine with a sense of place:** Pays d'Oc vines growing outside the walls of the historic city of Carcassonne *Picture: C.&G. Deschamps*

are excellent value for money. Sadly, Cuvée Mythique is not currently sold in the UK but, if it were, the price would be a little under £10. There are alternatives galore, however, and just a few are suggested below.

There is plenty of effort currently to promote Pays d'Oc as a reliable "brand" for newcomers to French wine. But there are differing views on the future of such IGP wines.

One winemaker I talked to recently – a man who has much experience in providing wines UK drinkers like – was pessimistic. Not because of any doubt over IGP's position on the quality ladder of French wine classification, but simply on practical grounds.

In years like 2013, when the grape harvest is low, he argues that many growers are stepping

straight from appellation d'origine protégée (the top level) to vin de France (the most flexible), avoiding the need to pass the often slow controls before IGP is allowed on the label. So, maybe, IGP could be squeezed out.

No way, insisted another, emphasising that IGP is recognised as a distinct step in quality above vin de France. Yes, in principle, but there are some very good wines which carry simply the vin de France tag. So that points to the big vin de France risk: a huge span of quality, something which shouldn't happen with IGP.

But back to Pays d'Oc. The region has loads going for it in terms of climate and grape-growing locations. The choice of wines is immense, with 56 different grape varieties permitted – have you encountered marselan, for example, or chasan?

## Recommended

Here are some of the wines I've enjoyed recently (available vintages may vary), but do experiment further: Domaine Rives-Blanches chardonnay/chenin blanc 2012, refreshing and zesty (£9.95, [www.greatwesternwine.co.uk](http://www.greatwesternwine.co.uk)); Domaine les Yeuses vermentino 2012, citrusy yet rounded and great value (£7.50, [www.leafsandemman.co.uk](http://www.leafsandemman.co.uk)); Domaine de Brau chardonnay/roussanne 2011, intriguing and enjoyable blend of fresh fruit and herbal/honeyed elements, and Domaine de Brau cabernet franc/cabernet sauvignon 2010, aromatic and attractive warm-weather red, (£8.50 and £8 respectively, [www.vintageroots.co.uk](http://www.vintageroots.co.uk)); Cournon Lafleur malbec 2012, crowd-pleasing and juicy (£8, Majestic – £7 for two-plus).

## restaurant of the week

# A change in my tastes – it really is too MUCH!

An upscale Indian has Joseph musing on a shift in the times, both in Britain and for him

**T**oo MUCH ...! You have to be pretty old, actually, to remember the time when this little phrase did not denote vulgar excess but was a synonym for absolutely fabulousness. For yes, we are talking about the decade that swung, the sixties, when else? Way OUT ...! That was another. This did not mean outré or off the wall (and obviously not exit) but pretty much the same as Too MUCH: simply the epitome of trendy desirability. The only epithet of this sort that lingers on is COOL ...! Which is even more ubiquitous now than in the days when love was not only free, but all you needed, baby. But I found myself muttering "too much ..."

just the other evening in Belsize Park ... and all I meant was: bloody expensive. I was having a drink in The George with Max, my globetrotting chum who nominally lives in Canada, but never seems actually to be there because he is constantly trotting the globe. Just back from North Korea, of all places, where he managed not to be put to death by the Dear Leader. The George is one of the most successful transformations of a pub that I have recently encountered. It used to be such a sticky and pitiful boozery: the wine was quite literally undrinkable, the food unspeakable (greasy fatty sausages, flabby chips ... but we shall not speak of it). Well it sure isn't like that any more: very smart, serene and inviting, every

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## Joseph Connolly at Hazara



■ Joseph at Hazara in Belsize Village

single table jammed with happy people drinking mostly white and rose wine, with a smattering of beer. The wine list is as long as your leg, and Max bought a bottle of red Sancerre, something of a novelty. It was light, it was fruity – it was what people term ‘approachable’, which translates as finding that you have rather quickly finished it and ordered another. But ... it was £30. And I thought: too much. But the bar staff (not too much – too few) could hardly keep up with alcoholic demand – though of course everybody knows that anyone at all in NW3 is a multi-millionaire.

We were not dining at The George, however, but in Hazara, an upscale Indian restaurant in

Belsize Village. I had constantly heard nothing but good of the place, but the reason I hadn’t got around to it before is twofold: firstly, they don’t open for lunch except at weekends – and I tend to be a luncher; while at weekends I tend to be a writer. And secondly ... well, it’s Indian ... and Indian does not number among my favourite cuisines (which yes I know makes me out of step with practically the whole of the country, but there you are). I had been assured, however, that Hazara was about as far removed from your average high street curry house as could be imagined ... and so the time had come.

Belsize Village is truly charming in its unchanging and intimate nature. There is a tree

in the street strung with tiny blue lights – though whether this is an inspired piece of urban decoration or simply left over from Christmas, I couldn’t tell you. Hazara takes up a pleasing corner site that long ago was a second-hand bookshop. I knew the owners: they eventually closed down having almost never sold a thing because the entire large space was so utterly crammed with books – the floor wholly covered with shoulder-high stacks, the walls obliterated – that there was literally no room for anyone to actually enter. And before that, it was used as a location in a film called *Smashing Time*, a very funny satire on the swinging sixties actually made during the swinging sixties and starring Rita

Tushingham and Lynn Redgrave. So what is now Hazara featured as a Biba-type boutique which was called ... Too MUCH ...! Now look: how clever was that? The way I brought us right back to the opening of the piece, yes? Cool, wasn’t it? Way out, even.

The décor is more seventies disco than sixties, however: soft and violet-tinted, and clusters of dripping spherical light installations: rather nice. Curved bright red bar – all good. And from the second Max and I walked through the door, my cover as an anonymous restaurant reviewer was blown to smithereens. One of a party of ladies looked up from her dinner to say “That’s Joseph somebody, isn’t it ...?” And before anyone could suggest ‘Stalin’, we quickly took our places. Then Taj the owner came over and said “oh my goodness – I took your booking over the phone and I didn’t realise that it was YOU ...!” Oh Lord. Well okay then – I’m here: feed me.

### Extensive menu

The menu is extensive, and draws upon all areas of India from Punjab in the north to Kerala in the south, while the ingredients and spices are the best and freshest, meat and fish sourced each dawn from Smithfield and Billingsgate by Taj himself (do restaurateurs ever get any sleep? I do sometimes wonder). We kicked off with poppadums that were actually worth eating – crisp, as thin as thin, and delightfully scented – with three dips: tamarind, yogurt and a sublime mango. Then a trio of starters, attractively presented on curvily elliptical dishes that sinuously snuggle up to one another: Chicken tikka masala (because you’ve got to, really): six large and tender chunks – a little hot for me (Kashmiri chilli) but Max demolished them. Then the excellent chef’s special of home-made cottage cheese stuffed with spiced dates and figs with tangy mint powder: like tiny triangular sandwiches, and truly good. And a pair of chargrilled lamb chops infused with star anise and pomegranate – yielding and

flavoursome, if slightly overdone. “This food,” said Max, “is quite unbelievably good”. I note in passing that while the plates and cutlery are fine and elegant, the wine glasses are thick-rimmed and cheap: odd.

Then he ate Lal Maas – a Rajasthan dish of lamb braised with chillies, onion and garlic (which carried a ‘heat’ warning: “that’s okay,” said Max: “I can chew raw chillies”). I had Methi Murg, a very succulent chicken dish from Kashmir: This is cooked with fenugreek leaves, which are bitter ... a little too bitter; actually, but the blend was a clever and successful one. Palak Paneer – cottage cheese simmered in spinach – was very good indeed, and there was also rice with peas ... which was rice with peas. “This,” pronounced Max now, “is actually the best Indian food I have ever eaten”. And Max has eaten Indian food everywhere from Brick Lane ... to India. Because he’s a globetrotter, see – and the night before this dinner he had flown to London first class from Bangkok. “Thai Airlines give you an hour-long massage before the flight. It turns you to jelly, but then they wheel you on to the plane. And give you Dom Perignon”. Which, apart from being perfectly maddening in every way possible, was, in terms of information ... Too MUCH ...!

■ 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](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

### FACTFILE

- **HAZARA**  
44 Belsize Lane, NW3  
Tel: 020 7433 1147
- Open Mon-Fri 6pm-11pm. Sat noon-11pm. Sun noon-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- COST It can mount up ... about £110 for two course meal for two with wine.



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