



It's such a happy valley

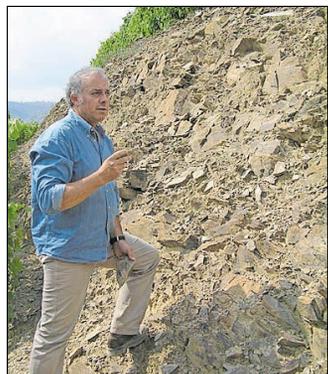
Great white wines come from what may seem an unlikely location

The white wines of Portugal's Douro Valley are unlikely stars. Just look at the place: vertiginously steep dry slopes, a baking hot summer sun – hardly two qualities high on the location list of any sensible white wine grower. But the wines, made mostly from local varieties whose names are unrecognisable and unpronounceable but which flourish in adversity, are a delight.

As yet, they haven't reached the covetable status they deserve, and thus there are plenty of bargains to be found. Simply enter 'douro branco' on www.wine-searcher.com, and there will be two pages of possibilities, with a sensible number below £12 a bottle (click through to the individual sellers to get the tax-inclusive prices).

Among them, here's one I've recently enjoyed: Altano 2012 Douro (£9-£9.75, independents including www.vintagemarque.com, www.davy.co.uk). Aromatic and juicy, with pink grapefruit prominent among its tropical fruit flavours, this is made from organically-grown malvasia fina, viosinho and moscatel galego grapes. The vineyards are mostly higher or cooler than many Douro red-grape locations, and the wine has a happy refreshing character.

But great whites also come from places where reds have long ruled supreme – when I was in the Douro Valley a couple of years ago white varieties were being grafted on to the rootstocks of previously red vines on steep, sunny sites immediately above the river. Regrafting is a much quicker way of getting a usable harvest from new varieties than



■ Jose Manso, agronomist at Quinta de São Luiz, in the Douro Valley terraces

replanting, and those involved with the work are happy with the results.

Doural Branco 2012 (£8.50, www.henningswine.co.uk) comes from Sogevinus, which has pioneered this work in its Quinta de São Luiz vineyards. I liked the wine in an earlier vintage – I haven't tasted this one – and other whites from the company which I've tried in the past have been very stylish.

Summery

I'll return to Portugal's under-appreciated wines next week, though from rather different areas, but now for some other white wines to consider if the promised marvellous May does materialise (or even if it doesn't).

Both M&S and Sainsbury's have been making a fuss about new wines on their shelves from the southern hemisphere, and the former's Mestizo 2013 organic viognier/marsanne (£10) from Chile's Casablanca Valley is a nutty, fresh-fruited summery blend. Interesting, too, is M&S Secano Estate sauvignon gris 2012

(£9), a slightly spicier Chilean take on some of the flavours of more-familiar sauvignon blanc and a good alternative if you like what the Kiwis do with the latter grape.

Sainsbury's new Winemakers' Selection 2013 sauvignon blanc from South Australia's Limestone Coast region is a bargain at £6. It comes from the respected Kingston Estate and has attractive nettle green scents and crisp character.

Rather more sophisticated is Peter Yealands' Marlborough sauvignon blanc 2013 (£10, Sainsbury's), where classic Kiwi sauvignon aromatics are matched by lots of fresh, bright interest on the palate.

Still in the southern hemisphere, Warwick Estate White Lady 2011 chardonnay (£18, Vagabond Wines, Charlotte Street, W1) is a South African effort along burgundian lines, done with some class, its oakiness restrained and minerality framing the fruit.

Back in Europe, jump at the chance of buying the splendidly aromatic and mouth-filling but bone dry German riesling, Weingut Göttelmann 'Halbmond' 2007 (£12, www.fromvineyardsdirect.com).

And the bottle which is currently open (though there won't be any left in it soon) is another European classic, Louis Latour Pouilly-Vinzelles 'En Paradis' 2012 (£13 at Majestic on two or more – but it's not in stock in all stores; otherwise £15-16 from independents including Mill Hill Wines and Spirited Wines). Pouilly-Vinzelles is one of the posher appellations of the Macon, where the chardonnay grape is allowed to sing without drowning in oak. This is true pleasure.

Old fire station is now hottest place in town

Reviewer follows in the footsteps of Harry Styles and Rita Ora to a popular venue

Chiltern Firehouse in Marylebone is the hottest and coolest place in town – only open a couple of months, and yet already all over the gossip pages and colonised by people such as Rio Ferdinand and David Walliams. Well, naturally, all of this has put me off hugely, but still I thought I ought to trot along. The evening before I was there, Rita Ora and Harry Styles were in: unlucky for them – if only they had delayed their meal until Saturday brunch, they might have met me. The building is very beautiful, as old fire stations often are (including the recently deceased gem in Belsize) and a confection of red brick and stone, not unlike Harrow School. The huge doorways through which the red engines once thundered are now glazed over; and the space affords a splendidly furnished terrace which is destined to be THE place to sit, eat, drink and smoke throughout the summer. This whole building is soon to be a hotel, but when I was there was open only for dinner and weekend brunch – though by the time you read this, they should be open for weekday lunch as well.

There is a fellow in a cape and a silly hat to welcome you, and the woman who takes your coat I

am sure I have seen on the cover of *Vogue*. Because this place has glamour: the female overseers wear bottle green long skirts very fetchingly split to the waist, and all look like supermodels. The chaps wear a three-piece suit minus the jacket, and an electric blue cravat: who knows – the presence of the versatile but much derided cravat in so cool a venue might herald its return to fashion acceptance, and maybe even supremacy. Andre Balazs is the man behind Marylebone's grooviest venture yet – he of New York's legendary Marchmont and Mercer hotels – and will hold trendy Marylebone in the palm of his hand ... at least until late May, when Jeremy King and Chris Corbin open Fischer's on the High Street: an embarrassment of riches – we will all die of coolth.

Pleasingly strange

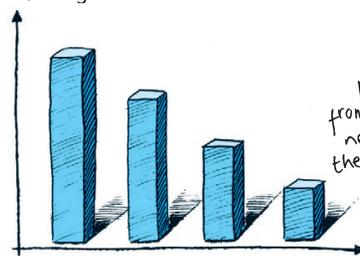
My cover was blown as soon as I entered, I'm afraid: the maître d'hotel Darius Namdar was, until weeks ago, overseeing at The Wolseley, so knew me well. The interior is pleasingly strange, the ceiling seemingly constructed out of Meccano, infilled with woven fabric panels – the floor a blend of 1950s Axminster and ceramic tiles. The kitchen – presided over by head chefs Nuno Mendes and



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Joseph Connolly at Chiltern Firehouse



■ Joseph with restaurateur Beth Coventry at Chiltern Firehouse, in a montage of photographs by Polly Hancock

Dale Osborne (late of Heston Blumenthal's Dinner) – is central, raised and fizzing. The place was rammed and the vibe is quite spectacular: this place has success written all over it – and also the confidence to set each table with salt and pepper cruets in the form of a pair of cutely kitsch porcelain puppies whose snouts are magnetised so that they are locked forever in a smoochy (poochy?) kiss.

My guest was Beth Coventry, a lady who knows a great deal

about cooking and running restaurants, having done both at Langan's Brasserie, Green's in St James's and – for the past ten years – The Wells in the Village. I have enthused about The Wells before, and still think it is the best kitchen in Hampstead. I told Beth that I had been recognised – and she knows all about that as well, her sister being the doyenne of restaurant critics, Fay Maschler. "Sometimes," says Beth, "Fay will wear a wig to avoid being recognised." Yes, well – I always

do, and it doesn't work for me.

The brunch menu is generous: six starters, eight mains to do with eggs, and five more with meat and fish. All attractive dishes – and I was shown the dinner menu as well, which did look rather exciting. Beth was having yogurt fruit parfait with granola, seeds and honey to start with, followed by fried eggs in the pot with champignons, asparagus, rocket and parmesan. And I ordered Firehouse Caesar with crispy chicken skin and parmesan, and

then lobster scrambled eggs fines herbes, with a side of broccoli. The parfait was very beautiful – perfectly peeled orange segments over the honeyed yogurt and gravel of granola ... though I had to request a spoon so that Beth might eat it. It was much enjoyed ... though my Caesar salad was very ordinary: not cos, but baby gem lettuce, almost no anchovy and not enough crispy chicken skin to make any impression at all: the parmesan and dressing were good. We had a bottle of Badoit (Beth hasn't touched alcohol for twenty-three years) and I had a glass of Ruinart champagne, having not touched alcohol since the day before. Beth loves to cook with friends – friends such as Jeremy Lee, head chef at Quo Vadis, and her great chum Caroline Conran, with whom she has just visited the Basque region in order to assist in the research for Caroline's next cookbook. She also loves to go to India whenever she can – she and Fay were born there.

Translucent

We talked about the old days at Langan's. "Peter wasn't just a boorish drunk," says Beth. "He really did know how to run restaurants. In Odin's, he let people like Hockney and Patrick Proctor pay for food with paintings ... but then fifteen people would turn up for a free lunch, which became unsupportable ..." She remembers that during her time at Langan's, Chris Corbin – now one of Britain's foremost restaurateurs – was a "rather skinny commis chef". Her main arrived in a black cocotte, rather than a "pot": two glorious eggs, the yolks the colour of her orange segments – and a wonderful array of raw and cooked mushroom, fat new season asparagus, raw translucent courgette and generous parmesan. "Really excellent, this – I love it." My scrambled egg was coral-coloured from the lobster ... but rather granular on top, and watery beneath. And, as if by magic, Darius was instantly at my side, and wearing an inquiring eyebrow. I made my point, and he promised an immediate replacement. And

thirty seconds later, it appeared – much creamier; and with huge chunks of good and meaty lobster – lovely with the al dente broccoli, though still not the best scrambled egg I have eaten. "That has always been Albert Roux's test for aspiring chefs," said Beth. "To do eggs in all the different ways."

I asked her how she came to be head chef at Green's – a very cosy and clubby place off Jermyn Street. "Good question. I knew how to cook, although I wasn't professionally trained – but I knew nothing about running a restaurant. I gradually introduced what were then novelties to a place like that: fishcakes, steak and kidney pudding ..." Then I had a chocolate tart: all desserts are made on the premises, and this was just superb – a glossy triangle of ganache, with what looked like a deflated Scotch egg ... which turned out to be almond ice cream, rolled in the granulated nuts. And despite a cheeky 15 per cent service, the bill wasn't bad at all – factoring in the glamour element. I idly wondered – now that the area is devoid of firefighting facilities – what they would do if there was a fire in the kitchen ...? Burn, I suppose. But meanwhile Chiltern Firehouse is merely hot ... and smokin'.

■ 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

■ CHILTERN FIREHOUSE

1 Chiltern Street, W1
Tel: 020 7073 7676

■ At time of writing, open for dinner daily and weekend brunch, 11.30am-3pm. Lunch soon – and maybe even now.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Cost: Brunch is the price of lunch – about £110 with modest drink. Dinner is very expensive.

ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE

Bistro blends style with exquisite French food

Donna Louise Hay visits **Aubaine** in Hampstead High Street

A favourite restaurant of mine in Hampstead, and reaching high on my list of mouth-watering wonders, is Aubaine.

The French bistro, at 82 Hampstead High Street, is a true blend of cosmopolitan style and French cuisine, offering style and simplicity with its approachable ambience and chic interior.

It is important to note that, during my visit, the restaurant was bustling with diners of all nationalities and many French – always a good sign.

The service at Aubaine

is second to none. Friendly, approachable staff take careful consideration over your menu choice, drinks and overall experience at the restaurant.

The restaurant prides itself in its provenance, with locally sourced food which is French in style and fresh in taste. The menu offers an array of choices to suit all the family – from Calamars Frit (salt and chilli squid) to Salade de Roquefort (Roquefort cheese dancing within walnuts, pear and dandelion) – and that's just for starters.

Bestsellers on the menu include



■ Aubaine is the perfect place to dine with friends or family

Spaghetti au homard (spaghetti, lobster, tomato, cream and basil), Filet de Boeuf (fillet steak) and a delightful set of patisseries to finish your Aubaine experience.

I would highly recommend the Raspberry Tart and, of course, a macaroon or two to finish with an espresso. Daily specials are also on offer, including soup and the meat

of the day.

With prices from £5.50 for a starter, Aubaine is the perfect place to dine with friends or family without tugging on the purse strings. You can even pop by and sit outside the restaurant for a light lunch or romantic evening meal.

Aubaine offers all-day dining to suit everyone's lifestyle, including brunch throughout Saturday and Sunday if you're in search of a lazy, relaxed weekend.

The restaurant also has a fantastic array of events going on throughout May.

■ For more details, call 020 3432 9260 or visit aubaine.co.uk. If you bring this article along to Aubaine Hampstead, you will receive a complimentary glass of wine or a complimentary dessert for every à la carte menu lunch and dinner from Monday to Friday, May 1 until July 31.