



Joys of spring cleaning...

Clearing out forgotten bottles can lead to some pleasant surprises

This is revelation time. What ancient bottles do you have mouldering in boxes below the stairs, underneath the spare bed, in a kitchen cupboard, even in a proper below-ground cellar? Have a look, get out all but those which relish long ageing, and drink them – perhaps as a themed evening with friends who've been persuaded to carry out the same wine-focused spring cleaning exercise. It could be an interesting experience.

I'll admit to being as guilty as anyone in this forgotten-bottles scenario. I don't have a temperature-controlled cellar, just a moderately cool cupboard on an east-facing wall, and I've been drinking up wines which have languished there longer than is good for them.

One, though, was in its prime. Coincidentally, I'd just received a sample bottle of the latest vintage released, 2011, of Torres Salmos, a grenache-dominated blend from grapes grown on the strange striped "licorella" slate soils of Priorat, high in the hills of Catalonia.

Rather than open that adolescent wine – pleasant as it certainly would be – I pulled the cork on the 2007 Salmos I'd found deep in the cupboard. I'm glad I waited. Youthful fruit and modern oak had mellowed into something very special. There was the faintest hint of leathery age on the nose, followed by rich, gently spiced black fruits balanced by fresh acidity (a quality which had certainly helped the wine to age so well) and lingering pleasure in the mouth. No more detailed notes were needed than "yum" – and it was a forceful confirmation



■ Torres vineyard at Porrera, 500 metres up in the heart of Priorat

that patience, or even poor cellar control, can be rewarded.

What is interesting is how little the price of this lovely wine has changed. The rrp of the 2011 is £19; the 2007 was £18. That's unlikely to reflect vintage quality, as both are regarded as very good, and much of the extra pound goes directly to the chancellor in increased duty and VAT. If Torres is somehow absorbing all extra costs, rather than passing them on to consumers, that's another big tick on the profile of what is deservedly seen as one of the best – and greenest – big-brand wine companies in the world.

Buy Salmos at Waitrose (2010, £18.50) or vintagemarque.com (2011, £21.30).

Matured pungency

I've had other good experiences with older wines. New Zealand sauvignon blanc is generally not something you'd expect to age well, but I came across a several-years-old bottle of a single-vineyard wine from Villa Maria, another big international name, which was drunk with pleasure, and respect for its matured pungency and layered fruit content, with a group of

sauvignon blanc growers from France's Loire Valley. That bottle had languished not in my cellar but in Tesco's – I couldn't resist a wine sale bargain.

But still in the Loire Valley, I've had bad luck with savennières, a flagship chenin blanc appellation. It has long had the reputation of needing years in bottle before its piercing acidity softens and lets the fruit sing, but a couple of bottles I deliberately tucked away to achieve just that didn't. Instead, they oxidised.

That happened even though they were kept in a dark, coolish spot. Oxidation is usually a result of light and heat, as was very clearly shown by the bottles of fine monbazillac (the best is an appealing and cheaper alternative to sauternes) that a pig-headed friend persisted in keeping in his loft. That's the worst possible place, given the huge surges between heat and cold. The wine turned from gold to dusty chestnut brown and tasted more like sweet sherry than the marmalade-laced fresh nectar of a properly stored bottle. How sad.

But back to those boxes, and, hopefully, happiness.

A carte to frame and drool over for all eternity

Amid the architectural wasteland that Swiss Cottage has become, fine dining lives on

Why should it be that we in NW3 are repeatedly forced to campaign (almost always unsuccessfully) for the retention of essential amenities – libraries, post offices, fire and police stations – while with the other hand attempting to stave off the slavering rapacity of developers? And now, once more, once again, another bloody time, the borough is compelled to mount a concerted battle against the fiends: the speculators, the architects and the (don't laugh) "planners". This time it is the turn of Swiss Cottage, where the current modestly sized if undistinguished office block 100 Avenue Road, home to the *Ham&High*, is under threat of demolition, the idea being to replace it with something

obviously nastier, this to incorporate a 24-storey tower. So exactly what sort of game is being played here? Only the usual: outrageous applications are summarily filed, the developers being wholly aware of the outcry they will provoke. A tower on that scale will, of course, ruin views from just about everywhere, but will not blight Swiss Cottage itself, because that poor, innocent and now practically obliterated area has been serially blighted practically unto death throughout the passing decades. The horrible library and swimming pool, the Marriott, the laughably ugly new school in Avenue Road, the perpetually stupid "Visage" building in Winchester Road which leans outwards for the very good reason that the useless architects thought "hey, I know! Let's make this one lean outwards! Yay!" – and

“The wine list is long and rather brilliant, with a welcome selection of half-bottles. Welcome, that is, if you are going down the one-course pre-theatre route. I am more of the 'let's just squander the entire afternoon' persuasion

“I found my job on jobs24.co.uk”

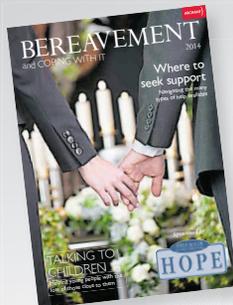


Jordan
Telesales Executive

Find your next job in London today with jobs24.co.uk

IN PAPER • ONLINE • ON MOBILE

READER OFFER:



Request your **FREE** copy today...

For a FREE copy of Bereavement and Coping With It fill in your details below and return to: Bereavement and Coping With It, Media House, 539 High Road, Ilford, Essex, IG1 1UD or email your details to bereavement@archant.co.uk

Name:

Email:

Address:

Postcode:

Tel Number:

T&Cs: Postage and packing fees may be applied. Offer open only to UK residents. One copy per household. By returning your details to Bereavement and Coping With It you will automatically be subscribed to receive news and offers from Archant London. To opt out visit the link on all future email communication.

ARCHANT



Do you have a **complaint** against this newspaper?

If you have a complaint about the editorial content in this newspaper which concerns **inaccuracy** or **intrusion** and the article directly affects you, then write to the editor with your complaint.

If you remain dissatisfied then please contact the **Press Complaints Commission** – a self-regulatory body established to uphold a Code of Practice, agreed by the industry, for all newspapers in the UK. The PCC will then seek to resolve your complaint quickly and amicably.

To contact the Commission:

Halton House, 20/23 Holborn, London EC1N 2JD

Tel: 020 7831 0022 Fax: 020 7831 0025

Helpline: 0845 600 2757

www.pcc.org.uk



Joseph Connolly at Bradleys



■ Joseph at Bradleys in Swiss Cottage

of course the absolutely appalling extension to the Central School of Speech and Drama, which still appears to be in its builders' cladding ... not to say the theatre itself and that bizarre great fish tank dumped in the middle of the pavement at the entrance to Eton Avenue.

Does anyone believe any one of these to be beautiful in its own right, and a lasting enhancement to the area? Well, do they? When is the last time you heard that these faceless ranks of money-grubbing vandals were "planning" a new building, precinct, block or shopping complex and you thought "oh goody: I'm sure it will be splendid, fit perfectly into its environment, and I just can't wait to see it!" The very words "architect" and "planner" cast a layer of dust and deep depression over any community because we all just know that they will be simply out to cram

into an insulting eyesore the very maximum number of "units" to be let or sold at the most exorbitant cost, and to hell with everyone and everything else. And, of course, they play us for fools: apply for 24 storeys, wait for the dust to settle, reapply for 18 ... which will be considered, though on balance rejected, and then happily settle for a dozen or so: which was all they wanted or expected in the first place, though still twice as tall as what we have at present. We will feel as if we have pulled off some sort of victory, but of course we will have been duped and cheated, as usual. Again. Yet one more time.

Serious and stylish

Now I am old enough to remember when Swiss Cottage was made up of an elegant Victorian parade of shops, an arcade and trees, the largest building for miles around being the Odeon – which was on a road, and not a motorway. But

when you turn into Eton Avenue, peace, leafiness and handsome buildings continue to be. Also in the top half of Winchester Road, which still looks and feel to have been built by humans, for humans. And there stands a bastion: Bradleys. I have reviewed this restaurant only once before, many years ago, when the décor had been newly overhauled. It looks much the same, but very crisp and fresh – a serious and stylish place without and within, with cool silvery grey offset by highly polished floor and tables, comfortably upholstered chairs, the odd innocuous abstract canvas, and a spattering of orchids. My wife and I had arrived early for lunch – about 12.30 – and I wondered whether the place was open. It was – though because it was at that time, empty and echoey, I thought oh well: we'll have a quick bite, and be off. In fact we left three hours later – not

due to dilatory service, but simply the easy joy of being there, and happily indulging the fine and extensive menu. Unusually, there is a prix fixe as well as a set lunch menu. The prix fixe is £27.50 for three courses of a superior nature, the set deal being £12.95 for a single course (a useful option, if you are next to a theatre), £15.95 for two, and £19.95 for three. The carte is something of a gourmet's delight: you could mount, frame and drool over it for all of eternity.

Parmesan custard

My wife was going prix fixe: so, artichoke barigoule – a wonderful seasonal Provençal dish incorporating stock, white wine and fennel seeds, with sweet tomato – this to be followed by the grilled fish selection (brill, mullet, cod and salmon) with courgette spaghetti and samphire. I was having (from the carte) new season English asparagus with something irresistibly described as "parmesan custard" and rocket and hazelnuts, and then roast rump of veal with salsify, gnocchi and leeks. With dishes such as this, you need precision, and a chef with flair who is completely in control ... and in Simon Bradley, we have that man. He has been cooking here for 23 years, and is better than ever. The wine list is long and rather brilliant, with a welcome selection of half-bottles. Welcome, that is, if you are going the one-course pre-theatre route. I am more of the "let's just squander the entire afternoon" persuasion, so we had a bottle of Côtes du Rhône – and the glasses are large, and fine quality.

The artichoke was intensely flavoured and succulent, with layers of surprising tastes and an undertow of olive – while the "parmesan custard" was simply Ambrosial: superb mousse of creaminess, quite perfect with the asparagus. The four pieces of fish sang with freshness, colour and flavour – the long ribbons of courgette in imitation of spaghetti eminently twirlable: very much enjoyed. My large and tender pink and yielding veal was an utter triumph, the integration of tiny pieces of leek into a glossy

and elegant jus, just perfect. As were Jersey Royals. Food at this level is a bargain – simply due to the time, care and expertise in sourcing, preparing, cooking and presentation: a delight for all the senses.

Then there was a rhubarb crumble soufflé with crème anglaise: a 20-minute wait, appropriately, and this is what my wife said: "It's gorgeous. Mm ... gorgeous. Ooh ... mm ...". There was a bit more of that before she added: "I think this could be the best dessert I have ever had". I investigated the cheeseboard (perfectly kept – how rare is that?) and had Liverot, Cheddar, a bit of Vacherin ... all so good. We had also enjoyed a pre-meal amuse-bouche, three sorts of very good home-made bread, and now some home-made and meltingly gooey chocolates. Bradleys won a Michelin Bib Gourmand five years ago, but I really do think it is time for it to step up to a fully fledged star. Because nestling in the shadow of whatever new and hideous brutality is next to be inflicted upon Swiss Cottage is not just one of NW3's absolutely top restaurants, but also one of the finest I have recently been to in the whole of London. Bradleys is a treasure.

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

FACTFILE

■ BRADLEYS

25 Winchester Road, NW3
Tel: 020 7722 3457

■ Open Monday-Saturday noon-3pm, 5.30pm-11pm. Sunday noon-3pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Prix fixe (three courses) £27.50. Set lunch £12.95, £15.95, £19.95 for one to three courses. A la carte, about £120 for three course for two with wine.

