



New vistas of vinous joys

Waitrose's new e-commerce site offers great French appellations

I walked out of the Waitrose Cookery School in Finchley Road, Hampstead, two weeks ago with a huge smile on my face. OK, I'd tasted a lot of wines whose alcohol, despite rigorous spitting, must have had an effect on my mood, but there was a lot more than that behind the grin.

It was the day after the launch of Waitrose Cellar, the supermarket's new e-commerce site (waitrosecellar.com), and I'd spent some time talking to Xenia Irwin, buyer responsible for selecting the wines available exclusively through the website (all the other 1,200-plus in-store wines are there too, so filling a six-bottle case to qualify for free delivery should be no problem).

Among Irwin's choices are two wines from the co-operative Cave de Roquebrun, whose wines I've enjoyed in France for many years but until recently have struggled to find easily this side of the Channel. These are wines which, if only more people could taste them, would win over a happy new category of converts to the delicious, age-worthy bottles from southern French appellations beyond the horizon of most wine drinkers.

Sense of place

Roquebrun's vineyards are set in the wooded hills of the Haut Languedoc, between Toulouse and Montpellier, where the co-operative has a near-monopoly of the St-Chinian-Roquebrun appellation – and it makes a lengthy list of different wines that reflect the specific places from which the grapes come.

Irwin, who knows the deservedly tourist-loved Roquebrun village and its surroundings well, has chosen



■ Roquebrun's vineyards are set in the wooded hills of Haut Languedoc

two where modern oak-free winemaking allows a sense of place to shine through. Both have an appetising black olive tapenade aroma, mixed with the region's herby heritage, but taste them and clear differences emerge.

Col de la Serre (£11), where carignan and grenache lead the blend, falls immediately into my category of a "smiley" wine: dense yet with appealing crisp dark fruit and a lingering spicy edge, splendid character and complexity, at less than 13 per cent alcohol.

The syrah dominance in the Terrasses de la Rocanière 2012 (£13) blend is obvious, in a very French and perfumed way. The fruit is darker and smokier, yet floral too, and again there is pour-more freshness and restrained alcohol.

All credit to Waitrose for offering these wines, and joining Majestic (La Grange des Combes 2011, £13, £11 on two or more) and Laithwaites (Terrasses de Cabrio 2012, £14, £12 in a case of 12), in increasing Roquebrun's UK profile.

But Irwin has taken advantage of the free hand she has been given over the Waitrose Cellar list to also bring in wines which

could be the start of an upmarket cult. La Chêne Bleu has ambitions to become a "super Rhône". There are entry-level bottles – for example, Astralabe 2009 from low-yielding grenache and syrah (£16), which has fascinating flavours and good balance despite high alcohol, and the Provence-pale, serious, food-welcoming rosé 2013 (£17). But you'll need a much deeper pocket for Héloïse and Abélade, meticulously crafted red blends from vineyards below the spectacular craggy Dentelles de Montmirail in the Ventoux (each 2007 vintage and £48) or complex, very smart white Aliot 2010 (£45). All will be available by the end of the month.

There's more to Waitrose Cellar than simply a list of wines (where most of the exclusives are approachably priced). Lots of thought has gone into making the website suit wine buyers' needs, and one initiative is a quarterly foodie case, with wines to match recipes from Gordon McDermott, head chef at the cookery school.

No room is left to note my favourites from the many new in-store wines, but do look out especially for the Spanish introductions, from June 9.

Dishes of Deep South turn out deeply delicious

Our reviewer revels in the hillbilly ambience created by fried chicken and yee-hah music

So what new food fad, diet or edict handed down by a committee of po-faced and alarmist idiots are you currently adhering to? Still starving yourself for a couple of days a week? Getting up quite ridiculously early so that the day will be long enough for you to cram in those 10 great portions of fruit and veg before keeling over from excess greens and acidity? Or maybe the caveman diet – do you know that one? The idea is, you only eat what a caveman could have eaten – so no risotto, ice cream or Haribo Mix, but simply the odd loin of dinosaur or wing of pterodactyl. And in order to cater for the diet's whims, I expect any day now a new chain of restaurants going under the name of Bear Grills, in partial honour of the survivalist, penknife pusher and all-round megalomaniac of nearly the same name. The whole idea is appealing in one way, though I'm not really convinced that living in a cave would altogether suit me: draughty, you know. On the plus side, wearing leopard skin is fine, and I would get to clobber attractive women around the head with a club – but then there is the very laborious business of dragging them by the hair back to said draughty cave ... but maybe

there are people who would do this for one.

The truth is that as a nation, we're not really faddy at all: why bother – you'll only die of smog. What we are doing is stuffing ourselves with sandwiches and pizza – the two most popular meals in Britain today, along with a succession of supermarket ready meals. Great news for the likes of Domino's, which last year increased its sales by 10 per cent, this largely due to a "deal" which includes a large pizza, garlic bread, potato wedges and something deeply odious called "twisted dough balls". All that clocks up 1,600 calories, and pretty much no protein at all: a "deal", then, at £14.99. But this is what we do now: we watch all the cookery shows on telly, while cramming our faces with twisted dough balls.

And even when going to restaurants, most people will cleave to the narrowly familiar. There's a chap called Charlie Thornberry, however, who is doing things differently. He has set out to enjoy the cuisine of every country in the world ... without ever leaving London! He's managed 50 so far, including Georgia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Somalia and Macedonia, the poor and plucky devil. Well not to be outdone, I tried an unusual

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Joseph Connolly at The Lockhart



■ Joseph Connolly lunches at The Lockhart with Debbie Potts of Hampstead Waterstones

Picture: Nigel Sutton

cuisine myself the other week: southern American (as opposed to South American, which is basically beef and malbec). Now there are some new restaurants in London which immediately are surrounded by an aura: the premises are often modest (though in a trendy spot) the food not particularly exceptional, and yet a buzz is palpable from day one, and the punters flock. Such a place is The Lockhart, in the further reaches of Marylebone, and opposite another very popular place in which I once had a very jolly and bibulous lunch with Lynn Barber: Vinoteca. The Lockhart has a very bright interior, due to its entire broad façade being window. The floor is old pale oak, as are the tabletops – each set with a single yellow tulip. Chairs are dark Thonet bentwood, walls cream – relieved by a single bay of old exposed

red brick – and the plates have been nicked from your granny's dresser, a few of them hung on the wall. The ceiling twinkles with pressed tin tiles, and the general feeling is one of space and ease: casual, but of course – any new place these days that opts for formal is dead in the water.

Husband and wife

The set-up is a husband and wife team: Molly, from New York, who serves and manages – and has the most amazingly blue, blue eyes – and Brad from Mississippi, who wields the griddle. The menu and the muted yee-hah music puts you in mind of all the hillbilly films you have ever seen – Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, smoking a corn cob pipe on the porch of a shanty, dungarees, rope belts, straw hats, shotguns, bare feet, inbreeding and blissfully naïve girls in

gingham shirts called Ellie-Mae and Lizzy-Sue and the old and toothless guy in the rocking chair is good ol' Gramps. So pleased I was wearing a gingham shirt, if none of the rest.

My guest was Debbie Potts, the events manager for the Hampstead Waterstones. Or at least she used to be called that – her title now is “curator”, I suppose because she's in charge of marshalling fragile and crumbly things like authors. She very ably arranges as many as four or five events a month, because Hampstead is bursting with writers. Having read English literature at Durham, she went on to do a PhD at Cambridge on Old Norse poetry. “Put down ‘Viking’,” she suggests. “It sounds more cool...” The menu is small, and Molly-Blue-Eyes is gently enthusiastic about all of it – she has the service thing

just right: smiling, attentive, informative, but not too much: so very New York, then. Debbie went for grilled chicken oysters (those very special little secret cushions of meat, only two per bird) followed by shrimp with grits (coarse oats) and cornbread. I just had to have fried chicken with black-eyed beans and pureed potato, this preceded by a butter-milk wedge salad with bacon and chopped egg. Just four chicken oysters – very succulent – as against a vast bowl of crunchy lettuce hearts, lots of boiled egg with tiny granules of crisp and nuggety bacon: very moreish – though Debbie helped me out with the sheer quantity. All the wine is either American or Argentinian, and we had a big and fruity thing from California that was a blend of Merlot, Syrah and Zinfandel.

To look at, the fried chicken

did so remind me of KFC – which I used to like, actually. The leg and thigh had been brined for 24 hours, braised, and then deep fried in a buttermilk coating: sublime – crunchy, then silky ... everything you want. The beans were beans, and the “pureed potato” was bright orange – just had to be squash. Debbie's “shrimp” was of course large prawns in a lively and garlicky gumbo. The cornbread was still bubbling from the oven, and very honeyed – a bit like a golden syrup suety pud, really: nice, but a bit too close to the sort of thing you'd have with custard. Debbie lives in Redbridge, but recently spent eight months in Iceland studying the language. “It's raucous at weekends,” she says. “Like Basildon, with snow.” If money were no object, where would she most like to live...? “Camden Town. Definitely.” More so than Hampstead...? “Oh God yes.” The thing she's most thrilled about currently is the prospect of seeing Kate Bush at one of her summer concerts. “I just adore her – I am the greatest fan. Can't believe I've got tickets...!”

We had no space for doughnuts, nor lemon icebox pie – so we said “Bye now, y'all” to Molly-Blue-Eyes, saddled up my old Klondyke mule Jemima, and trotted off into the sunset. Yee-hah...!

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

FACTFILE

- **THE LOCKHART**
22-24 Seymour Place, W1.
Tel 020 3011 5400
- Tuesday-Saturday 12pm-2.30pm, 6pm-10.30pm. Sunday 12pm-7pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: No set lunch. Two courses for two people with wine about £100.

I took several pairs of shoes with me on holiday, but all fortnight I wore the same pair of sandals. They were so comfortable and seemed fine for all occasions. I got them at the Naot Natural Footwear Centre where there was the largest selection I've ever seen



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