



Celebrate English fizz

You could end up with aching teeth but it really doesn't matter

Everyone is familiar with taste tests, but here's an alternative: the teeth test. And mine failed it.

The topic is a timely one, as this is English Wine Week. As usual, the biggest annual trade tasting of our island's vinous products was held in the run-up to the nine days of in-shop promotions, restaurant specials, winery open days, vineyard tours and all the other encouragements to wine lovers to drink English, which continue until Sunday (June 1).

Big it certainly was, and so very different from how the tastings used to be. Who could have imagined, even as little as five years ago, that lined up together would be 50-plus bottles of fine English sparkling wine, from some 20 estates, made in the same way as champagne and generally using the same grape varieties as grow in the fields around Reims and Epernay rather than less inviting cooler-climate hybrids.

And that brings me back to my aching teeth. By their very nature these wines (just like champagne) have a high acid content, and that attacks tooth enamel...

Don't, though, let that put you off drinking English fizz. Even if you take up as many opportunities as possible among those offered by English Wine Week (see www.englishwineproducers.co.uk/news/eww/ for the list) you won't be subjecting your teeth to anything like the challenge that mine endured.

There have long been two stand-out pioneers of champagne-style English sparkling wine, both located on the Sussex downs. Now, while Nyetimber and Ridgeview



■ Walking the vineyard at Biddenden Vineyard, near Ashford, Kent

remain the standard to aim for – they have enough gold, silver and bronze medals to launch a mini mint – they have many very serious rivals. All these estates also took golds or silvers in the 2014 International Wine Challenge: Albourne, Breaky Bottom, Camel Valley, Denbies, Furleigh, Gusbourne, Hennes, Hoffmann & Rathbone, Jenkyn Place, Lily Farm and Redfold.

Their wines – deservedly – sell at champagne prices, mostly around £25-£30 but soaring sometimes to £40 plus.

Geology

Why is English fizz so good? Let me repeat the familiar champagne-link mantra: similar vineyard geology, same grape varieties, same yeasts, sometimes same winemakers, perhaps a slightly more suitable climate. If you need further evidence, note that vine acreage has doubled in the last seven years (much planted to chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier), and look to the number of champagne houses buying potential vineyard land here.

There are risks. Our long growing season may offer great potential quality, but beware the English weather. In 2012, for example, Nyetimber didn't make any wine at all from its rain-

drenched grapes. And the bubble could burst if the burgeoning growth in plantings continues without back-up investment and sensible decisions on where and how to process the grapes and market the resulting bottles. But for now it's celebration time.

Among all the fizz fuss, still wines should not be overlooked. They have improved immensely, but pricing remains a bit steep for what you get – producing English wine is costly. But let this week be a chance to try at least a bottle or two. Waitrose and The Wine Society are two particularly patriotic suppliers.

I've enjoyed English bacchus – happily named grape, with some resemblance to sauvignon blanc – and there are pleasant white blends and the occasional decent red or dessert wine. There can also be interesting experiments. I wanted to buy a fascinating white from poorly-ripened 2012 pinot noir grapes – until I saw that it cost as much as a blanc de noirs champagne.

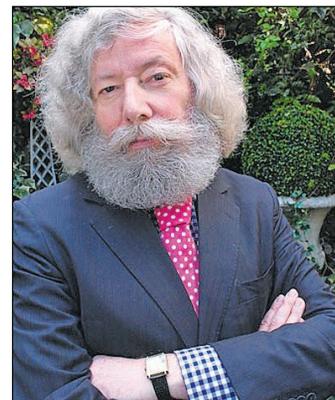
■ Two local English Wine Week happenings are tastings of Hennes' sparkling wines with winemaker Sam Chamier at Prohibition Wines, Muswell Hill, tomorrow 5pm-7.30pm, and of 10 wines at John Lewis Food Hall, Oxford Street, next Tuesday (June 3) 6pm-7.30pm.

restaurant of the week

I have no beef at all with the joy of fine dining

It's expensive, but our critic just revels in the latest offering from Richard Caring's empire

Beef. Now there's a word. What does it conjure up for you, I wonder? Well, if you're a veggie, nothing short of repulsion, I suppose. Or does it remind you of the Sunday roasts of yore? Or possibly the word simply signifies a good and proper meal – in which case, you are probably a man. Women do enjoy beef, of course they do, but it is men who can become really quite passionate about it – and, consequently, there are beef bores. Just like football fanatics, oenophiles and petrolheads – because when blokes get their head around a thing, they just won't let it lie. In France, a new top-shelf magazine has just been launched – aimed unashamedly and exclusively at men, it is called *Beef!*, its credo being that cooking is a virile activity that only men can accomplish. The editor goes



■ Joseph Connolly

further: "women bring nothing to the kitchen but clutter – a real man is needed to produce a decent meal". Crumbs. I wonder what Angela Hartnett and Helene Darrozes have to say about that. *Beef!*, by the way, has a centrefold: it shows a lot of leg – and although

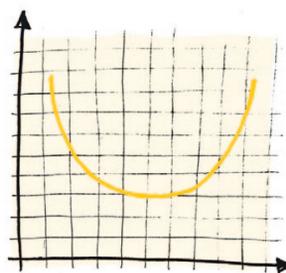
“People ask me how certain fashionable restaurants “justify” their prices. Well they don't – and nor do they have to: no one is forced to go, and not only are these places rammed, but it is damned difficult to get a table. The rich, they are always with us.



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Joseph Connolly at 34



■ 34, located on South Audley Street, is 'a very grown-up and stylish' restaurant

Picture: Sim Canetty-Clarke

all of it is lamb, the militant feminists are nevertheless up in arms. Well let's hear it for the militant feminists! I take my hat off to them: they hate that.

I feel sure that the editor of Beef! would rather enjoy 34. That's what it's called, this week's restaurant: 34. Annoying, isn't it? And the reason it is called 34 is that the address is 34 Grosvenor Square – ah, but get this: it isn't actually in Grosvenor Square. I know this because my son and I were cutting it rather fine to meet a couple of people for dinner – for once, my Addison Lee car was late – and I was gazing about me frantically. I hadn't a clue where it was because this is the only restaurant in Richard Caring's mighty empire (the Ivy, J.Sheekey, Le Caprice, Mark's Club, Daphne's, Harry's Bar, Scott's ... on and on ...) that I hadn't before been to, and now it was slowly dawning upon

me that there aren't actually any restaurants in Grosvenor Square: that big lit-up vileness with an eagle on top and surrounded by concrete roadblocks ...? American Embassy. Opposite side ...? Canadian Embassy. Everything else ...? Anonymous and rather intimidating luxury flats. But we found the place eventually: it's in South Audley Street, you see. But its address isn't 34 South Audley Street, oh no – it's 34 Grosvenor bloody Square: drives me mad. And don't for heaven's sake go confusing it with the restaurant called 45 in nearby Park Lane, or you'll simply lose your mind.

Bespoke gunmaker

South Audley Street is beautifully posh: the bespoke gunmaker Purdey ... and the very smartest purveyor of tea and dinner services to Her Majesty, Thomas Goode: should a bull of taste and

refinement happen to be passing, then here is the china shop in which to be clumsy. The vibe in 34 is distinctly masculine, while being covered in women. There is a rather solemn oriental lady playing a baby grand – all the smoochy favourites: *As Time Goes By*, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* – and this adds immeasurably to the New York *Mad Men*-era feeling they are going for here: panelling, leaded glass, burnt orange leather banquettes, lowish lighting. And the women ...? Very glossy, extremely expensively dressed, coiffed and decorated – laughing wildly at the "jokes" told to them by legions of short, fat, old, bald and wealthy men, all of whom they clearly find vastly more attractive than tall, slim, young, hirsute and poor ones. I received a lovely welcome from the receptionist whom I knew from the Dean Street Townhouse (Caring cannily moves

around his key front of house staff) and there is a pretty, smartly dressed girl who stands next to the double glass doors leading down to the loos. She smiles when you go in, and she smiles when you re-emerge: doesn't open the doors, or anything – just smiles.

Black truffle

The menu is extremely varied and enticing, though undeniably heavy on beef and seafood. And the prices are positively alarming. There were four of us, and on the recommendation of one who knew the restaurant, three of us kicked off with black truffle lasagne, the fourth going for something billed as "shrimp cocktail" – an irritating Americanism, and particularly so when what arrives are not so much shrimps as langoustes. And a bottle of Pouilly Fuisse with that: the price was positively alarming. There are many types of beef – including wagyu, the price of which thoroughly transcends the merely positively alarming and explodes into mind-bending. But if you order the Cote de Boeuf (Scottish dry-aged, grass-fed) for £70, it actually feeds four: so something of a bargain. Cotes du Rhone with that, at a price that was only reasonably alarming. And it goes without saying that the place was packed: to the Mayfair set, recession is what happens on Necker Island when the tide goes out. People sometimes ask me how certain fashionable restaurants can "justify" their prices. Well they don't – and nor do they have to: no one is forced to go, and not only are these places rammed, but it is damned difficult to get a table. The rich, they are always with us.

The lasagne was absolutely gorgeous: just gooey and melting, the shavings of black truffle giving off the most heady and erotic aroma even before you have lifted the fork: the flavour, and aftertaste, are haunting. Then we settled to discussing my son Charles's debut album – for Charles is a penniless musician: we considered that there were sufficient penniless writers in the family, so thought we'd go for something different. The album is called *Snakes and Ladders*, and his

Mummy and his Daddy think it is wonderful – but do please decide for yourself (www.soundcloud.com/charlesmusic). The beef was very enticingly presented upon a tall silver stand: the rib bone was present, though the meat had been thickly sliced and just lay there, oozing with temptation. It was so very tender; and beefily excellent – and there was also a section of split-open bone charged with sweet and juicy marrow: a rare and treasurable thing. The Bearnaise was just so, the cornet of chips perfect, the broccoli and spinach al dente and suitably wilted, respectively. And what happened then ...? All a bit hazy ... one or two people had ice cream, I'm fairly sure ... and then there was champagne. Martinis, conceivably. And something else as well, I think. Then the bill arrived ... and I was in for half of it. Which went so far beyond positively alarming, I simply can't articulate ...

34 is a very grown-up and stylish restaurant – but although the place was simply teeming with young and eager staff, the actual service was not on a par with the other restaurants in the group: smiling, and nominally attentive ... but slow, and slightly out of their depth. Then I got a taxi home. Just gave the cabbie the house number: let him work the rest out for himself.

■ 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

- 34
- 34 Grosvenor Square (meaning South Audley Street, of course) W1
- Tel: 020 3350 3434
- Open 11.30am-11pm
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Oh my God. Well – lunchtime, you'll get three courses and wine for two people at around £130. Dinner time ... you won't: second mortgage time.

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