



# Charmed by an elegant pair from Down Under

Penfolds wines in the spotlight at compare and contrast seminar

Australia's icon wine is Penfolds Bin 95 – far better known as Grange – the near-100 per cent shiraz currently into its 63rd vintage. It's certainly expensive, selling at up to £500 a bottle depending on vintage. Consider, though, that many experts argue that Grange equals the quality of some of the very best wines of Bordeaux, which can cost twice as much, and perhaps the price isn't so extravagant after all.

Penfolds has plenty of other very smart top-end wines in its portfolio, and in London last week chief winemaker Peter Gago offered a fascinating compare-and-contrast exercise between Grange and St Henri, also shiraz-dominated but again usually with a tiny percentage of cabernet sauvignon included. The winemaking, however, is entirely different.

Grange – which until 1989 proudly proclaimed “Hermitage” on its label – is fermented and aged in small, new American oak barrels, a major contribution to what Gago described as the wine's “dark concentration”. St Henri, originally titled “Claret”, sees no new oak, made instead in 1,460-litre wooden vats, the youngest six decades old, and is gentler and more elegant, though still with Penfolds' benchmark firmness, concentration and optimum ripeness. “No two vintages are the same,” said their maker, while emphasising that each wine had its characteristic style template.

Gago's seminar for the Circle of



■ Peter Gago at the CWW London Wine Fair seminar

Wine Writers (and non-members ready to pay the very reasonable £40 price for a rare and very special experience) was one of the top events at the 2014 London Wine Fair, the wine trade's biggest UK event, now back at Olympia after an unhappy exile in Docklands.

Five vintages of each wine were poured, the oldest 1986 (not yet ready, argued Gago, an engaging, informative speaker). As someone who can't stomach oaky Australian blockbusters, I was charmed by both styles, even if St Henri was more to my taste (and rather closer to my pocket – a six-bottle case of St Henri costs around the same as a single bottle of Grange of the same vintage). My notes are far too copious to offer here, but Grange is deliciously balanced, despite its power, with liquorice a common flavour; St Henri is more elegantly textured, often floral and very pure-fruited.

If I could choose one favourite among the 10, it would have to be St Henri 1998, where the blackcurrant and raspberry scents reappear as flavours in a wine of wonderful complexity, freshness and length. At 14 per cent it is higher than ideal in alcohol – Penfolds aims not to exceed 13.5, but South Australia's heat doesn't always allow that – but I found no sign of alcoholic heat in the wine. Stock is rare – try [www.laywheeler.com](http://www.laywheeler.com) (£60).

## Tasted blind

What's intriguing is that neither of these wines comes from a single vineyard. Grapes from potential sources, both Penfolds' own vineyards and those of trusted suppliers, are tasted blind, and for each vintage the choice varies, depending on which vines yield best fruit in that particular year's conditions. “That takes out any financial bias or emotional bias,” Gago explained.

But for those growers whose grapes do make it into Grange, there is much more than higher payment. “They wear it like a medal.”

A final gem of information, for quiz success perhaps: Grange takes its name from Grange Cottage, the first home of a young English doctor, Christopher Penfold, and his wife Mary when they emigrated to Australia in 1844, soon after Penfold graduated from Bart's Hospital in London. They established a winery on the Magill Estate just outside the city of Adelaide, initially to make tonic wine for anaemic patients. The cottage survives, a feature on the historic tours which Penfolds offers at Magill.

## restaurant of the week

# Lunch is like life ... it's just got to be a laugh

Our critic wines and dines with a writer and comedian at a King's Cross watering hole

In the days when Fleet Street was still in Fleet Street, the newspaper buildings were very grand indeed – none more gorgeous or impressive than the glittering art deco foyer of the *Daily Express* (the exterior in dark reflective glass, and nicknamed the Black Lubyanka) and now home to some or other undeserving money institution. The *Daily Telegraph* clock was a vast and notable landmark in the street – and in the rat-runs behind could be seen the flat-bed trucks daily delivering the massive rolls of paper, so that the hot metal presses could be eternally fed. *Punch* (remember *Punch*?) was in Bouverie Street just around the corner and El Vino's was the watering hole of choice – still there, but the bibulous hacks have

now been replaced by equally bibulous lawyers. El Vino's would not allow women at the bar – and nor even through the door, if they were wearing trousers: so either the good old days, or else the dark ages, according to taste. These days, Fleet Street is just everywhere. After nearly 25 years, *The Times* is soon to move from Wapping to the South Bank, the *Daily Mail* and the *Evening Standard* are in Kensington, the *Daily Telegraph* in Victoria, and *The Guardian* and *The Observer* in newly groovy King's Cross. And it was in that very building that I found myself the other week: I am not a Guardianista, though – I was there for lunch, what else? Newspaper buildings no longer seem to be hives of humming industry – more like airport lounges and leisure centres. The

“Here is a British brasserie of distinction that is very proud of the provenance of their beef and lamb: they have their own farm in Northumberland, the beef being hung for 32 days and butchered in house



## Joseph Connolly at Rotunda



■ Joseph with Viv Groskop at Rotunda in King's Cross

Pictures: Polly Hancock

*Daily Mail* is all soaring glass escalators and lifts, exhibitions and cafés – and *The Guardian* too is rather like that: galleries, bars ... and the Rotunda.

I had been under the impression that here was one of the new crop of restaurants springing up weekly all over this newly revitalised area – but the waitress told me it had been there for five years, so what do I know? A rotunda is a round thing, as well we know, but here is half a round thing – a very light and appealing crescent with a long and handsome curved bar of marble and chrome, blue fluted leather upholstery and full-height windows leading to an attractive outside space. They call it the “secret garden”, though it’s

actually pretty blatant: you’d have to be blind not to spot the secret. They also call it the “waterside terrace” (because the canal is alongside, replete with decorative barges). There is even mention of the “outside gin bar” ... so you see they are rather proud of it all, whatever it is called.

#### High repute

Quite coincidentally, I was lunching with a freelance journalist whose main outlets are *The Guardian* and *The Observer*; so she knew the building well. But to refer to Viv Groskop as merely a freelance journalist is to severely underrate her almost quite literally unbelievably wide area of activities. More will

emerge later, but for now you must know that she is a stand-up comedian of high repute, an interviewer, a presenter, the literary editor of *Red* magazine, an author, and the artistic director of the Bath Literary Festival. As well as writing for just about all the quality nationals and many magazines. Oh, and did I mention that she is the mother of three children, the oldest of whom is 10? I didn’t? Well let’s bung that in as well, then.

Viv is very funny and entertaining, so we didn’t get to the menu for a while. But when we did, we saw that here is a British brasserie of distinction that is very proud of the provenance of their beef and

lamb: they have their own farm in Northumberland, the beef being hung for 32 days and butchered in house. And further, they boast that very serious and trendy piece of kitchen equipment, the Josper oven: a grill and cooker combined, completely fuelled by charcoal. So how could we not order the beef rib, for two? Preceded by chargrilled asparagus with honeyed goat’s cheese for Viv, and handpicked Cornish crab with Granny Smith, mango and coriander for me.

#### Bombed

“I woke up this morning,” said Viv, “wanting to kill myself”. Ah yes, I sympathised – when people realise they are lunching with me, it is so very often the way. “No – it’s because I did a gig last night at the Comedy Pub, and it completely bombed.” I proposed a toast to artists bruised by philistines, but bravely soldiering on. The asparagus was fat and good, the rather underpowered “honeyed goat’s cheese” served as a small sort of ceviche: not quite what was expected, but enjoyed. My crab was curious – more or less minced, its subtlety lost amid the similarly granulated sweet-sourness of apple and mango. The main course, however, was much more the thing: the beef was medium rare, as requested – enough for three people, and generously sliced, alongside the bone. Triple cooked chips were perfect, and so was the Bearnaise. There was also Hollandaise poured over the broccoli, so there we both were, Viv and I, dicing with our futures in coronary central: great food, though – and that is always the point.

Last year Viv published a book called *I Laughed, I Cried*, subtitled *How one woman took on stand-up and (almost) ruined her life* – this occasioned by her maniacal determination to perform 100 gigs in 100 days...! This achievement now forming the basis of her one-woman show. “It’s such a stupid idea,” she says. “A comedy show about comedy...” She is being modest, of course – audiences have been loving it. And at the

Edinburgh Festival in August she will be performing not just this show every night, but events at the Free Fringe as well. “Thirty-seven shows in 15 days. Crazy, really...” She looks very well on it ... but how does she make it all work? With the help of a part-time nanny and what sounds like a dream husband in Simon, a Radio 4 producer, who back home in Teddington not just cooks and child-minds, but even bakes bread. “I am a greedy person,” Viv says then. “I have appetites. A friend of mine is a ballerina, and when we meet for lunch all she eats is the froth on the top of her cappuccino.” So not like Viv, then – who now ordered dark chocolate torte with cherries and honeycomb. This – which I slyly shared – was a superb combination of torte (like Sacher) and unctuous ganache: sinfully fine.

“I adore Russian food,” she said then. And it turns out that she has lived in Moscow – because get this: having graduated from Cambridge in Russian and French, following a stint at *Esquire*, she worked for *Russian Vogue*. “I was convinced my surname was Russian, but it’s Polish. Groskop – it’s Yiddish for Bighead.” Well Viv is the reverse of conceited – just truly good fun. We were chortling even as we left the restaurant – because look: lunch is like life ... it’s just got to be a laugh. No?

■ 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](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

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