



These white ports won't leave you high and dry

Stars of the fortified wine world shine forth at annual trade tasting

The first thing to realise about white port is that it isn't white. The spectrum of colours ranges through pale straw to gold to near chestnut. Fact two is that "dry" white port isn't dry. The levels of sweetness vary, but there is always some.

Have I deterred you from trying white ports? I hope not, as one of the best of my recent wine tasting experiences involved white ports, one of them more than 75 years old.

Most of the white port you'll see in supermarket aisles or on neighbourhood wine shop shelves is pretty commercial stuff, a pleasant base for long summer evening aperitifs when laced with tonic, ice and a slice of lemon. But when there is equivalent effort to that which goes into good tawny ports, the results are something else, and dilution is the last action to consider.

What makes white port different from the rest of the family? Essentially, the high level of refreshing acidity, which gives lovely balance and generally makes the level of alcohol less obvious than in red ports (tawnies, to my palate, fall somewhere in between). The grapes are different, too: the eclectic blend of native white varieties such as viosinho, rabigato, gouveio and others you've similarly never heard of.

But the initial winemaking is as for any port, with fermentation of the grapes stopped by the addition of grape alcohol, a

procedure which always leaves some natural sweetness. Then, like tawnies, whites are aged in large casks where flavours are gradually modified and concentrated by oxidation and evaporation.

Quite what wood those casks are made of can be a mystery. Carla Tiago, winemaker at Sogevenis – which owns four important port houses, Barros, Burmester, Calem and, oldest of them all, 1638-founded Kopke – simply doesn't know, where the oldest wines are concerned. With so long an export history, when for example ships taking port to Brazil brought back exotic rainforest timber for the Portuguese coopers, the casks could be from many species, many places.

Exploration

The very old white port experience came during Tiago's exploration of coheita ports, effectively vintage versions of wood-aged ports, ie tawnies and those old whites (conventional vintage port and LBV age in bottle, so don't undergo the oxidative colour and flavour changing process). Alongside fabulous coheitas from red grapes, Barros Very Old Dry White, approximately 40 to 50 years old, stood out. It was the driest white port I tasted all day (I was at the



■ The outside of the bottle is great, too: Ramos Pinto Adriano White Reserva

Big Fortified Tasting, London's annual trade celebration of the marvellous world of fortified wines), a rich golden colour, extremely complex, spicy yet delicate and amazingly fresh.

The second white was Kopke Coheita 1935, the oldest wine in the selection. Both, noted Tiago wryly, "were made before I was born". The Kopke could, she suggested, even be the oldest white port still in existence. My tasting notes included "wow" and lots of exclamation marks, but promoting it is futile as hardly any is left.

From the unrepeatable to the possible, however. How can you try the white port experience?

There are wines available which are in that classic tradition, but they can be hard to find. A simpler but good, well-priced place to start is Ramos Pinto Adriano White Reserva, pleasantly nutty and attractively non-sticky (rrp

£17.50, Philglas & Swiggot, Soho Wine Supply, www.thedrinkshop.com), or try Niepoort Dry White (£16, Lea & Sandeman). And these 10-year old-whites are recommended: Niepoort (£31.75, www.farehamwinecellar.co.uk); Quinta da Gaivosa (about £25, 50cl, www.topselection.co.uk); C. da Silva Dalva (£26, www.tomiansonwines.co.uk).

And for that long aperitif, you can't do much better than Noval Extra Dry (£10-£12, www.drinkshop.com, www.cambridgewine.com) or Taylor's Chip Dry (£13, Waitrose, Budgen), which is actually white wine colour, and very nearly dry.

Less the place to eat than the place to avoid

A visit to John Lewis in Oxford Street leaves our reviewer feeling low, hungry and grumpy

Time to go to church. Well – to the cathedral, really: because in common with all other law-abiding and fully paid-up members of the British middle class, my wife and I are periodically gripped by the compulsion to genuflect before the altar of our one true patron and mentor, the Blessed St John of Lewis. Because unless you all live in a yellow submarine, you can hardly have failed to notice the proliferation of mumsily period advertisements in celebration of the partnership's 150th birthday. Did you bake a cake? It would have to be Never Knowingly Undercanded. And do you find it surprising that John Lewis opened 30 years before Harrods was built? Forty-five years before Selfridges? In fact, the only extant store that predates it is the daddy of them all, Fortnum

& Mason, which started to sell its scrumptious offerings in 1707. So anyway, what happened was that John Lewis opened his draper's shop in Oxford Street at the age of 28. Did you open a draper's shop in Oxford Street when you were 28? No – nor me: can't think what else I could have been doing. As the years went by, Mr Lewis tacked on a few adjacent buildings, and the whole caboodle was blown to bits in the Second World War. The current building rose from the ashes, and in 1963 someone had the rather bizarre idea of bolting a Barbara Hepworth sculpture to the side of it.

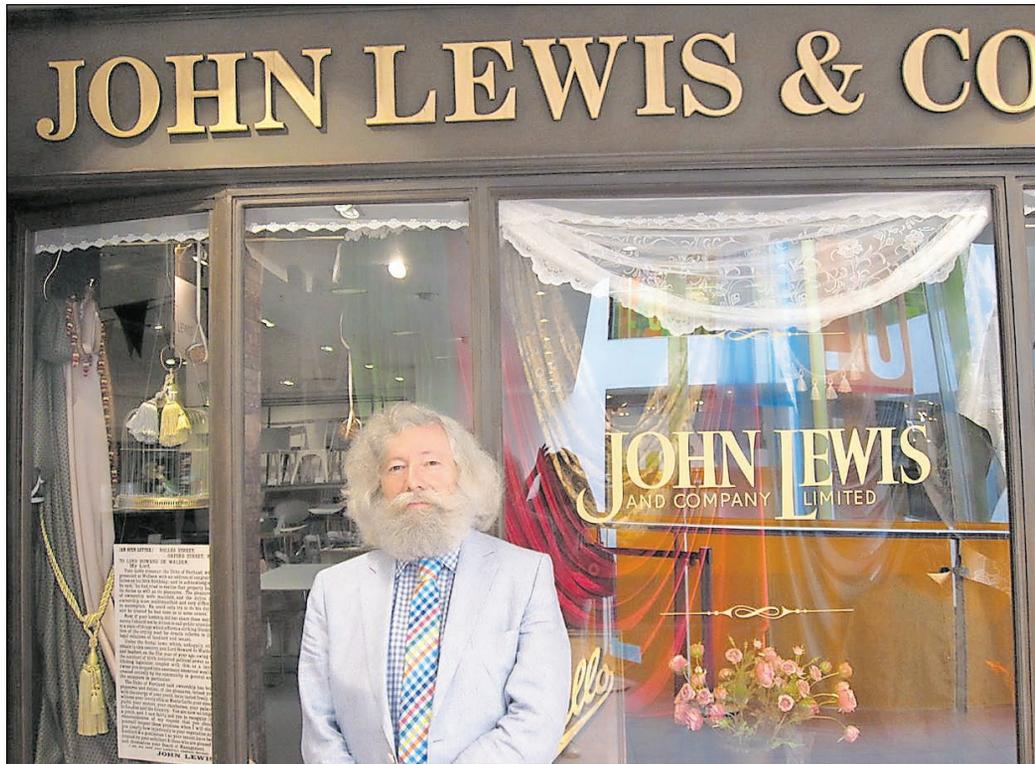
Democratic

So John Lewis was God – and we know that the Son of God, otherwise known as John Spedan Lewis, was an eminently sensible and discerning gentleman, because he lived in Hampstead.

“The sausages were sort of OK. The mash was like Polyfilla, with an undertone of feathers. Gravy cold and tasteless. The quiche...? ‘It is,’ said my wife, ‘just about edible. Poor pastry, surmounted by a very overdone omelette...’



Joseph Connolly at The Place To Eat



■ Joseph outside The Place To Eat at John Lewis in Oxford Street

It was during the ride home one evening that he devised the wheeze of transforming his father's store into a democratic partnership: effectively, giving it away to the employees. There exists no record of his family's joy at the news. And along the way he scooped up many provincial stores (cannily retaining their original names, and hence the local goodwill) as well as Peter Jones, the late and beloved John Barnes – and also Waitrose, thus enabling the middle classes to eat for the very first time. Now for these birthday shenanigans, I had heard tell of a pop-up roof garden, an exhibition, reissued classic designs ... how could I resist? And, of course, lunch would have to be a part of it: I had previously clocked the Brasserie on the third floor – it had looked pretty good. And so, as you will by now have gathered, I had

come very much to praise Caesar, not to bury him ... but as things turned out: oh dear oh dear oh dear ...

There was a succession of happy, smiling young partners fronting the miserable-looking self-service restaurant The Place To Eat, eager to direct us, via a bewildering number of corridors and staircases, to the roof garden. It's a weirdly shaped thing, notable not for being especially beautiful, but simply for being there at all. It is covered in the most brilliantly convincing artificial grass, and dotted with rounded hillocks of the stuff fashioned into armchairs – and these, together with all other seating, had been colonised by intimidatingly large women who clearly were not budging: they were there for the duration, you could tell – they had probably been there all night, and summarily

hosed down with all the planting, come dawn. They will be prised away protestingly when the garden is demolished in August. And why would they destroy the garden at the height of summer, you might wonder? Well good point: the exhibition is being dismantled at the same time – quite rum. It's quiet up there on the roof (apart from the cackles from all the big women). You would never know you were in Oxford Street. There's a kiosk selling sandwiches called Joe and the Juice: should I ever be moved to form a rock band, such a monicker could well be ideal. There is a hut which, an evangelical partner was telling me, in the evenings is transformed into a pop-up restaurant boasting a high-profile (though unnamed) chef offering dinner for (get this) £130 a head: Never Knowingly Underpriced.

The façade of the exhibition is rather nicely done – as you may see in the picture. Quite cutesy, no? And as you go in there is the noise of horses' hooves clip-clopping on cobbles, as in the opening credits of Sherlock Holmes (by which I mean the peerless and unsurpassable Jeremy Brett series, not the upstart Cumberbatch). There are ledgers (on the first day of trading the store took 16/4d – about 85p, for the sake of the kids) and a good bit devoted to wartime, together with the astounding revelation that wife murderer Dr Crippen was convicted on the strength of the John Lewis buyer testifying that he could not have owned the pyjamas in question on the date averred, due to their pattern. Something like that, anyway: seemed riveting at the time.

Comfortable

And now to the Brasserie, yes? Well yes ... but not for long. We settled ourselves into comfortable purple leather chairs at a black glass table overlooking the treetops of Cavendish Square. All very good until the waiter very apologetically proffered a menu with practically no choice at all: how could this be so...? He explained that the Brasserie was due to close at the end of the week, to be replaced with an outpost of Rossopomodoro, a so-so Italian chain. And I thought two things: (i) I can't review the bloody Brasserie if it's about to close down, and (ii) what does John Lewis think it's up to in its 150th year importing a mediocre franchise...? Yes but meanwhile, I wanted lunch ... so there was nothing else for it but to traipse back up to the miserable-looking self-service restaurant The Place To Eat ... and this is the point when the oh dear oh dear oh dear began to bite.

So I'm shuffling a tray along a metal shelf. There's grey chicken quarters, a quiche, sausages and mash ... that was about it. I had the bangers, and my wife went for the quiche, with salad. Orange juice, fizzy water. Quarter bottle of red: 20 quid. Then we drifted into exactly the sort of department store cafeteria space that I assumed

had disappeared decades ago: drab old carpet, plastic tables, dismal lighting ... I was the only male amid a tranquil sea of women, seemingly hugging to their collective bosom the staleness, the depression, the comfort of predictability. The sausages were sort of OK. The mash was like Polyfilla, with an undertone of feathers. Gravy cold and tasteless. The quiche...? "It is," said my wife, "just about edible. Poor pastry, surmounted by a very overdone omelette..." So: Never Knowingly Undercooked. The salad was wilted and undressed. The orange juice was from concentrate. The wine was all right – and I wished I had a gallon more. We lacked the spirit to queue up all over again for a lump of cake, or something.

Oh look ... I'm a lifelong fan of John Lewis, and this gives me no pleasure at all: it's like bashing your mum. I went to church, and now find myself flirting with the possibility of excommunication for a heresy so vile. But I have to tell you that on the strength of this perfectly woeful experience, here is not so much The Place To Eat as The Place To Be Avoided Like The Bleeding Plague. I left it feeling low, hungry, and therefore grumpy: Because as you know, I am Never Knowingly Underfed ...

■ Joseph Connolly's *The A-Z of Eating Out* is published by Thames & Hudson. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **THE PLACE TO EAT**
- John Lewis, Oxford Street, W1
- Open shop hours ... but you are better advised to go to the excellent food hall in the basement (the cheese room is wonderful) and convey your comestibles to Regent's Park.
- Food: ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
- Service: ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆ (there is none)
- The Feeling: ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
- Cost: I paid £20. I may as well have set fire to the money.

**“PLEASE SIR...
MAY I HAVE SOME MORE?”**

Hungry for more customers?

Advertise your restaurant in this space to reach thousands of potential diners.

Call our team now on
0845 6714460