



# Loire star is so versatile

**H**ere's the challenge: name a grape which can be made into all styles of wine, from sparkling through dry, semi-dry and sweet to ultra-sticky. Of the varieties which come easily to mind, only two oblige, riesling and chenin blanc, and this column focuses on the latter, the less familiar of the pair:

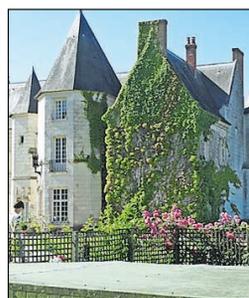
The world's largest acreage of chenin is in South Africa, but the grape's spiritual homeland is France's Loire Valley, where it has been grown for more than 1,200 years and where the results can be very splendid indeed.

But they're not achieved easily. Time and again, as I talked to growers during a visit to the region two weeks ago, they emphasised how tricky chenin can be. The vine's vigour must be limited and optimum ripeness achieved in the grapes, emphasised Sylvain Brault, president of the growers' syndicate in Coteaux de l'Aubance, one of several chenin-only sweet-wine appellations.

If there's rain at harvest time the grapes must be picked very quickly, otherwise the entire crop can be lost to grey rot within a week, warned Jérôme Loisy, winemaker at Château Moncontour, where sparkling Vouvray production exceeds that of leading champagne houses.

Then once the wine is made it can be a sulky creature, shutting down after initial glory and hiding away its character for years before blossoming again, lamented Claude Papin, who heads the growers' syndicate in Quarts de Chaume, the highest-regarded and very-sweetest wine – the Loire Valley's only grand cru.

In early June sunshine, with the delicate scent of chenin flowers wafting through green and happy



■ Château Moncontour, left, and, right, Séverine Brancheau, of Domaine des Forges, and the Coteaux du Layon panorama

vineyards, such problems seemed remote. But a couple of days earlier hail had destroyed huge swathes of vines in Bordeaux and Cognac, and the Loire growers were fearing a repeat of the storms which had devastated their vineyards last year. And who knows what autumn 2014 will bring – hopefully no repeat of the 2012 deluge.

## Terroir wine

Travelling from west to east through the chenin heartland, from Angers to Tours, there's little superficial change in the rolling green slopes. But that's entirely misleading. Study the soils, the direction and degree of those slopes, then taste the wines. They are often very different, even within the same style category: a demonstration of what chenin does so well. It reflects the place where it's grown; it's terroir wine par excellence.

This is a region of geological turbulence, where the metamorphic Armorican massif and the younger, sedimentary Paris basin collide. So essentially there's schist to the west, limestone (the white tuffeau of Loire châteaux) to the east. It's a region, too, of modern diversity, where the vignerons' individuality shines. Variety is wonderful, but can sometimes

confuse wine consumers, so here are two straightforward introductions.

Moncontour, on Vouvray's tuffeau, is a classic Loire château, set high above the river with the production cellar for its still and sparkling wines hidden beneath the formal rose garden. Beloved of Balzac, it was saved from near ruin in 1994 by wine-loving surgeon Christian Feray. Domaine des Forges, whose vines root into the schist along the Layon valley south of Angers, is a family operation now in its fifth generation, making fine, fair-priced wines in modest but cherished surroundings.

Two appealing versions of Moncontour 2013 Vouvray demi-sec, where chenin's character acidity delicately cuts through fruit sweetness, are newly into Waitrose (Château de Montfort, £9.60 to July 15) and M&S (Château Moncontour, £10), and M&S may still have Château Moncontour sparkling Vouvray (£11). Waitrose also stocks rich yet fresh Domaine des Forges Coteaux du Layon premier cru Chaume (£8.50, half-bottle). Among other excellent Forges cuvées available here are luscious Chaume Les Onnis 2010, (£18.75, www.stonevine.co.uk, www.tanners-wines.co.uk) and dry Savennières le Clos du Papillon 2011 (Tanners, £14.90).

# Hapsburg-style venue's ideal for schnitzel pig-out

Our reviewer is joined by fellow author Mavis Cheek for a taste of Mitteleuropean elegance

**H**ow many restaurants are there in London? God alone knows – but if God alone ever took it into His head to tot them all up, by the time He had arrived at a number, it would surely have shifted. Places go under every week, of course – but get this: between now and the end of 2014 there will be about 260 new openings in the capital. And the first half of this year hasn't been too shabby – I've been to loads of new places, and still there are more on the list. Today's restaurant is one of the most keenly anticipated, because the two men behind it – Jeremy King and Chris Corbin – not only have form, they practically invented form. They long ago rescued The Ivy and J. Sheekey from the unimaginable doldrums into which they both had tumbled,

eventually selling them and going on to create The Wolseley, that most enduringly fashionable and wonderful place. Now they also have The Delaunay, Brasserie Zedel, and Colbert. Coming in autumn is a hotel, The Beaumont ... but for now we have Fischer's as the newest shaft in their very considerable quiver, and trendy Marylebone is abuzz with it. Trendy Marylebone, of course, is always abuzz with something: most recently it was The Chiltern Firehouse ... and now it is Fischer's.

## Atmosphere

My guest and great friend Mavis Cheek, author of 15 novels, was remembering the days when Marylebone High Street "had only the sort of shops you actually go into and buy things from. On my way here, I saw somewhere selling baby shoes for £200. That

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## Joseph Connolly at Fischer's



■ Joseph with fellow novelist Mavis Cheek at Fischer's in Marylebone High Street

Picture: Polly Hancock

is, shoes for someone who can't actually walk...". I very much like the street: everyone mentions the bookshop Daunt, of course – and it is very good, although we all are very heartily sick of going to book launches there: there seems to be one every evening. And there is great cheese and meat to be had (La Fromagerie, The Ginger Pig) for those inclined to things other than clothes, tailor-made scent, the Conran Shop and Emma Bridgewater. Fischer's is on the site of the old Cotidie – an upmarket Italian restaurant I rather liked ... but there was no atmosphere at all, and it quietly folded. Before that it was Café Luc, a decent middle-of-the-road brasserie. And now it is Fischer's – where buzz and atmosphere come

as standard.

The exterior is restrained and handsome, a fine protruding clock and curved bronze signage offset by tall and narrow yellow awnings. The interior is designed by Shayne Brady, who worked with the late David Collins, creator of all the other restaurants in the King-Corbin empire – and the finish and quality here is truly fine. The idea is to evoke the pre-First World War grand Austrian café ... and some people, I suppose, might regard that as a theme park too far. Well it is pastiche, of course, but achieved with such confidence, brio and sheer beauty as to carry you willingly away with it. Marble floor, much inlaid and gleaming panelling with peachy mirror at banquet height – all

very Josef Hoffmann. The tables are magnificent – contrasting marquetry with the gloss of a super-yacht. A tiled frieze, and of course Thonet bentwood ... a motley of old photographs and peasant art ... it is cool and classy, yet very inviting and cosy: you will be at your ease in here, whether for a snack or a blow-out. Pride of place goes to a large oil painting of the great Austrian opera singer Richard Tauber, maybe best remembered for the romantic operetta *Goodnight Vienna*.

Mavis lives in Wiltshire, though is soon to return to London. "I have loved the country life, but there are many things I miss. Like restaurants." Right, then: let's take a serious look at the menu. It is long and thin, not

unlike that rash of humourlessly jokey 1960s birthday cards – but here are no merry quips, but simply groupings of very clever and enticing sections devoted to all things Austrian – heavy on sausage and schnitzel, though with sufficient fish and smaller plates to keep everyone happy. Apart from the starters proper, there is a selection of cured fish, and Mavis and I chose from that – she going for Bismarck herring with pickled vegetables, while I was having Asbach (German brandy) cured salmon with horseradish cream. But before that, a flute of Brundlmayer: Ever heard of it? It was new to me – an Austrian sparkler which, had I tasted it blind, would have identified as Bollinger: creamy, toasty and sublime. And, pigs that we were, we had a pre-starter before the starter: four little brotchen – which usually means hard bread rolls, but here were elegantly constructed canapés of chicken liver and cucumber, white asparagus and artichoke, smoked salmon and goat's curd and – my favourite – herring roe caviar and egg. All on thin sourdough, and very lovely. After that, the cured salmon was fleshy and good, and Mavis said of the Bismarck herring: "Could be saltier ... but very zingy, with a good and oily aftertaste." Anyway: she sank the Bismarck.

### Revelation

We were sipping an Austrian red that was a further revelation: Blaufränkisch – soft and luscious with a touch of vanilla, not unlike a Crozes-Hermitage. As we awaited the mains – devilled veal sweetbreads with tartare sauce and wilted spinach for my guest, schnitzel with chips and broccoli for me – Mavis told me that she very much fancied a restful stay in "one of those wellbeing centres. Leisure and contemplation. The trouble is, in return for an absolute fortune they give you warmed-up lemon juice and pulped vegetables. I might do a runner. And take everyone else with me." Mavis is currently trying her hand at crime fiction for the very first time – though her novel will not

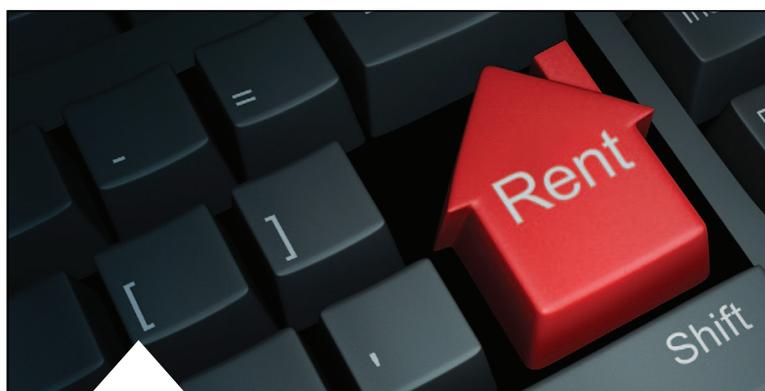
be following the current and very horrible trend for extreme violence against women, written by women for an exclusively female market (which I think is about as weird as weird can get). In addition to that, she is running the Marlborough Literary Festival. "It's quite unpaid. All my wonderful workers – no one gets paid. I actually work my tits off. You maybe shouldn't say that..."

My schnitzel, though a tad smaller, was as good as in The Wolseley, and that is the highest praise. The chips were nearly marvellous. "These sweetbreads," said Mavis, "are actually rather delicious. Piquant, and very tender." There are piles of puddings – strudels, but of course, and many other yummy things: Kinder was one of them – though not a choccy egg containing a plastic Smurf, I think. We shared a Sachertorte, because always I am in search of one that lives up to the Sacher Hotel original, or that made by Fortnum & Mason, in the days when they had their own quite peerless patisserie. This wasn't it: too thick, far too cakey ... but the thin ganache on top was lovely: should have been a great fat seam of that at the centre. God Almighty, though: we'd eaten a mountain of food. One more morsel, and for me it would have been goodnight Vienna.

■ 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](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

### FACTFILE

- FISCHER'S
- 50 Marylebone High Street, W1
- Tel: 020 7466 5501
- Open Monday-Saturday, 8am-11pm; Sunday, 8am-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Reasonable brasserie prices. You can graze and snack, but for a three-course meal for two with wine, about £130.



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