



# Watch for percentages

Difference between 13 and 14% of alcohol can mean a hangover

**A**lcohol is obviously part of the drinking experience, even if the intention is a sociable, wine-with-food evening rather than ending up senseless in the gutter.

The trouble is that wine alcohol levels have been subtly increasing over recent years, as the climate world wide has warmed and growers take more care to pick their grapes at optimum ripeness – which means more sugar, converted through fermentation into more alcohol.

The (rather small) bubble for very low alcohol wines seems to have burst, as big companies discover that the market for these often not very pleasant concoctions has reached its limit. A good thing, I'd argue. Better drink a smaller quantity of "proper" wine than bloat yourself with something less palatable than a decent alcohol-free fruit juice.

But the difficulty with "proper" wine is that the better it is, the less obvious the alcohol content. It's a question of equilibrium. If all the constituent parts of a wine, alcohol included, are in balance, nothing shouts out and you might happily drink a 14.5 per cent wine thinking it to be no more than 13 per cent. That's an alcohol difference of more than ten per cent, and however innocent each glassful seems the extra does have its effect on your body and consciousness.

Unsurprisingly, reds most frequently have higher alcohol levels, yet how well some can disguise this was made very clear at the most recent Marks & Spencer press tasting. There were two beguiling wines – Fort de Triniac Latour de France 2012 (£9)



■ Hot sun equals ripe grapes: vines in Roussillon

and Terre d'Ardoise Carignan Old Vines 2012 (£10) – from Roussillon, sunniest region of France, where sugar levels soar in the grapes. These two come in at 14.5 per cent and 14 per cent respectively, but in each case the dense concentration of herb-laced fruit completely hides any alcoholic heat.

Do drink wines such as these, but in moderation...

Whites can be equally guilty of such subterfuge, though. Many of the fine dry Savennières and Anjou wines I tasted during a recent chenin blanc-focused trip to the Loire Valley were around 14 per cent, but of such purity and finesse that I wouldn't have known. So it's good to welcome a lean and lovely example from M&S, Château de Chamboureau 2009 (£16), elegantly mature and mineral, registering 13 per cent.

## Sunny

But I can't resist an M&S recommendation from Roussillon's equally sunny neighbour, Languedoc. Though the 13.5 per cent of Château de Flaugergues blanc 2013 (£9, excellent value) is just apparent, this is a splendid wine, very dry, aromatic and long-lingering.

Where to look, though, for wines with lower alcohol but no less character? Fizz is an obvious starting point, as grapes are often

picked slightly less than fully ripe to give a crispness alongside the bubbles. Vinho verde is calmer now than in its very spritzy past, and all the better for it, delivering a refreshing summer glassful usually at 11 per cent or below. Think, too, of England, Beaujolais (though alcohol levels are creeping up), other cool-climate reds, and off-dry whites from anywhere not too hot.

So also on your M&S 12.5 per cent-limited shopping list could be Marksman English Sparkling Brut Blanc de Blancs 2010 (£26), smarter than many champagnes, or Franciacorta (£19), softly fresh, fruity, enjoyable bubbles.

Whites: intriguing Tbilvino Qveris 2011 (£9), traditionally-made Georgian wine, golden orange in colour, fascinating flavours and very complex for the price; Alaia Txakoli 2013 (£12), gently spritzy, as green as the northern Spanish vineyards from which it comes; La Tuilerie Pouilly Fumé 2013 (£14), refreshing, classic Loire sauvignon; Snake + Herring High and Dry Riesling 2013 (£16) from Western Australia, chalky, crisp and characterful.

And two reds to serve cool: summery scented Mayne de Bauregard Bergerac 2013 (£8); crunchy red-fruited Bardolino DOC 2013 (£9).

## restaurant of the week

# Lunch with man who breakfasted with Freud...

Our critic enjoys fine dining with editor Geordie Greig and has a chat about art

**J**esus. What a lunch. I mean this in a good way, it must be understood – and a great deal of it was down to exemplary service, and in particular, the attentions of ... Jesus. Because Jesus, in terms of Le Caprice, is God, if you take my meaning. Mr Adorno has been the suave, elegantly suited and supremely capable front of house at this legendary restaurant seemingly since time began (actually since it opened in 1981) and seems to be in possession of the elixir of youth. Maybe he has tapped into Mayfair and St James's always tiny and ever diminishing stock of virgins, whose blood he quaffs at full moon from a Baccarat goblet. Maybe not, of course.

Did you read lately that British women are the fattest in Europe ...? Yes well: not the ones who come to Le Caprice, baby – they are pencil slim, and groomed

to perfection. For surely here is the original destination for the "ladies who lunch" (Le Capricious by nature) – a cool and discreet sanctuary following the onslaught on Old Bond Street designer boutiques, tucked away so peacefully just down the road from the Ritz and the Wolseley. And contrary to expectations, these ladies do actually take food with their meals, though it tends to be of the Dover sole or lobster salad variety: nothing which ever could be construed as anything approaching the vulgarity of a slap-up feed. What do you take them for? Men?

## Refinements

The décor here always appears to be the same – black and white, alleviated by touches of chrome, the walls covered in Bailey portraits of Baby Boomer icons such as Mary Quant. But refinements are constantly being

“At one time, Lucien got himself into debt with the Krays, which isn't ideal. But he said that if they ever had tried to coerce him, he would have resisted

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## Joseph Connolly at Le Caprice



■ Joseph with Geordie Greig, editor of the *Mail on Sunday*, at Le Caprice in Arlington Street Picture: Nigel Sutton

made under the watchful eye of Jesus – though always in the manner of John Lewis, say, or the *Daily Telegraph*: never so violently as to upset the horses. My guest is a legend in Fleet Street: Geordie Greig, for the past two years editor of the *Mail on Sunday*, having also been editor of the *Evening Standard* and *Tatler*, as well as – along the way – literary editor at the *Sunday Times*. He is a most gentlemanly and modest fellow – though, as may be seen, he has little to be modest about. Had you any idea that the *Mail on Sunday* sells more copies than the *Sunday Times*, *Observer*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Independent of Sunday* all put TOGETHER ...? Well there you are. Further, last year Geordie

published a rapturously received memoir entitled *Breakfast with Lucien* – concerning the artist Freud, of course, and about which we will chat, once we have got a bit of food and drink inside of us.

A glass of champagne to kick off ... and that is all the alcohol Geordie would take, this for him being a typically long working day (he will usually be in the office by 7.15 in the morning, leaving any time between 7 and 8 in the evening, though at weekends it can sometimes be midnight). Whereas I just lunch and loaf, and so know nothing of all such earnest endeavour. Because it is the very brief season, we had to have gulls' eggs: I managed to increase Geordie's initial request for just the one to a brace, and I

had the same. These little speckled delights are always a true treat: they serve them with cress, boiled in the shell, which you tip-tap at and peel away. I avoid the traditional celery salt: the flavour off the egg alone is a singular blend of richness and discretion.

Geordie is often spoken of as "well-connected" – and although he most assuredly is, his circle is extremely broad, and he has always associated with and been fascinated by artists. Bacon made him a member of the Colony Room, that recently extinct and biliously green Soho drinking club that retains its place in the history of louche London. "All a bit of a haze ..." says Geordie. He fell into the habit of breakfasting with Lucien Freud – always

at the weekend, and always at Clarke's restaurant in Kensington Church Street, a few doors from the artist's house (whereas Freud would always lunch or dine at the Wolseley, where I saw him often). "It became a big part of my life," says Geordie. "I loved his company, the conversation. I thrill to the 1940s and 1950s, Auden, Connolly and so on. So stimulating". Freud was a creature of absolute habit and discipline – and if the summons was for 8.45 am, 8.46 would simply not do. Clearly, Geordie loved the man – and there are some charming photographs in the book of his young children in thrall to the artist. "The thing about Lucien was that he would never ever do anything he didn't want to. At one time, he got himself into debt with the Krays, which isn't ideal. But he said that if they ever had tried to coerce him, he would have resisted". Well as we know, Freud died only a couple of years ago at the age of 88 ... so the episode had a happier ending than was entirely possible.

#### Tranche

Geordie was looking at the menu. "Health and greed," he was musing: "they always compete". He ordered fillet of hake with spiced borlotti beans and grilled octopus. This he enjoyed very much – a decent tranche of fish on a bed of beans and surmounted by a skewer of succulent octopus cubes. My sliced rump of veal was simply heavenly – meltingly tender, with a superb, rich and glossy jus and nuggety tortellini alongside. I had a glass of Languedoc with that ... and this led to Geordie telling me that when he was writing the Freud book, he would get up each morning at 4.30. "I was writing on a Blackberry ... and I suddenly decided that I would not drink until the book was finished. It took two whole years ..." He was true to his word: the first drink – champagne at the Wolseley – came courtesy of his agent Ed Victor and editor Dan Franklin at Cape, to celebrate completion. "It actually tasted rather bitter ..."

Geordie is a great reader and book collector, so all sorts of

good book chat kept us going for ages. He particularly admires Trollope, whom he has written and talked about – and next year is the 200th anniversary of his birth, so is gearing up for more. "I love antiquarian bookshops," he says. "Abebooks is wonderful, of course, but it does rather take away the mystique ..." I wondered whether he had always wanted to be a journalist. "Well, when I left Oxford, my father said 'why not be a banker?'. I could have started on £15,000. I took a job as a reporter on the South East London and Kentish Mercury for £2,000 instead. But there was romance in it. Also, in Dalston, lots of murders". Which of his posts has made him the happiest ...? "I've been very lucky. I've loved all my jobs, actually ... although *Tatler* initially was something of a shock. Not really my world. I thought Gucci was a misprint ..." Ever any inclination towards politics ...? "My credo as an editor has always been Listen, Learn, Lead. And politicians ... they just don't do that."

He enjoyed a very pretty elderflower jelly – and I had a signature Caprice dish: peach melba tart, with fresh raspberries and vanilla ice cream ... quite teamakingly good. So: wonderful food ... and excellent company. Jesus. What a lunch.

■ 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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