



The kid in a sweet shop

Sarah Knowles lands dream job as a buyer for the Wine Society

In a very happy turn of phrase, Sarah Knowles likens her job to being a “kid in a sweet shop”. What does she do? She chooses wine for the Wine Society’s 126,000 active members.

Knowles, an Oxford geography graduate whose previous wine job was very different – creating a wine list from scratch for a boutique drinks wholesaler – is the latest recruit to the team of seven buyers who select some of the best, and best value, bottles available for retail in the UK. She loved her previous job, but opportunities to buy for the Wine Society are rare indeed (between them, the buyers she works with have well over a century of service) and she couldn’t resist applying.

A “rank outsider” was how she rated her chances, but this very articulate and passionate young wine-lover got the job. “If I survive my first year, I’ll be here for 40,” she told me.

Has she made a mark already? I talked to her at some length last month, at the society’s first-ever summer press tasting, where each buyer showcased wines of which he or she was particularly proud. “It would be crazy to upset the apple cart,” she said of her areas of responsibility – Austria, Australia, New Zealand, North America and sparkling. “There are already some very fine wines there.”

But the tasting did include two wines she’d sourced: Schloss Maissau Weinviertel gruner veltliner 2013, £9.50, with classic twist of white pepper and fresh length, and a California bargain with genuine fresh-fruit-led vinosity and a food-welcoming dry finish, Pedroncelli Friends Red 2012, Sonoma County, £8.



■ A nose for the job: Sarah Knowles with buying manager Pierre Mansour and trainee buyer Joe Mandrell

In contrast to Knowles, Toby Morrhall has been a buyer for 22 years. His responsibility is massive – 600,000 bottles a year, the large majority of them from Burgundy (it’s the society’s most-demanded region after Bordeaux, with some £8 million-worth of wine sold each year).

He emphasises that the society’s strategy is to “work long term” with its suppliers, which, for example, allows him to select each vintage of Exhibition Grand Cru Chablis from the fine choice of top site samples lined up for him by the Brocard family.

Continuity

Styles might change slightly, an improved new wine could replace an older cuvée, but on the whole continuity rules. “We’re not looking for flashy wines,” he told me, “but wines that stand up to food, are more structured, have more tannins – not the fruit bombs.”

What’s so encouraging for Wine Society members is that the buyers drink what they buy: one instance is the enthusiasm of Sebastian Payne MW, head buyer for 27 years until 2012, for the scented, dry, Slovenian Devri Pax riesling 2011, £10 – his “house aperitif”.

The summer tasting included more than 60 wines and I’d happily drink almost every one – and, as a member, pay to do so at the ultra-reasonable prices (a mutual, the society has no shareholders demanding dividends, instead it invests profits in member-beneficial ways). I’ve room, though, to list only one wine from the other buyers’ choices – deliberately, bottles which are out of the ordinary, relevant to summer and fun to drink. Everyone expects the Wine Society to do classics well, which it certainly does, but these wines show how much further it goes.

Juicy, tasty Guimaro Mencia 2012, Ribeira Sacra, £10 (Spain, Pierre Mansour); flavoursome and enticingly drinkable Chapel Down Pinot Blanc, 2011, £13 (England, Mark Buckenham); Shannon semillon 2012, Elgin, £13, a treat to keep (South Africa, Joanna Locke MW); The Stop Gap chardonnay 2013, £6.50, wonderful value French gem to counter the burgundy shortage (regional France, Marcel Orford Williams); Maycas del Limari Reserva Especial pinot noir 2012, £12.50, stylish South American expression of a classic grape (Chile, Toby Morrhall).

A taste of luxury and we go for the burgers

Our critic and his dining companion, artist Martin Fuller, try a new, opulent brasserie

Luxury. It is a word which these days is banded very lightly indeed. On a barrow in a market, I recently spotted a pack of seven “luxury dusters”. That they can refer to a lavatory roll as being “luxury” is almost as horrible as the fact that they insist upon calling it “toilet paper”. Someone has just told me that he bought from a pet shop a “de luxe flea collar”. But real, true, deep and decadent luxury – by God, you know it when you see, feel and inhale it ... and it is simply all over the Rosewood Hotel, a spectacular Edwardian stone chateau that used to be the head office of the Pearl Assurance Company, peacefully hidden away in a courtyard, the arched and gated entrance fronting the din and grandness of High Holborn. This hotel has taken opulence to a whole new level – truly stunning, and rendering the Dorchester akin to a Holiday Inn. It is the latest in a worldwide chain, heavy on the

Far and Middle East – and if I tell you that two of its star outposts are the Carlyle in New York and the Crillon in Paris, you will understand the measure of the place.

Lush

There are several spots to eat, including Scarfes Bar. It is called this because amid all the very lush panelling, upholstery, classicism and leather bound books there sits rather uneasily a series of caricatures by Gerald Scarfe. Or, because there is no apostrophe in Scarfes Bar, possibly penned by a veritable legion of scurrying little mini Gerald Scarfes, each of whom has been genetically cloned. The coolest and most fashionable part, however, is Holborn Dining Room – a tremendous sweep of grand Edwardian marble and Ionic columns, beautifully designed with bronze lighting and vast banquettes in red leather and chevron tweed. Here is a “British” brasserie, very much along the

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Joseph Connolly at Holborn Dining Room



■ Joseph with the eminent painter Martin Fuller at Holborn Dining Room

Picture: Polly Hancock

lines of its evident mentor The Wolseley, and also Covent Garden's Balthazar – though this, with 250 covers, is larger than both. But the good and rather surprising news is that it is not too expensive, and has become not just instantly trendy, but an absolute godsend for Holborn, which has long been a fashion-free zone, not to say a gastronomic wilderness.

My guest for lunch was the eminent painter Martin Fuller. His studio is in Brixton, and he has exhibited all over the world, including one-man shows in the Dover Street Arts Club as well as Paris, Oxford, Dusseldorf, Bath,

Bristol ... and the Camden Arts Centre. Within the very spraucy hotel and restaurant 45 in Park Lane, a whole floor is devoted to his pictures (other floors being given over to the great Peter Blake, and the not-great Damien Hirst). "I met Charlie Watts in there the other night," said Martin. He's in the Rolling Stones, you know. Was wearing a £50,000 watch. Actually ... I think it might have been Bill Wyman ...". Martin is married to Margaret Rand, a renowned freelance wine expert and advisor, who has for some years been responsible for Hugh Johnson's *Pocket Wine Guide*. "I picked her

up at Glyndeboune," says Martin. She was editing *Opera Now* at the time. Apart from art, opera is my passion". Though despite all the wine sloshing about, Martin doesn't drink – as witnessed by his ordering a non-alcoholic beer. Pursuing the "English" thing, I had a glass of Gusbome Estate sparkling, from Kent. Pretty good, a bit green – rather like Lanson champagne, and £9.50, unfortunately.

The menu is a picker's delight, and will fulfil any craving, whether rapid or a splurge. It is divided into charcuterie, hot and cold counters, crustacea, "hot

kitchen", specials and sandwiches (these to include steak, and fish finger). The front of house greeting had been warm, and the friendliness is carried through to the floor manager and our waiter ... both of whom I knew well from the Ivy and Wolseley: the carousel, it never ceases to spin. Martin was hungry, having eschewed his customary breakfast of two duck eggs in favour of a honey sandwich. We decided to share a board of British charcuterie – and this was unusually excellent: wild boar sausage, ham, venison salami and exemplary air-cured beef. There was none of the grease or sliminess that often pervades such a selection, and the large quantity rapidly vanished. Then I was sure I was going to have a special of wild salmon, which you rarely see ... so don't ask me why I ordered the Holborn Dining Room cheeseburger, but I did. And Martin was having a shrimp burger, because he had never had such a thing before. "I like fashionable food," he said. "Always up for something new". He then asked the waiter to remove from the table a little cactus in a pewter pot – and I asked him why. "I think it cynical to have one of these on every table – it has no aesthetic quality". So I was fairly relieved that he didn't have me chucked off as well.

Brioche

Both burgers looked very neat in their brioche buns (mandatory, these days – sesame is just sooo yesterday). The cheeseburger was ... all right. A good, steak consistency, but rather dry. Martin, I think, was not too impressed with the shrimp version: "It tastes of fish ... but also rather fatty". Which, to me, sounds utterly repellent, so I didn't sample it. The chips were pretty good, not great, and charged at a cheeky £4.25. And then Martin told me that he was a great adherent of the medieval tradition of barter. "I have exchanged my pictures for everything, over the years. Meals in restaurants, tailoring, tickets ... these spectacles I'm wearing – Cutler & Gross. My dentist. I even managed surgery, once". He adores

his Brixton studio, where he has lived for more than twenty-five years, his beloved opera blasting out from Hi-Fi 1960s speakers, as he necks upwards of eight or nine espressi a day. And what, I wondered, of the early days ...? "I went to Hornsey School of Art, and when I was still a student I went to St Ives where I was restoring a series of clown paintings for the local circus. Then they said that one of the actual clowns had torn his Achilles tendon ... and would I mind stepping in? I was seeing the lady contortionist at the time. And so for a while, I was a junior clown ..."

It was time for pudding, and I asked him if he could maybe cope with a custard pie ...? There was a Valhrona chocolate pot – though in keeping with the Britishness, it should maybe have been Cadbury's. Martin went for Eton Mess – vast, but rather syrupy and sticky, as if from tinned fruit. My Bakewell tart was nothing of the sort: a thin, circular and utterly impenetrable over-sweet millefeuille, with almonds. And then I padded off for a mile or so amid ankle-deep carpet, until I located the "accessible restrooms". So I accessed those and had a very quick rest, as I marvelled at the acres of green and glossy marble about me ... not to say the absolute luxury of the lavatory roll.

■ Joseph Connolly's new novel *Boys and Girls* is published by Quercus. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **HOLBORN DINING ROOM**
252 High Holborn, WC1
Tel: 020 3747 8633
- Open Mon-Fri 7am-11.30pm.
Sat 8am-11.30pm. Sun 8am-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Usual brasserie prices.
Two of you should be fine for £90 with modest drink.



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