



Raise a glass to Gascony

The French region's white wines offer good value at all price levels

One entirely non-alcoholic pleasure of wine is how it connects with place – and if you've been to that place, each glassful is special, wherever you drink it later. That's why I'm always delighted to pour a Gascon wine, as I've spent many happy holidays in that region of gently sloping hills where vines grow alongside corn and sunflowers and the towns and villages evoke the Three Musketeers' escapades.

A very large share of the Gascon wine that reaches UK drinkers comes from the exemplary Plaimont Producteurs co-operative, whose former director, André Dubosc, saw – and achieved – an alternative, brighter future for the juice of the local white grapes as wine rather than in Armagnac, a fine but under-appreciated spirit.

Plaimont spans the spectrum from £5 supermarket wine to fine chateau bottles with style and consistency. The happy, excellent value, easy-to-enjoy introductory whites are perfect for summer drinking. Most often from the colombard and ugni blanc grape varieties, they are fragrant, citrusy-fresh and generally restrained in alcohol level, though as you mount the price scale the complexity increases.

All these are recommended (all 2013 vintage – these are wines to drink young): Gers White, M&S, £5.30; Pujalet White, Waitrose, £5.50; Gascogne Cuvée Speciale, M&S, £7; and – my favourite, with denser flavours and greater length – Grand Héron, Majestic, £8 (£6.80 if you buy two or more).

Move up, where the predominant grape is often manseng, a particular treasure among the many indigenous



■ Young vines in the Plaimont conservatoire

varieties of southwestern France, and there are more serious, complex and ageworthy but still deliciously drinkable wines. L'Empreinte de Saint-Mont (which come in a tempting red version, too) is a fine example. The current 2010 vintage is sold by The Wine Society (£11.50) and Adnams (£13.40). Adnams, with a branch in Store Street, Bloomsbury, offers an excellent Plaimont selection – try Les Bastions (£7) or the very smart Le Faite (£19), blended each year by different top names in the wine world. Corney & Barrow, too, is a good source of Plaimont whites.

Freshness

The co-operative's members also make fine sweet wines – again from the two mansengs, gros and petit – where unctuous richness is always countered by a lovely freshness. Pacherenc or Jurançon are the words to look for (though both can also be dry, and equally well worth pouring).

If D'Artagnan was a red wine drinker, he was missing a lot!

Who's the wine writer who hasn't been to Bordeaux? Not me certainly, though like most of my colleagues the emphasis there

has always been on reds. But the whites are fighting for new attention, and they deserve it. They're sauvignon blanc-based, and careful work in vineyard and cellar is resulting in wines with a freshness and depth of fruit which can rival – though with restraint – the market-dominating New Zealand sauvignons.

Both these, both 2013, are good examples: Dourthe Grande Reserve (Waitrose, £9.30), with concentrated, zingy green character; and Château Haut Rian (Nicolas/Spirited Wines, £9.05), actually more semillon than sauvignon, but still grassy, citrusy and tangy.

Perversely, this white column is going to end with a red – but one which is a splendid summer wine. Alsace sticks in my memory for its geranium-decked buildings, but geranium isn't a smell I'd look for in my glass. Instead, Rolly Gassman Pinot Noir de Rodern 2011 (The Wine Society, £24) has a discreet but classic forest floor and red fruit scent and develops great aromatics on the palate. It's smooth, elegant, restrained and complex, and all the pleasures linger on and on: a treat worth the indulgent price.

Chewing the fat about greasy pole's climbers

Author Tom Bower's conversation doesn't disappoint our reviewer but the pork does

Fat is back! Fat is good! Fat is the new fat-free: fat, quite frankly, is now the way forward. Not actually to be a fat person, of course (that is still uncool) but simply shovelling the stuff down you – because after decades of vilification, fatty foods and full-fat milk have become the grub of choice. It doesn't clog up the arteries, is what we're now being told – and nor does it pile on the pounds like the absolute arch-villain, sugar. Well who knew? But this is not the reason you should now be up to your nose in fatty gourmet delectables, however – you should be eating it because you like to eat it. It's the only way. Anything you consume because it's "good for you" will not only disappoint, but – as with any duty – you will come to resent it, and it soon will anyway

be declared in fact to be bad for you. Similarly, it is pointless to avoid the things you love because within them you have been told there lurks a terrible danger ... because after not really very long at all they will be joyously proclaimed to be a wonder-food. In many new restaurants in London, they are literally serving fat, in the form of lardo: cured, and sometimes whipped, pig fat, spread on toast, crostini and even pizzas. The good stuff is worth it ... the bad version, simply disgusting.

Old-fashioned

So I thought a traditional old-fashioned French restaurant might be the place to wallow: rich creamy sauces, and heavy on the meat. I had spotted Otto's a few weeks earlier: it seemed incongruous in this patch of Holborn – amid a cluster of

“A curious note is struck by Marilyn Monroe: scattered all over the red velvet banquettes are many cushions bearing her wonderful and distractingly erotic visage. I had bagged a classic Warhol, but there were plenty more variations

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Joseph Connolly at Otto's



■ Joseph at Otto's with author Tom Bower, whose specialises in biographies of the rich and famous

sandwich bars and coffee places, here stands the sort of place you would have seen in 1950s Soho: a half curtain across the window, and a row of dusty dead wine bottles – all the greats, of course: Yquem, Lafite, you know the names. The interior continues the theme: buttoned red velvet banquettes, generous tables with proper white cloths and napkins, fluted glass pendants and Willow Pattern china (can't remember the last time I saw that in a restaurant). A curious note, however, is resoundingly struck by Marilyn Monroe: scattered all over said red velvet banquettes are many cushions bearing her wonderful and distractingly erotic visage. I had bagged a classic Warhol, but there were plenty more variations. And in the downstairs bar and eating space, she's simply all over the

place. And in the Gents. There are token appearances from another couple of blondes – Bardot and Deneuve – and the clang of discordancy with the sole representation of Audrey Hepburn, who is about as sexually alluring as a lamppost.

Maverick

Anyhoo ... into this Gallic throwback, with a soupcon of Hollywood, stepped my guest, the esteemed journalist and maverick tormentor of the obscenely rich and famous, Tom Bower. Tom was briefly a barrister before joining the BBC as a reporter on *Panorama*, and since then has published about 20 books, most notably his piercing and merciless biographies of such giants (or ogres) as Richard Branson, Robert Maxwell, Conrad Black, Richard Desmond, Bernie

Ecclestone and Simon Cowell. It seems to me that his subjects' common denominator is that they all are rampant egomaniacs who have made vast fortunes, and want everyone in the world to love them, whatever the cost to honesty and integrity. Well maybe, yes ... but how about some French food, then...?

There is a set two-course lunch for £24 (£28 for three) and a colossal carte listing pretty much all the classic greatest hits ... including (if you have pre-ordered it) pressed duck. This is a rarity these days, involving a great silver press like a titan's thumbscrew: blood and bones are pulverised ... but the whole thing eventually turns out quite nicely – as, at £140, it ought. Tom was starting with something similarly alarming from the carte: pan fried fresh calves' brains with

lemon, capers, parsley and sautéed wild mushrooms. I ordered (from the set menu) a ballotine of foie gras and duck with Cox's apple and rhubarb compote. This was very good indeed – silky and flavoursome, and served with a soft warm brioche. Tom's brains were as big as his own (what a clever calf, then) and were, he said, "superb. Really excellent. I love this – marvellous flavour." He wasn't drinking because the night before he had been to a dinner where his legendarily generous host, known to us both, had served a great deal of Latour '71. I contented myself with a modest glass of Côtes du Rhône...

Energising

Tom is a local lad, having – in his own words – worked himself up from Gospel Oak, where he was born, to a very smart street in Hampstead Village, by way of Gayton Road (where his house had cost him £9,500) and Flask Walk. He lives with his wife Veronica Wadley – a very busy and energising lady who used to be editor of the *Evening Standard*, and now is special adviser to Boris, in his role as mayor, as well as chairing the Arts Council and holding quite a few directorships.

Tom enjoyed his main of medallions of monkfish, lobster bisque, crushed potatoes, confit of tomato and shaved fennel. It was attractively presented, but eventually he pronounced it "expressionless – the texture was good, but a bit bland". As to my tenderloin of pork with a peppercorn and mustard crust and wilted spinach ... had we not been chatting so energetically, and were I not aware of a looming interview that Tom was later conducting, I would actually have sent it back (because it always takes time, that). The woefully overcooked meat was hard and crunchy, the crust bitter, having caught: I struggled through half of it, with no pleasure at all. How, I wondered, would Tom define his biographical victims...? "They have to be living, for a

start. People who have climbed the greasy pole, are rich and powerful, and rewrite their own history." Until, that is, Tom comes along. "Branson," he says, "is a bad man. And terrible company. His rocket will be his downfall. The engine doesn't work, you see. He'll never fly people into space – although he has taken \$80 million in advance fares. He's not nearly as rich as everyone thinks. He rents out Necker Island – what other billionaire rents out his home...? I like Ecclestone and Cowell ... though they didn't at all like what I wrote about them. Conrad Black loathes me, of course..."

And, as we shared a perfect crème brûlée, he told me that he is currently working on Tony Blair...! His subjects are aware, of course, that a Bower biography is in one way the ultimate accolade ... but I think it's one that Blair could maybe do without. "So many people have said to me, 'Why don't you do Blair – I can't stand him'. He used to have 93 per cent public approval ... and now he is utterly toxic." Well that's where megalomania gets you, chaps. As Tom says: "The cemeteries are full of indispensable people." Apart from my lunch, it was all good, being here with Tom: chewing the fat.

■ 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

FACTFILE

■ OTTO'S

182 Gray's Inn Road WC1.
Tel: 020 7713 0107

■ Open Monday-Friday, noon to 3pm, 6pm to 10pm; Saturday 6pm to 10pm. Sunday closed.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: Set two-course lunch £24, three course £28. The carte is pricey.



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