

Comeback king riesling

Take a straw poll of influential people in the wine trade, and there's every likelihood that riesling will emerge as their favourite grape – the “thinking drinker's grape” as it was described to me recently.

Germany is by far the biggest producer of riesling; its vineyards cover almost 23,000 hectares, 60 per cent of the world's riesling vines. Second, third and fourth places are taken respectively by the US, Australia and France, but each hovers around only 10 per cent of the total.

Slowly, slowly Germany is emerging from the slough of disrepute, where lakes of muller-thurgau engulfed good riesling and were turned into “horrid hock, gallons and gallons of liebfraumlisch” as specialist Anne Krebiehl acknowledged as she led a seminar at London's 2014 Great Riesling Tasting.

She illustrated how things had changed, with a very impressive range of dry wines – dry in name and taste, but not in chemical analysis. The levels of residual sugar (natural flavour-enhancing grape fructose remaining after yeast gobbles up less appealing glucose in the alcohol-creating fermentation process) were such that had the grape been pinot grigio or sauvignon blanc they would have been unpalatably cloying. Riesling, however, has a particularly fresh acidity which counteracts sweetness, creating an appetising mouth-watering balance.

Germany, as Krebiehl pointed out, grows riesling in every region, and big variations in soil type and sunshine hours bring distinctively different results. That applies in the dry (trocken) wine, and up through the sweetness scale to intense, richly sweet and wondrously fresh late-harvest



■ David Motion with fervent riesling advocate Jancis Robinson MW

dessert wines. To experience these wines, the trockens especially, you need venture no further than to The Winery, in Clifton Road, Maida Vale, where David Motion offers arguably the best choice on any UK high street or website. There's a broad price range (up at the top, Schloss Neuweier Grosse Lage Goldenes Loch 2012, £37, is intense and immensely long) and knowledgeable, relaxed staff to guide you.

Sources

But what of riesling from those other, smaller sources? Stay with The Winery and enjoy New Zealand's very fine Germanic styles from Framingham Wines in sauvignon-stronghold Marlborough. The journey starts with the mineral-scented, crisp and classy Classic 2013 (£14) and moves on through the F-Series of very individual, almost funky wines developed through natural yeast fermentation and maturation in all kinds of small kegs and barrels and demijohns – the delicately sweet F-Series Riesling Auslese 2012 (£26, half-bottle) is simply stunning.

Conventional wine advice has long been to recommend new world rieslings as a more approachable introduction to the grape than sometimes hard-

to-appreciate European styles. As I toured the Great Riesling tables, tasting wines from other Kiwi estates, from Australia, Chile, South Africa and the USA's Washington State as well as Alsace, that seemed largely no longer true. Most of the wine world is increasingly making “proper” riesling, where the core characteristics are mineral fragrance and steely acidity balancing fruit sweetness, and enjoyment abounds.

There is no doubt at all over riesling's ability to age, but the biggest surprise for me was provided by Jacob's Creek. The 2012 vintage didn't seem particularly special – decent fruit and crispness but no great character. Then I tasted the 2002 – and wrote “wow” in my notes. It was in an entirely different league.

Had there been dramatic changes in vineyard or cellar in that decade?

No, replied the importer pouring it.

Dare I suggest that you tuck away a box (around £8 a bottle in lots of supermarkets) and relish the result in 2024? If you do, I hope the experiment works out. If it doesn't – well, as I'm unlikely still to be writing this column, I won't be around to receive your abuse.

restaurant of the week

I really must come clean: I love filthy food

Our critic enjoys what is happening to meat in our restaurants and has a great lunch

Filth. It's all the rage. Simply anyone who is even remotely aware of the zeitgeist just has to be very heavily into filth. I am talking gastronomy, of course. It was not enough that your martini become simply dirty (by means of the addition of olive oil) and nor your burger, rotisserie chicken or pulled pork. These days, dirty is the new clean: filthy, now, is the only way to go. We are not referring to an unhygienic kitchen, rich in salmonella and eager to infect you with dysentery. We do not even mean the decidedly iffy kebab from a battered van, should you, very late one night, happen to be insane. No, what we are talking about here is meat (it's nearly always meat) with the merciless additions of lardo, lardons, cheese, bacon,

chilli and deep fried everything, all in American quantities. And when you talk of such hunker-down grub as being filthy, you mean it in a good way, of course: filthy is wicked. And the coolest restaurants even have a “secret” filthy menu: the most extreme examples (deep fried cronut, say – a combination of croissant and doughnut – with streaky bacon) will have to be requested by those in the know. Actually, even McDonald's has a secret menu – had you any idea? Why not try asking them for a McGangbang. I dare you. Either the police will be summoned, or you will be served with two burgers with fried chicken stuffed between them, and slapped into a bun. Difficult to say which outcome would be least agreeable: I think on balance I'd go with the slammer.

And the décor: that has to

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Joseph Connolly at Q Grill



■ Joseph at Q Grill in Chalk Farm

suggest filthiness as well. It costs a fortune to transform these trendy new hangouts into a derelict storeroom – and so it is with Q Grill in downtown Chalk Farm, bang opposite the entrance to The Stables. Here you will find rather more than the staple diet – so if you're tired of crunching on staples, come on down to the Q...! I would say that it's just the place to let your hair down, but the fellow who served us had all of his piled up on his head, and twisted into a topknot. He was very welcoming, in a suitably laid-back manner – as is the place. It is sited in a new and weird building where a petrol station used to be: with Camden land worth a

trillion a square foot, no mere petrol station stood a chance. The block is bilious green, and topped with wacky rusted iron fretwork – because why not? So long as any new building doesn't look rational, it's fine.

The ceiling is roughly planked, and so is the floor. Black iron girders, zinc-topped tables, exposed metal ducting (obviously), vast open grill and Josper oven, white industrial tiling, a mounted display of axes (possibly in readiness for late-night Camden fun and games) and Muddy Waters-type music. And, as usual, all this very deliberate filthiness is tamed by way of soft pale leather buttoned banquettes, fifties-style

chairs and bar stools that look like bucket seats from an E-Type, set on to stalks. Does it all sound a mess? Well it isn't – I really liked it. And it's big too – L-shaped, with a half mezzanine hovering at the rear. The generous napkins are like those traditional glass cloths that have "glass cloth" woven into the stripes: here, they read "Q".

My wife and I were probably too clean to be allowed among such wanton filth, but God we were hungry – and that is always the point. There is something called a "Quick Lunch" – an oxymoron, in my book – which offers one course for a tenner, two for £14 – this to include a flat iron steak, ubiquitous in New York, and

increasingly visible over here. This cut can be dense and chewy as hell, or else as tender and flavoursome as heaven: a roll of the dice. My wife was starting with Q smoked chicken with blue cheese and bacon salad, this followed by one of the two specials of the day: whole sea bream with fried samphire and aioli. I thought I'd try something fairly filthy, so went for southern fried chicken with deep fried pickles and a blue cheese sauce: pretty damn grubby, eh? And before that, hot smoked salmon with vegetables and "superfood" cress (which actually sounds a bit clean) with sides of seasoned fries and creamed corn. And when the chap with the topknot took our order, he said "the menu has changed a bit since the last time you were here. Very good to see a return customer – makes us feel we're doing something right". All well and good – but I've never before set foot in the place. Something to ponder, while glugging a bottle of the house red, a Languedoc. This came with a pleasingly simple label reading just "Q Red", even though it was orange. It was okay, but at £23 for a house wine, it should have been better (or cheaper).

Smoky

The smoked chicken, which was scattered among leaves of chicory, my wife said tasted of "just smokiness, really – good crispy bacon, though. Hardly any blue cheese detectable". My starter was superb – and I rarely enthuse about starters. Chunky and warm flaked salmon, just smoky enough – like very posh kipper, the vegetables beautifully shaved (which is more than I was) to resemble tagliatelle. Brilliant pomegranate seeds added texture and sweet-sourness. The bream looked absolutely marvellous: a plump and glisteningly browned whole fish (with head and tail) and was hugely enjoyed: "moist, so very fresh, perfectly cooked" is what she said. And my fried chicken was a dream: sinfully good – the crunch, and then the silk. Chips were pretty good, and dusted with paprika – though I

don't think that deep fried pickles are on the whole a good idea – so I gave them to my wife, and in return enjoyed a good deal of her very moreish, savoury and similarly deep fried samphire. There was also a nice fresh salad of largely lettuce hearts and cherry tomatoes – and the creamed corn was pretty much just that: neither thrilling nor disappointing.

My wife then suggested sharing something called a Bulleit bourbon and pecan tart. I don't like pecan tart, so she was on to a good thing. And Bulleit is nothing to do with the ludicrously overrated car chase in the damn Steve McQueen film: it is simply a brand of Kentucky rye. She liked it – and it was very boozy. And then the waiter repeated how good it was to see me again ... and having now pondered, my conclusion is this: a few shops down there is a party and fancy dress place called Escapade, and clearly they have recently experienced a run on their always popular Joseph Connolly dressing up suits, replete with wig and false beard. There could be dozens of me running around.

So here is a cool and easy, well-run and already fashionable eating place, with very good eating. And in the Gents there are framed photographs of a bloke in make-up and black lacy female underwear: well that's pretty filthy, wouldn't you say ...?

■ 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

- Q GRILL
- 29-33 Chalk Farm Road, NW1
- Tel: 020 7267 2678
- Open Mon-Thu noon-11.30pm.
- Fri noon-midnight. Sat 10am-midnight. Sun 11am-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

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