



No taking names in vain

Much has changed since a wine could be called 'Spanish Chablis'

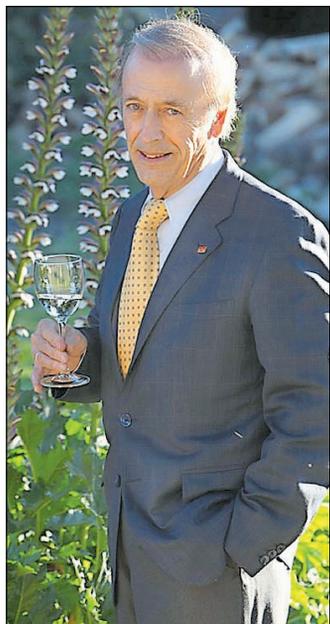
How wine labelling has changed. As I write, I've a bottle in front of me declaring it is "Spanish Chablis". Wow! In no way would the wine producers of northern Burgundy – nor, for that matter, the EU bureaucrats – allow that now.

But in the museum at the Torres winery in the Penedès hills west of Barcelona the original bottle is defiantly on display, though its label is damaged ("Chablis" has been deliberately excised). And the one on my desk? It was from a very limited edition, certainly not sold to the public, to mark 50 years of a white wine which has, deservedly, a huge public following.

Today's retail bottle is the same shape, but design-wise much has changed, moving to 21st-century stylishness. But isn't it great to find an inexpensive, flavoursome, fresh and generally appealing wine still so popular so long on from its inception?

That longevity has a lot to do with the people who make it. The Torres family have been involved in wine since the 17th century, and that's what they do today, though on a larger scale and over a wider spread than existed when Miguel A Torres made the first Viña Sol in the early 1960s. Then he'd just finished his viticulture studies in France and put into practice what he'd learnt not in the main winery but in a nearby garage.

Now he's the president of the company, though in the process of handing over to the next generation. And Torres wines are made in more areas of Spain as well as way beyond the country's borders, in Chile and California.



■ Miguel A Torres, the creator of Viña Sol

Despite the size of the company – it sells some 4.5million cases of premium wine a year – and the investment which has created a modern icon winery for its finest wines, there's a remarkable and welcome modesty at the head. There is unwavering commitment, as well, to sustainability and environmental consciousness.

But all this would count for nothing if the wines were conventional big-brand products. Viña Sol is the largest-selling line, an enjoyable blend of parellada and garnacha blanca that has an individuality which sets it way apart from the massed boring, often over-sweetened ranks of most big-brand sauvignons, chardonnays and pinot grigios.

And beyond Viña Sol there are all kinds of other delights – fragrant Viña Esmeralda, the very smart Milmanda chardonnay (made even more tempting if you've ever seen the stunning setting of the 12th-century Milmanda castle) or Fransola, one of the few sauvignons outside Bordeaux where, to my palate, barrel ageing adds a truly pleasurable extra dimension. And that's ignoring other whites and the host of excellent reds.

Big production equals broad distribution and for Viña Sol (from about £7) that means many major supermarkets, high street wine chains and independents. So unscrew the cap of a bottle (another change – "Spanish Chablis" was sealed with a cork) and raise a glass to the Torres family.

Misleading

Leaving aside "Spanish Chablis", lots of other now illegally designated wines have gone: British Sherry, Australian or South African Port, Australian White Burgundy, for example. Such names did sometimes indicate the style of what was in their bottles, but unregulated use of unfounded descriptions can be misleading and simply wrong.

Of course it can all be taken too far – the champagne producers are renowned for this, with individual houses hounding tiny wine companies in distant lands which happen to use a similar colour label, plus united frenzy whenever the word "champagne" is used beyond the region, in winemaking practice, perhaps, or as a perfume name.

Better such effort should be expended on generally clearer and properly informative wine labelling.

restaurant of the week

Bad food, rip-off prices – and the view was ugly

Matisse exhibition is warmly recommended, but the same can't be said of the restaurant

You know how some days just go so very beautifully, so seamlessly, so absolutely perfectly right from the word go? Almost as if everything has been divinely preordained, and destined for utter bliss ...? Yeah well: this wasn't one of them, matey. My wife and I were off to see the Matisse cut-outs at Tate Modern, see – and although the tower of this converted power station had been visible for ages, still our Addison Lee driver managed to drop us off in seemingly a dead end: somewhere round the back where precious deliveries were accepted and rubbish removed (and at Tate Modern, the distinction can be a close run thing). We had timed entry tickets and were horribly late, so we scooted around a maze of alleys and eventually found the

rump end of the ludicrous and stupid "wobbly bridge" (which doesn't wobble any more, but it's still bloody stupid) and thence the entrance to the gallery. "Matisse Cut-Outs Downstairs", it said. And the bloke down there said it was upstairs, but of course. Just got in by a whisker before the next timed mob was due to be funnelled in.

This was the second Tate in a week: first it was Liverpool, to see Mondrian, and now the Modern, for Matisse. The Tate I really love is the original on Millbank: wonderful pictures – the Turners alone would make you swoon – and a damned good restaurant with a fine wine list and Rex Whistler murals, to boot. All of which I was to be reminded of later ... and the teasing pain was terrible. But before all thoughts of grub, let's get some culture in, shall we? Well it was a bit

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Joseph Connolly at Tate Modern Restaurant



■ Joseph outside Tate Modern

of a huddle at the beginning, I can tell you: more or less just shuffling along in a continuous queue. One of the troubles being the school holidays: gangs of enlightened parents urging five-year-old Jocasta and Gideon to look at the lovely colours, and assuring them that they could do it just as well the minute they got home and excavated the Winsor & Newton and scissors from the Ikea creativity box. It thinned out a bit later – and truly the display was dazzling. The gaiety and exuberance of Matisse's final great works truly do uplift the heart. And by way of a riposte to all those who beg of any mid 20th-century art, "Yes, but what does it all *mean*...?" Well it means that it makes you happy: it's art, baby. There is film here of an insouciant Matisse rapidly cutting such tight and elegant curves in his leaves of gouached paper with seemingly a wallpaper hanger's shears: extraordinary.

Window table

And then, as so often, food was called for: I had of course booked a table at the restaurant on the sixth floor, requesting a window table because the view is legendary. I had been told that while my request would be noted, it could not be guaranteed. Fine, I said. The table was booked for one, and we rolled up with a good 15 minutes in hand: all window tables but one were already taken ... but I couldn't have that one, I was told, because it was booked. "But," I mildly protested, "I was told that you couldn't specifically book a window table." "That's right: you can't." "So ... I can have that table, then." "No. Other people booked it first." "But ... I was told that you couldn't specifically book a window table." "That's right: you can't." Well it was all getting a little bit too much like *Alice in Wonderland*, this – so I settled for a table adjacent to the window table that was booked, but actually wasn't, because you can't.

They're wrong about the view, you know: it isn't really wonderful at all. People often mistake "being

high up" with having tremendous views – but what we had here was the glory of St Paul's, peeking out with almost embarrassment from among a great and ugly cliff of architectural horror, backed by looming and misshapen hulks: what we have done, and continue to do, to the London skyline is truly a disgrace, and it makes me weep. The restaurant is a bare, hangar-like space with a hard floor, wood tables and a selection of toadstools painted onto a white wall by an interior designer who clearly knows best. It was clear from the start that it was woefully understaffed: well-meaning waiters and waitresses were buzzing about, but there were just too few of them. I suspect the same is true of the kitchen, because so many tables were bereft of food. The deal here is not a good one: £24.50 for two courses, £29.50 for three. This is about the top end for a set lunch in London ... while the food was around the bottom. We ordered fried devilled chicken and livers on toasted sourdough, and Scottish razor clams in a white wine and shallot sauce. Half an hour later, I inquired of its progress: apologetic stuttering from waiter.

It wasn't chicken and livers: it was chicken livers. Large and nastily presented on a chunk of bread. I had three razor clams – they were like short sections of rubber tubing: terrible. A bit of frisee, and some tiny scraps of red that might have been tomato ... might have been watermelon, I honestly couldn't tell you. One-and-a-half hours after we had sat down (trying not to finish the wine, and gorging on indifferent bread) the mains arrived. Just before, I had asked the female sort-of-front-of-house whether she imagined the food would actually be served today...? And she said: "I'll just double check that for you." My wife's broad bean, pea and herb risotto was a bowl of rice pudding, with green bits: no creaminess, no layers of flavour, and tepid to boot. Which was more than my Gressingham duck breast managed to be: stone bloody cold,

and as tough as a suitcase. At the next table, two women were gamely sawing at bavette steak, though it looked as if soon their strength would give out. Myself, I had forsaken the struggle after a single vinyl mouthful: my lunch was bread and chips.

I calculated that pudding would be (a) 40 minutes in coming, and (b) bought-in pap. After a while, the manager ambled over: first sight I had had of him. A good front man is constantly touring, solving problems before they arise: here we had a janitor, clearing up the mess. He hunkered down and looked sincere. "What's the problem?" he said. Hm, well, let me see ... waiting an eternity for cold, stodgy overpriced and uneatable food ... will that do? He presented a revised bill, charging only for the mains we didn't eat ... which I gently pointed out. He wanted to be shot of this, and we were aching to be gone: this time, the bill was for the decent Beaujolais only. And later, when he knew I was a restaurant critic, I received a very apologetic email which, reading between the lines, translated as please please please please don't be beastly to us in print...! Alas, too late. So: do go to see this great exhibition (two weeks left). As to the restaurant, I urge you take a gouached leaf out of Matisse's book ... and just cut it out.

■ Joseph Connolly's *The A-Z of Eating Out* is published by Thames & Hudson. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website

FACTFILE

- TATE MODERN RESTAURANT
Bankside, SE1
Tel: 020 7887 8888
- Open for lunch Monday-Friday, noon-3.15pm; Saturday-Sunday, 11.30am-3.15pm. Dinner Friday-Saturday, 6pm-9.15pm.
- Food: ★★★★★★★★★★
- Service: ★★★★★★★★★★
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★★★★★
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