



Wine tourism on the up

See Burgundy region on two wheels, by car, or even hot air balloon

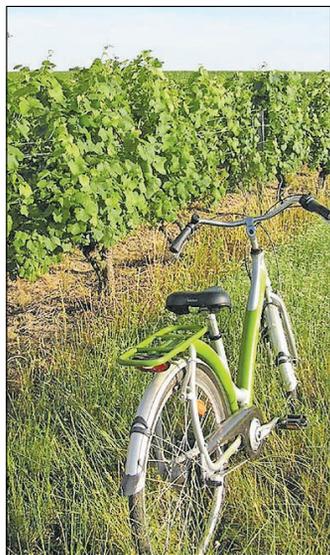
If there's a prize for initiative in wine tourism, it surely has to go to France's Burgundy region. Think of any way to enjoy the vinous experience, from cycling through vineyards to learning how to make barrels, from itinerant tasting courses to flying over the vines in a hot air balloon, and the Burgundians offer it.

If you're waiting for the youngsters to go back to school before you make your own holiday plans, one of the best times in the wine year to immerse yourself in wine culture is coming up. The harvest may be an ultra-busy moment for the professionals, but those who take pride in showing consumers how the wines they enjoy to drink are created are just as welcoming then as in quieter months.

There are special events, too, stretching far into the autumn. For example, late September sees the weekend of the "fantastic picnic", while a month further on vigneron, bands and parades take over the streets of the village of Chablis for the annual wine festival. Starting point for information is burgundy-tourism.com.

My own most recent experience of Burgundy wine tourism was a brilliant, if bouncy, tour through the Chablis vineyards in turquoise-painted Lulubelle, the Citroën 2CV of oenologist Eric Szablowski. Now he offers a weekend experience extending into neighbouring appellations, as well as wine (coursesaucoeurduvin.com).

Burgundy is an intriguing region for anyone interested in wine. In one respect, it's simplicity itself: essentially just two grape varieties, one red (pinot



■ Through the Burgundy vineyards by bicycle

noir), one white (chardonnay). But it is also one of the most complex of growing areas, with its hundreds of different "climats", individual plots distinguished by precise location, soil, subsoil, aspect, microclimate and history.

The divisions can be very subtle indeed, and a lot depends on the growers – sometimes, wines from the most revered climats can be less rewarding than the finest from lesser-regarded plots.

But the way to understand what all this means, and to identify the wines you most want to drink, is to go there. Try, though, to keep to the hills, as the plain that borders the river Saône is flat and boring.

The southernmost area, the Mâconnais, is lovely – rolling countryside with the towering rock of Solutré a formidable landmark, and wines which can be excellent value for money – and further north Saint-Romain

offers spectacular views over the vineyards as well as more well-priced wines from the local growers.

Burgundy, of course, is far from the only destination for wine tourists. For long-distance travellers, Australian wineries are open and welcoming – for many, cellar-door sales are the bulk of their business. There are great places to stay and eat in South Africa's Cape winelands, and again language is no problem in Virginia, Oregon, or Washington State.

Guides

Back in Europe, Wink Lorch's *Wine Travel Guides* are a splendid resource. There are 48 for different micro-regions in France, including such lesser-known areas as Jura, on which Wink is the recognised expert, plus others for Tuscany and Rioja (winetravelguides.com). Another French region trying hard to attract wine tourists is Languedoc-Roussillon. It's got some way to go to meet Burgundy's standards, but look for possibilities at en.destinationsuddefrance.com/Club-Oenotourisme. And it is sunnier...

Guided wine tours let expert others do the planning for you. Arblaster & Clarke (winetours.co.uk) is long established and well regarded, and a tempting autumn trip combines Puglia and Basilicata. Smaller organisations can be excellent, too. The very knowledgeable and nice people who run the Wine Education Service have expanded their wine holidays into a separate company, Wine Voyages (winevoyages.co.uk) with coming tours including north eastern Spain next month and South Africa in March.

Bon voyage.

Hidden treasure offering a taste of Englishness

We are constantly hearing about how this great capital city of ours is "vibrant", "dynamic" and "a melting pot". The first two are true – vibrancy and dynamism are never far away – and the third is truer still: most basic traces of authentic Englishness have long ago been dumped into the melting pot, and now are quite indistinguishable amid the swelter and bubble of a dubious soup, best left unfathomed. What is most exciting, however, is the seemingly endless appetite for rediscovery and restoration of so many neglected treasures. Not long ago, beautiful but shabby buildings and entire terraces were routinely destroyed to make way for some fresh hell or other: nowadays, the best is lovingly and expensively preserved ... though still remains diminished in every sense by the looming, vast and intrusive horror of endless misshapen, vulgar and insulting glass monoliths inflicted upon London by blind and amenable planners and megalomaniacal architects. Nowhere is this more true than within the Square Mile. I was fortunate enough the other week to have been invited to see over all the secret parts of the Old Bailey, Mansion House (this to include an audience with our charming Lord Mayor, Fiona Woolf – only the second woman to hold the office since the twelfth century), the Royal Exchange and Tower Bridge. Each is wonderful

in its way – especially the absolute miracle that is Tower Bridge – but every single view is blighted by the huge, brutal and stupid glass invaders: and literally hundreds more are to come.

Transformed

All this is also true of King's Cross. I am constantly amazed that this area in so short a time has been transformed from a dirty and dangerous dump into a cool and fashionable destination. The two stations of course have been beautifully restored and sensitively augmented, and many old warehouses and the like have been reclaimed and brilliantly updated. Everything new there, however, is dire: St Pancras International and all the nearly-finished big glass things: dire. But just around the corner from all the central hubbub, I found yet another restaurant, Smithy's, in a silent cobbled alleyway – and so-called because it once was where the horses who used to pull carriages from the stations were stabled and reshod overnight. A wall of horseshoes bears memory to this, and the original uneven cobbled floor is a delight, if you watch your step. Iron girders, pitch-pine stalls, the odd cartwheel, burnt orange walls and forged iron pendants: very welcoming and relaxing, and not a bit forced. The ugly aircon tubing is exposed, as is mandatory with ugly aircon tubing (and it wasn't very efficient either). The tables are bare (which is fine) and the napkins are small, and of very

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Joseph Connolly at Smithy's



■ Joseph with John Mitchinson at Smithy's in Leeke Street

Pictures: Polly Hancock

thin paper (which is not). Food tends very much towards hearty and traditional English: the chef is called Memo (do try to remember that) and was trained by Marco Pierre White, which used to mean a great deal more than it does today. The not-too-loud music was of Gerry and the Pacemakers and Manfred Mann vintage, which was fine by me.

My guest was inveterate

bookman John Mitchinson – and normally, as I am sure you will understand, I never would trust or entertain any man with long hair and a beard (because you know what they're like) but for John I was prepared to make an exception. His current claim to fame (although he is far too modest to make any such claim) is as one of the rather brilliant joint creators (with John Lloyd)

of *Q.I.*, the witty and addictive television quiz programme hosted by Stephen Fry, where prizes are awarded for answers that are Quite Interesting. John Mitchinson has co-authored a series of funny, offbeat and extremely successful spin-off books, and also his *Daily Telegraph* column of the same name. Further, he presides over Unbound, an online publishing venture whereby readers, having

assessed a pitch, can sponsor the books they want to see in print. But before all that, John used to work in the Hampstead Waterstones, in charge of poetry (he loves MacNeice and Chaucer, while he love-hates Eliot) before becoming the company's marketing director. Then he was head of the publisher Cassell – where I did a book for him about the 1950s called *All Shook Up* – and now ... he is having lunch with me.

Entertaining

The menu is ... quite interesting. No set lunch, but plenty of things under £7.50, if you want them. I was starting with chorizo and tomato Provençal with a fried duck egg, and John wanted salt and pepper deep fried squid with chilli and avocado (he had briefly flirted with the idea of soup of the day, but chaps with faces like ours don't tend to do soup). These days John is a countryman – he lives in a farmhouse in the beautiful Oxfordshire village Great Tew with wife, three sons, pigs, sheep and chickens – all of which he eats, with the exception of said wife and sons. So he is always in the market for old English country dishes, and alighted with joy upon honey and mustard roast pork knuckle with bubble and squeak, while I was having roast marinated half chicken with sautéed Jersey Royals and courgettes. "I just love lunch ..." sighed John, with perfectly understandable passion. "In publishing, nothing is ever decided at a meeting, except to table another meeting. It was all done over lunch". Which I know to be true.

My starter was surprisingly successful: the gooey tomato merged well and colourfully with duck egg yolk, the chorizo cutting it nicely. I fear that John's squid was as dull as fried squid can be ... "but it's not at all chewy," he said: "pretty good". The pork knuckle was frankly ridiculous: a very large proportion of the pig – like a lamb shank writ very large indeed. He loved it – and the pink and yielding meat just kept on coming. My chicken too – more like half a turkey, and very

good, though the Jerseys had been sautéed whole in their skins, and they and the courgettes were rather adrift amid a slick of melted butter. A bottle of Merlot from Languedoc was pleasing us both – and despite the vastness of our mains, we nonetheless requested the pudding menu. Which duly arrived ... followed by 20 minutes of nothingness. Now it really ought to be understood that when a diner asks for the pudding menu, the eventual idea is to order pudding ... but no one came back to take the order. So I went off to find someone. And no one was there. Gone. Empty. No one behind the bar: vanished. After a while, I found a startled young man in a backstage corridor, who agreed to come and take our order. He did come ... in order to tell us that we couldn't, in fact, have any pudding because the kitchen was closed. Chef, in common with everyone else, had gone up in a puff of smoke. But all we want is a crème brûlée and a chocolate cake, which are already made, presumably ...? No dice. So we had a drink instead. And 20 minutes after that, the fellow came back to say that we could have a pudding after all. We declined.

A tremendously entertaining time, though – and although this was all down to the wit and charm of my guest, he would be dreadfully embarrassed if I said that this lunch had been any more than, er ... quite interesting.

■ 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

■ SMITHY'S

The Stables, 15-17 Leeke Street, WC1. Tel: 020 7278 5949

■ Open Mon-Wed 11am-12pm.

Thu-Fri 11am-1am. Sat 5pm onwards. Closed Sun.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Cost: Not bad at all. Two of you will be fine for about £80 with drink.

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