



2010 – believe the hype!

Barolo wines of that vintage deserve all the praise poured on them

There's a massive amount of fuss in fine wine circles at the moment about the 2010 vintage in Piedmont – and the wines from Barolo in particular. Following on from the atypical hot-weather 2009, 2010 marks a splendid return to classic style.

But don't take it from me, let those who make the wine every year confirm its quality. "2010 is a vintage you can buy without tasting," said Franco Conterno, son of Barolo legend Aldo Conterno, at a masterclass on the vintage in London earlier this summer. "Ninety per cent of wineries have produced great, great wines. There are no negative surprises." Fellow grower Guiseppe Vajra likened the experience of 2010 to receiving a gift far beyond expectations. "That's breathtaking, and that is what we are feeling now."

The praise for the just-released vintage ("longevity and elegance, something special", "the potential to be splendid in 20, 30, 40 years", "the greatest young Barolo vintage I have tasted in a lifetime of buying, cellaring and drinking these wines", "these are wines that will evolve into a masterpiece; consider cellaring a few cases for your children and grandchildren" ...) risks being boring. Until you taste the wines.

Barolo's grape is a single red variety, nebbiolo, tricky to handle well but capable – in the same way as pinot noir – of producing extraordinary wines if the place and the growers' approach are right. Tar and roses is the famous definition of its scent, though these days roses trump the tar as wines are made in a more approachable, less intimidatingly tannic style. As for flavour, that's



■ Poderi Aldo Conterno's Cicala vineyard

too complex to define in a handful of words, but cherry is often the predominant fruit, alongside spice and herbs and perfect balance between tannin, acidity and alcohol.

There are different styles, some lighter, fruity, ultra-fragrant and seductive young, others substantial and too stern to drink for five years or more. And, as is to be expected of wines often seen as Italy's best reds, they are costly, making it all the more important to buy from a specialist.

Barbaresco, often suggested as the feminine counterpart of Barolo's masculinity (if you believe in such sexist determination of wines), is from the neighbouring area of Piedmont, is also made only from nebbiolo, and again 2010 is a star vintage. Barbaresco matures slightly sooner, so 2010 bottles are more likely to be available now while the Barolos stay a little longer before being delivered to their en primeur buyers or wineshop cellars.

This widespread delight over the 2010s has had a great consequence – lots of press and trade tastings to show them off, and I've been privileged to sample some wonderful wines. Importer Liberty, for example,

brought five top-notch producers to London, to explain what made the vintage special. So far, only the Barbarescos of Bruno Rocca (£37-£58, exelwines.co.uk, slurp.co.uk, winedirect.co.uk) are available, but Barolos (specially recommended cuvées in brackets) from GD Vajra (Bricco delle Viole), Massolino (Margheria) and Poderi Aldo Conterno (Romirasco) will be available later in the autumn.

Elegant development

Similarly, Bibendum in Primrose Hill (bibendumfinewine.com) has only E Piri & Figli's Cannubi Barolo (case of six £345) so far, but a fine selection from Aldo Conterno, Massolino, Pio Cesare, Vajra and more is expected before the year is out. Watch out, too, for well-chosen wines at Berry Bros and Lea & Sandeman.

The experience I've enjoyed most, though, was a tasting of Michele Chiarlo's Barolo Cerequio from the five best vintages of the decade to 2010. Superlative wines, and proof of fine Barolo's elegant development. It's invidious to choose just one, but the 2007 is very special (£53-£60, corkingwines.co.uk, winedirect.co.uk, robersonwine.com).

restaurant of the week

Pretty pleasant spread of Italian peasant goodies

But from exploding cigars to Fairy Liquid, our reviewer can't keep his mind on the meal

There once was a time when an exploding cigar was thought to be a fun and rather frolicsome thing.

These were actually manufactured, alongside quite a few other little pocket money japes which today might easily raise an eyebrow or so. Itching powder. Sneezing powder. Sugar that would make you froth at the mouth. Black-face soap. Stink bombs. Some old favourites do still exist: a cunning simulacrum of a mouse (not the sort you click) that will leap out of a tin of peanuts, and into your face. A buzzer that guarantees that the person with whom you shake hands will receive a mild electric shock. A Wrigley's chewing gum packet that is a miniature mousetrap. Not to say the hallowed tradition of the whoopee cushion, which always will appeal to the British, as Freud very probably

patiently explained to us. But back to that exploding cigar: the other week some unfortunate bloke was killed as a result of his e-cigarette blowing up in his face. Many other malfunctions of these very weird devices have resulted in nasty burns – and although the manufacturers claim that the worst of nicotine and tar is no longer sucked down into you, there have been no exhaustive tests as to the harmfulness of the vapour that is. But smokers, they will always find the means (the whereabouts and the wherewithal) to ingest their drug of choice. At my club, snuff is growingly popular. The other day, I had occasion to buy a packet of 20 Silk Cut Purple for a lunch guest, and was genuinely shocked to discover that the cost was nearly a tenner: I was expecting about 4/11d.

So that's all the stuff about smoking out of the way, then: and

“Chris immediately knew what he wanted: roast suckling goat. But he couldn't actually have it, as the goat had only just stepped off the plane from Italy (maybe accompanied by his nanny) and had not yet sufficiently acclimatised to England



Joseph Connolly at Ostuni



■ Joseph with his wife Patricia and Chris and Sue Gale at Ostuni in Queen's Park

Picture: Jonathan Goldberg

if you thought that here was a sly and wryly way to seamlessly segue with wit and sleight of hand into this week's chain-smoking guest, you'd be totally wrong. The whole of the foregoing was utterly gratuitous, bearing not the slightest connection to anything whatever. So ... let's get down to lunch then, shall we? Ostuni is billed as an authentic Pugliese restaurant in a pleasant little mews in Queen's Park, and, unusually, there were four of us present: my wife, Chris and Sue Gale and, um ... oh yeh: me. Sue is a true local, having been born in the Suburb, then living in Christchurch Hill, Hampstead. She attended St Mary's Convent in Fitzjohn's Avenue, her own children being fifth generation St Mary's alumni. After that she

went to St Martin's in Hadley Wood: "My sole claim to fame," she says, "is that I was at school with Patti Boyd – you know, the one who married George Harrison and Eric Clapton. She was lovely. I used to buy her chocolates. A bit of a lesbian crush, really..." Then the Gales lived in West Hampstead for a long while, and now are settled in Finchley – where the preponderance of Asian restaurants and Iranian and Turkish supermarkets suits them just fine: "We do like spice," says Chris.

Authentic

Ostuni is a big, cool space – the pink and green rustic tiling and pendants fashioned out of riddles and sieves, the open counter where

competent toqued Italians prepare fresh meat, the glass fronted safe sporting hams and provolone ... it's all as authentically deep South Italian as one can decently expect in NW6. There is a pleasing outside area with an awning, where people could smoke ... though this review actually has nothing to do with smoking. There is a Pugliese charcoal-fired oven – and Chris immediately knew what he wanted from it: roast suckling goat. Which you don't often see. But he couldn't actually have it, you see, because the goat had only just this minute stepped off the plane from Italy (maybe accompanied by his nanny) and therefore had not yet sufficiently acclimatised to England. We then debated whether or not to sit on

the terrace – it was a very warm and sunny day. "The weather in Italy at the moment," volunteered the waiter, "is the rubbish. You excuse my French".

'Ball of gorgeousness'

So to start, we were variously to gorge upon steamed mussels, burrata (the extra creamy mozzarella), tuna tartare with burrata stracciatella (which sort of means torn into ribbons) and orecchiette (pasta shells, loosely) with meatball and featherblade of beef in a tomato sauce. That was mine: it was good, the pasta nice and nuggety, the meat quite properly imbued, the sauce just slightly on the sweet side. The mussels, Chris said, were "gorgeous – in a good and spicy sauce" (which turned out to be garlic, chilli and lemon). My wife's tuna was modest, chopped and bore an anchovy undertone, with a friselle – which the waiter had described as being quite like a sliced, baked breakfast muffin, but as I had no idea on earth what a breakfast muffin might be, I was still in the dark. It was crispy, and fine. She said she could have done with more burrata ... unlike Sue, who described her starter as "a ball of gorgeousness". She further said that it was "so soft and gentle", which irresistibly put me in mind of Nanette Newman and Fairy Liquid, but never mind. Sue is a member of a book club: "It's good – you read books you otherwise might not know of. And it's therapy. And we drink wine. Gallons." Chris, on the other hand, adores cricket (being an MCC member) and restoring classic cars. He showed me a picture of the latest: oh my God. A 1958 Jensen, of which only 53 were made, in gleaming red with chrome wire wheels: truly concours condition, and quite as drool-making as anything on the table. Which was pretty good, on the whole: my wife and I were having a sharing plate of arrosto misto: pork and provolone bombette, homemade rustic sausage, lamb neck fillet and half a poussin. This was one hell of a lot of meat: 10 pieces, heaped into a

bowl – a lump of dead, and deeply brown. The pork thing was thin slices rolled alternately with the cheese, the resulting little parcel crisply fried: very good indeed. The chicken was over-charred, the lamb rather chewy, and the sausage quite excellent. Sue had whole sea bass baked in a salt crust – deftly boned and decapitated by the waiter: "Tasty," said Sue. "Succulent. Very tasty. Very tasty indeed. I'm so glad you're the food critic and not me..." Chris was having the single version of arrosto, and we all shared sides of Swiss chard in tomato (good), rustic rosemary chips (unpeeled, rather flabby) and zucchini fritti – which were in strips, and not very fritti at all. All decent peasant fare, though – and decent too was the local wine, and excellent value at £17 the bottle.

Puddings...? After a fashion. Sue had a sgroppino – loosened lemon sorbet with prosecco and a slug of vodka: so booze, basically – as was Chris's espresso martini (which he received with a moan of deep delight). My wife had a nice warm chocolate fondant, followed by fresh mint tea, prettily presented. And I...? I just sat there contemplating how immensely full I was: all that lump of dead. And then I got to thinking this: how about if, following such a blow-out, a cigar is lit, and the man explodes...?

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

FACTFILE

■ OSTUNI

43-45 Lonsdale Road, NW6
Tel: 020 7624 8035

■ Open seven days a week, 10am-11pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: About £95 for three-course meal for two, with modest wine.

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