



Bouquets to their door

Virgin Wines' new delivery service comes with the personal touch

Here's a pretty ambitious aim: to become the Interflora of the wine gift delivery market. The company which has that in its sights is Virgin Wines, which almost a year ago shook itself free from giant web and mail seller Direct Wines.

Efforts already by boss Jay Wright and his colleagues in the management buyout have prompted soaring sales – July's figures were the best the company has ever seen. But they want to do more, hence Wright's assertion in the trade press that there's a "huge opportunity" to become the name everyone thinks of when it's the moment to send a bottle.

The new Gifts by VW range is being launched next month, and will grow as time goes on. It's aimed at consumers, though later business-to-business sales will feature too. What's likely to be a particular selling point is the chance for customers to personalise bottles, labels or gift packs.

"We're basically looking forward to giving anyone in the UK the opportunity to order a beautifully packaged wine or champagne gift knowing that it will be delivered the next day with a personalised gift message by a business that are already experts at sending wine direct to the consumer," Virgin's head of events, Jessica Parker, told me.

And talking of events: Virgin Wines continues to be keen to let its customers taste the wines it offers before they buy them (though there is, as with many mail order/web companies, a "return if you don't like it" option, plus the chance to change bottles in the regular wine club



■ **A chance to try before you buy: Virgin customers at a London tasting** (selections).

As I write, there are tickets left for the national tasting on October 18 at the Waldorf Hilton, Aldwych (£25, refunded if you order at least 12 bottles on the day). The previous evening's tasting (£15) is sold out, but call Virgin (0843 224 1001) or check on www.virginwines.co.uk in case things have changed. Or if you prefer a tasting at home, Virgin can offer that, too.

The wines

What of the wines? I've tasted some good stuff recently, notably the pure xarel-lo (one of the important grapes of cava) Alemany i Corrio 78 2012, Penedès (£13) – an altogether intriguing still wine, smelling subtly of herbs, steely-dry but with nutty and herbal elements and a dry tropical-fruit edge. Unusual, too, is Château de Lancyre La Rouvière 2013 (£15), a rare Pic St Loup white from the Coteaux du Languedoc, which blends classic Rhône grapes rousanne, marsanne and viognier to fresh, slightly spiced-peaches effect – I've climbed the Pic St Loup, and a glass of this would have been a fine reward.

Among reds, The Calligrapher 2013 (£12, shiraz, mourvèdre, grenache) is a happy-drinking Western Cape offering without any of the burnt rubber character which for me spoils too many South African reds. And De Martino Emigma 1 Reserva 2010 (£16) is a smart, serious Chilean blend of cabernets sauvignon and franc plus syrah, its French oak smoothly integrated now.

These wines are at the top end of Virgin Wines' core price range, where there's plenty to tempt at under £10. The range is due to expand, with more offerings below £8 and up into the three-figure fine wine echelon.

It's a difficult decision, deciding which direct-delivery wine company to choose. Do you go for one of the many which offer pre-mixed cases, often on regular occasions throughout the year? Do you prefer to make a personal choice? What are the merits of big names against smaller, niche set-ups?

My feeling is that if you have a good idea of the kinds of wines you like you should go for one offering customised buying – and take advantage of any tasting opportunity offered.

restaurant of the week

Soho character with a charming French accent

Joseph dines on Gallic cuisine in handsome surroundings and with some genial company

Should I ever come to write a memoir (can you wait?) there would have to be a chapter entitled *The Soho Years* – these to roughly span the decade 1993 – 2003. Not that Soho was unknown to me before – and certainly I've been acquainted with it since – but during this period I was, it is fair to say, an habitué ... though not, I hope, a 'character'. There is never a shortage of people in this miraculous little enclave (mostly men, though not exclusively) anxious to be seen as a 'Soho character'. Bacon was one. The ghastly Jeffrey Bernard another. Dan Farson. Ian Board. I could go on – but the common denominator was 'drunk'. And loud. And abusive. Soho, fortunately, is a hugely forgiving place: come the dawn, all is expunged by the growing sun, rinsed away by the dew, and annihilated by the hangover. No one bears a grudge, no one points the accusing finger ... this very largely due to the fact that no one remembers a single bloody thing about it.

So where did I frequent ...? Groucho, mainly – then Gerry's Club, the French House, occasionally the Bar Italia in the wee small hours of the morning.

Other cafes: Patisserie Valerie (known to all as Val's) when it was unique and magnificent, and not as now merely one of an indifferent and ubiquitous chain: Maison Bertaux is far better, and continues to thrive. I never much went to the Coach & Horses, fiefdom of Norman Balon, legendarily 'rudest landlord in London' – but I met him a bit in Gerry's, and he actually struck me as unusually well-mannered. Then there were the restaurants: L'Épicure, with its blazing gas street lamps, Wheeler's in Old Compton Street (one of the few there that had not been colonised, if that's the word I seek, by the homosexualist community). In Greek Street there was the Gay Hussar (no relation to the above) still today just about hanging on by the skin of its teeth ... and L'Escargot. Opened in 1927, with claims to be London's oldest French restaurant, L'Escargot is one of those restaurants that people will tell you they used to go to all the time, but can't remember when last they did (rather like Simpson's). I was there quite a lot when it was owned by Jimmy Lahoud, who later formed some sort of partnership with Marco Pierre White (never, seemingly, an altogether sensible thing to do) and now, just this year, it has a brand



Joseph Connolly at L'Escargot



■ Joseph Connolly with guest John Arthur

Pictures: Polly Hancock

new owner who has instituted a complete revamp: so time to go calling, I thought.

The building is as beautiful as ever – a mid-Georgian terrace house proudly flying the Tricolor, with its vertical neon sign in the same red, white and blue. There is a jaunty mosaic escargot on the step – and there used to be a golden one dangling from somewhere, but not any longer. The entry hall is still cosy and inviting, lined with pictures of patrons past, including such hellraisers and wild party

animals as Edward Heath and John Major. In my day, the main eating action used to take place at the back, but now it's the other way round. Bar still handsome, décor good – maroon and black panels with mirrors and potted palms (a little reminiscent of Biba, actually). There is a new (yet another) private members' club upstairs – which I would say doesn't stand a chance in hell, but this new owner, Brian Clivaz, has impressive form with clubs, having founded Home House and

run the Dover Street Arts Club. He bought Langan's recently – and now L'Escargot, together with Laurence Isaacson (the man behind the initially great and latterly lamentable Chez Gerard chain).

My guest was John Arthur, a very genial fellow who – although a recently retired businessman – used to own the late lamented Scribes, a splendid bar and restaurant off Fleet Street: happy days ...! Although a long-time resident of Dulwich, John

originally hails from Donegal – coincidentally, the very same town where my daughter currently resides. Moreover, John's mother was a Connolly, her mother having married someone called Joseph Connolly. This was, I insist, before my time – so I am not, in fact, John's grandfather: we are just good friends. There is a prix fixe of £17.50 for two courses, £19.50 for three, and an inviting carte of French classics – though not to the degree of the wonderful Mon Plaisir, say. John was having nine 'snails extraordinaire' (the house speciality, suitably enough) and I went for lobster and avocado salad. The snails – traditionally served in the shell with garlic sauce – were much enjoyed. My salad was pretty good: creamy avocado, equally creamy dressing on the endive, the reasonably generous lobster rather too cold. John is kind enough to invite me to Lord's from time to time, so we lunch a lot in the sainted Oslo Court, where they give you a whole lobster ... but that's another story.

Potatoes

Then a booming voice from the corner: there, large as life (rather larger, actually) was the guvnor, Brian Clivaz, reading out to his guests a rather rotten review of his restaurant which he seemed to think had been written by Grace Dent for *ES*, but was in fact by *The Spectator's* Tanya Gold. He found it hugely amusing, which is interesting in itself. For mains, John was having escalope of veal with lemon, and I ordered grilled organic chicken. We were sharing sides of French beans, frites and new potatoes. "I love potatoes," said John. "I could actually eat a whole meal of nothing but potatoes". You can take the man out of Ireland, but ... well: you know. Apart from the proprietor and his bevy of sycophantic acolytes, only one other table was taken – seven women, none of whose hair was actually hair-coloured. All having a great time ... and that was apparently okay, even to the waitress stroking the thing: but it's not okay, actually.

The veal was very good: crispy crumbing, tender meat. My chicken came in the form of a spatchcocked poussin: sweet and yielding. Jerseys and beans fine ... and I sent back the horrible flabby pale yellow frites. A replacement arrived quickly: they were horrible flabby pale yellow frites. John, he was telling me, had found Ireland far too confining as a young man, so came to London and sold knitwear in Selfridges. He didn't remain in the realm of pullovers: very recently, he sold what had become Britain's largest dental insurance company. His girlfriend in those early days attended St Godric's College in Arkwright Road ... and more than forty years on, she is still his wife. Pudding: an all right raspberry tart for John, and profiteroles for me: these were a little chewy, and set around a pot of chocolate. All wrong: you can't dunk a profiterole – it has to be obscenely plastered with the stuff.

Then Polly the photographer arrived, and although I had cleared this with the front of house, Brian Clivaz swung his considerable form into action: he told her quite curtly to stop. Dachshunds are fine, apparently, but photos are not. Well – as you see, Polly managed to get a good shot, despite Mr Clivaz having been very abrupt and preposterously authoritarian. Oh dear: I do hope he isn't angling to become a 'Soho character' ...

■ 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

- L'ESCARGOT
48 Greek Street, W1
Tel: 020 7439 7474
- Open Mon-Sat 11am-12pm.
Sun 11am-6pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Prix fixe £17.50 for two courses, £19.50 for three. Otherwise, about £120 for three courses for two people with drink.

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