



England bubbling over

Indian summer may make it best year for homegrown champagne

As, day after day through September, the sun shone and rain stayed away, English wine growers couldn't believe their good fortune. If 2013 had been a good year, 2014 was hinting at possibly being even better.

Over the last seven years vine plantings have burgeoned through lots of suitable parts of southern England, and even points further north, doubling the overall acreage, so year-on-year statistics aren't too relevant. But there are certainly hopes that 2013's record 4.5 million bottles will be overtaken this vintage.

And two good summers in a row have brought a particularly spectacular tenth birthday present for one English vineyard – the crop on a single plot at Furleigh Estate in Dorset is predicted to be even bigger than the sum of all the previous harvests it has produced.

It's not just quantity. Quality is great, too, as Julia Trustram Eve, marketing director of English Wine Producers, confirmed to me last week, though with understandable caution in case the Indian summer turned suddenly to monsoon winter. "Vineyards are looking great and the continued warm dry weather has really helped them along." The harvest is well underway, so with luck the change to autumnal weather won't affect the vintage too much.

But while many of the 2014 still wines will be ready to be enjoyed next summer, the real cream of this year's crop will require patience. The best of England's fizz stands firmly alongside champagne in quality and drinking appeal, but like the French classic it takes time



■ Grapes ready for harvest at Furleigh Estate

to make and to mature before its optimum drinking moment arrives.

Often before I've emphasised the similarities – in geology and grape varieties particularly – between the northernmost of France's viticultural regions and the chalk hills which run inland from the English Channel, and the proof of how these work for wine is increasingly evident.

Increasing

Fizz now forms two-thirds of England's wine production and volume is ever increasing, as more ambitious would-be vigneron invest the profits from their day jobs into land, vines and smartly equipped wineries. But Furleigh's Rebecca Hansford is unusual in that her vines grow on the former dairy farm where she was brought up and which she and her husband Ian Edwards, both actuaries, were able to buy back thanks to a provident business merger.

In other aspects, though, the estate has much in common with many of its fellows. There's enthusiasm for entering top-notch wine competitions (where Furleigh has been well rewarded this year and last), the wine is on sale at a good number of

outlets as well as direct from the vineyard and visitors are welcomed – currently with special overnight harvest packages (October 19 and 22, email info@furleighestate.co.uk or enquiries@bridge-house.co.uk, or call the vineyard on 01308 488991).

If you want to sample English fizz at home, Waitrose is offering the ever-reliable Merret Bloomsbury from Ridgeview in Sussex, one of the pioneers and still one of the best, at £20 instead of the usual £25 until October 28. Ridgeview also makes Marksman for M&S (£26). Jeroboam's has a good choice, including Nyetimber's very fine Classic Cuvée 2009 (£28.25) and, from one of the newer and impressive estates, Hennes Brut Reserve 2009 (£30) – there is 10 per cent discount on 12-bottle cases. Oddbins has soft, ripe Gusborne Brut Reserve 2009 (£28).

The only cloud on the sparkling horizon is whether there will be the right winery and sales infrastructure in place in time to vinify and sell all the bottles which finally result from the current planting boom, especially if summers such as 2013 and 2014 prove the norm. But that's a concern for the future. For the moment, England's bubbling.

restaurant of the week

The special is just what the doctor ordered

But the chateaubriand is not quite right for our critic and as for an after-lunch smoke...

So what did you do this summer? Was it fun? Did you go somewhere madly exotic? Did you manage to dream up some form of ruinously expensive entertainment for every single day in order to ensure that the kiddies were bloated with amusement, not to say burgers? Or was it a staycation? In other words, doing what you always do the whole year round with added selfies, and opting to call a fortnight of it a staycation ...? Barbecues? Were you, in that case, felled by food poisoning? Because the latest government advice is to not just cook your meat in the oven in the kitchen before you recook it on the barbecue, but to repeatedly wash your hands at every stage of the process. Which everyone does, don't they ...? Or maybe, if you're famous enough, you have publicly undertaken this bloody ice bucket challenge. Whereby a vat of ice

water is dumped upon the head of some or other gurning celeb, and all in the name of charity. Because famous people will go to any lengths at all for a good cause, so long as the gesture guarantees blanket exposure in all the dailies and the six o'clock news, while incurring no expense whatever.

Inventor

Anyhoo ... I've been doing none of these things: I've been having lunch. Summer, winter – makes no difference to me: another day, another lunch. And the latest of these was at Frederick's, a venerable institution in Islington that dates back to the 1960s. At the time, the coolest restaurant in London was Carrier's, in Camden Passage. This was Robert Carrier, of course – inventor of the cookery card and the lushly pornographic cook book. Everyone used to pronounce Carrier in the French way, as in Cartier –

“I asked the waiter why the umbrellas were not up, so the outside seating would be dry for a smoke. He said that was because the rain spoils them. Quite right – which is why in wet weather I never wear shoes: completely buggers them up



Joseph Connolly at Frederick's



■ Joseph Connolly with Dr David Harper at Frederick's in Islington

Picture: Polly Hancock

but in fact he was a Yank, so it ought to be pronounced carrier, as in bag. Carrier's is long gone – but Frederick's is still where it always was: right next door. The lettering upon the fascia is grandly Victorian – because in the 1960s, apart from pink and orange psychedelic swirly, the most fashionable iconography was Victorian: strange, but true.

My guest was Dr David Harper, a GP from Hassocks, just outside of Brighton. I had suggested Frederick's because David and myself are reasonably keen Havana cigar smokers, and this restaurant has a beautiful garden and terrace. Yes, and we met there on the wettest day of the entire summer. I asked the waiter why the enormous umbrellas were not actually up, so that the outside seating would be dry, and the terrace usable. He said that they were not up because the rain spoils them. Quite right – which is why in wet weather I never actually wear shoes, you know: completely buggers them up.

The restaurant is so much larger than it appears from the frontage in this charming walkway, which used to be crammed with equally charming and original shops, and now isn't. The favourite part seems to be the tall and glass-domed conservatory to the rear – which offered David and myself a peerless view of the sodden garden. There are Vasarely-type vibrant geometric abstracts on bare brick walls, well-spaced tables, good cloths and napkins, proper butter in a ceramic ramekin with a paper topping reading "Frederick's", and a reasonably-priced set lunch: two courses for "fifteen-and-a-half pounds" (their way of doing it: amusingly cutesy or bleeding annoying? You decide) and three for £19. We were going for one of that day's specials: chateaubriand for two at £55, this to include chips, spinach, red wine jus and a Bearnaise sauce. The wine list is very enticing and sensibly priced – we had a more than decent Cotes du Rhone – and there is a large carte with about fifteen mains, including three (bream, cotes de boeuf and lamb gigot) which they

list as being "bare essentials", I cannot even begin to explain to you why. Before the chateaubriand, David was having pan fried scallops with pulled pork and apple puree, and I ordered dressed English crab with Marie Rose prawns, spiced guacamole and croutons. Here was an excellent cylinder of white meat together with the ingredients of a small prawn cocktail ... and not guacamole, but simply sliced ripe avocado: all very good. As were David's two large scallops, the pulled pork formed into a little fried and breadcrumb cake. "They do go very well together," he said. "One cuts the other".

On call

Often, David is on call throughout the weekend. "You have to be very careful. Some people will say it's an emergency, when all they want is a repeat prescription. With children, I always err on the side of caution. If there is a temperature, I ask the parent to press the skin lightly. If the colour returns instantly, all is well. Should it remain white for a few seconds, it's time to call 999". Did he always want to be a doctor, I wondered ...? "Well when I was very young I wanted to be a fighter pilot ... but I couldn't see very well, so that was no good. I read medicine at Barts – and did think of becoming a paediatrician. Surgery rather bored me. All that standing up. And when you've taken out one appendix, you've taken out the lot. So I became a GP. I like the variety. When I was 28, I was responsible for 2,200 patients". And is he always patient with his patients ...? "I hope so. Drug addicts wear me down – but apart from that ..." He has three sons, one of whom is an anaesthetist. "Another is a geriatrician. No sorry – he practises 'elderly medicine'. You're not allowed to say geriatrics any more ..."

We had asked for the chateaubriand to be medium rare ... though it arrived looking rather too red for my liking. David was fine with it, but I rather rashly requested that my half be cooked a little longer. Always a mistake: of course it came back well done, and rather dried out. The texture

was not what you want: this is supposed to be the finest and most tender cut of all, yet it seemed to have been sliced against the grain and was just a tad chewy. Flavour excellent – as were the spinach (I rarely praise spinach) and jus. The chips and Bearnaise were first class. "I cooked Beef Wellington for 14 at the weekend," David was musing. "But you can't go wrong with Beef Wellington". He is being over modest: I can recall quite a few Beef Wellingtons in various restaurants that have managed to go very wrong indeed.

The service here – largely at the hands of polite young Frenchwomen, very smart in black – is really very good, as well as discreet. I mentioned to the maitre d' my reservations about the quality of the beef, and half the cost of it was immediately deducted. Which was good. What wasn't good was the still dripping terrace – and David with a couple of Cohibas going begging ...! So we went elsewhere to smoke them: on a terrace that was dry. At the Savile Club, actually – this never to be confused with the cigar-smoking DJ monster of the same name. I once suggested that in a gesture of solidarity with the unfortunately tainted Savile, the Garrick should change its name to the Glitter Club: there were few takers.

■ 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

- **FREDERICK'S**
Camden Passage
Angel Islington N18
Tel: 020 7359 2888
- Open Mon-Sat noon-2.30pm,
5.45pm-11pm. Closed Sun.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Two course lunch £15.50,
three for £19. Otherwise, about
£110 for three course meal for two
with wine.

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