



Monk's label is answer to our prayers

If there's a particular logo on an unknown bottle of French wine, I'm pretty confident the drinking experience will be a happy one. The little monk with a barrel on his shoulder identifies wines made by members of Vignerons Indépendants – men and women who put their personal stamp on what they produce. The results are very often delicious, as well as soundly priced.

What I hadn't realised, until I did some extra research, is quite how widespread the Vigneron Indépendant (VI) organisation is. It numbers some 7,000 members spread through all France's principal wine-growing regions. Together they are responsible for roughly half their country's wine grape harvest, making 28 million hectolitres of wine – some 3.7 billion bottles – annually.

But big needn't necessarily mean beautiful, so it's good to know that VI is more than a 'pay-your-fee-and-get-the-logo' grouping.

"This logo isn't a gadget, it's a philosophy, a professional ethos," says Gaillac grower Michel Issaly, current president of the group. "Artisans of wine, we create each year our wine, the result of a subtle alchemy between a man, a terroir and a knowledge to ensure their originality and authenticity."

Members adhere to a 13-point

charter, which insists they are responsible for their wine through every stage from working the vineyard to selling the final bottles. That implies overall quality control, careful and competent work in vineyard and cellar, care for the environment and an innovatory approach which respects tradition and patrimony.

The requirement I like best is the final one. VIs agree to welcome wine drinkers, advise on the tasting and drinking of their wines and – surely most crucially of all – "take pleasure in presenting the fruit of their work and their culture".

Enjoyment

That's the nub of wine appreciation – pleasure. Wine shouldn't be a quick alcohol fix, a liquid to swig regardless of what you're eating or the company you're in, a posh drink only for the privileged or a commodity to be bought and traded as an investment. It's something to enjoy both in its own right and to complement happy social situations. So VI members have absolutely the right aim.

In return for their commitment, VI offers its members both practical support and broad defence of their interest.

It all came about 36 years ago with the foundation of the more cumbersome titled Confédération

National des Caves Particulieres, inspired by a vigneron in the deep south, Charles Ramires. The name change in 2003 brought the federation firmly into the 21st century.

But the proof is in the drinking. In so wide-ranging an offering, some members' wines may be disappointing or simply not to your taste. But I've had lots of happy experiences, reinforced at a recent tasting in London of wines from Languedoc-Roussillon, organised by Sud de France.

A single independent merchant proves the point: Stone, Vine & Sun (www.stonevine.co.uk), sellers of my favourite white from that tasting, Domaine du Météore Faugères Les Léonides, 2013 (£11.25), long and tasty and a fabulous food wine – think scallops, perhaps.

Among highly recommended VI reds from the same source are Château la Grave Minervois Tristan & Julien 2013 (£8.75) fresh yet dense with red fruit, a herby touch and savoury finish, and Domaine du Grand Arc Corbières Reserve 2011 (£9.75), which has similar, slightly strengthened characteristics – and there are two more great Grand Arc wines if you spend a little more. All these wines are excellent value for money, and so much more interesting than many impersonal, big-brand offerings.

Italian proves it's best to stick to innate talent

A marvellous Bolognese proves the point that it pays to play to your strengths

'How to Become a Successful Writer!

That's how the headline reads. Have you seen them, these damned condescending adverts? You must have: they're everywhere. Here's how the copy continues: 'If you've ever fancied being a writer but don't know where to start – here's the answer. A home-study Creative Writing course that teaches ordinary people how to write, get published and earn extra income'. Oh God, oh God ... where does one even begin with this ...? It is all so very deeply insulting to professionals, as well as being perfectly laughable in its easy presumption. The very idea that you might just 'fancy' being a writer, as one might maybe fancy a bag of crisps or a flutter on the lottery. And if you 'don't know where to start', then why on earth should you? Don't start, for God's sake, and spare us all. Can you imagine if the word 'writer' were to be substituted with 'plumber'? Or neuro-surgeon? Classical pianist? Prime Minister? Do you 'fancy' it? And don't know where

to start? Are you an ordinary person? Well then whack us off a cheque, and soon you will be plying your brand new and lucrative trade 'in your spare time'. Oh Lordy. Because the truth is that most people who say they want to be writers don't want to be writers at all: real writers, they are already very busy writing, not idly aspiring to it. What these dreamers mean is they could do with a few extra quid, and it would be a blast to see their name on the cover of a book – and then they could host a glitzy launch party and sign lots of copies and soon make half a billion, just like that J. K. Rowling (generally the only author they have ever heard of).

Well-run

Chefs, I know, would be rightly contemptuous of anyone who thought they might just 'fancy' a bash, but don't know where to start. It's all about twenty-four hour commitment, relentless effort and utter dedication: this is called professionalism. It's not a bloody 'lark', for Christ's sake. And I am reminded of this in so many restaurants: you can tell in a nanosecond the difference between a short-order cook who



■ The Vigneron Indépendant logo

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Vered's luxury hampers open up UK eyes to fabulous treats produced by small suppliers

Beautifully packaged luxury hampers and treat boxes stuffed with award-winning artisan British products can be ordered from South Hampstead-based Darling Bites.

Founded in 2013 by former management consultant Vered Zimmerman, the company was inspired by the cornucopia of Selfridge's food hall and the falling cost of delivering packages of goods made by small, specialist suppliers.

"A few years ago people thought the internet would be the death of letter writing, but as buying online caught on, packages became the way of getting goods from one place to another and delivery costs came down," says

Zimmerman. "Like everyone else I was getting into buying my groceries and clothes online and thought, 'Why would I ever want to go to the shops?'"

"Working near Bond Street, one day I went into Selfridges food hall to buy a special box of biscuits and thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice to get hold of these products even if you don't live near Selfridges?'"

Variety

"People in Hampstead are incredibly fortunate to have variety and choice but that's not true of the UK as a whole."

Since small suppliers of handmade goods aren't set up for mass distribution, Zimmerman sees her company as helping to fuel Britain's food revolution.

"I'm not a supermarket, but here for people who fancy something nice or want to spoil themselves. The emphasis is on the fun aspect of the foods and treating yourself."

Zimmerman's cherrypicked products have to both taste and look good.

"Too often I have bought fancy boxes because the packaging looked nice but the taste didn't live up to it. They have to be fabulous inside and out to make you feel this is special."

Chocolate fudge, Portlebay Popcorn, biscuits by the Island Bakery from the Isle of Mull, Fine Cheese Company crackers, indulgent treats from the Grown Up Chocolate Company, handmade natural raspberry marshmallows

Joseph Connolly at Bacco



■ Joseph with guest Bruce Harris at Bacco in Holborn

Picture: Polly Hancock

bangs a steak on to a skillet, and a true and consummate chef. The restaurant I was in the other day, however, boasted neither thing: simply an attractive and well-run Italian, better and pricier than most. Bacco is in Red Lion Street, a rather attractive narrow lane in Holborn, and home to quite a few other eating places. The frontage is pleasingly old-fashioned with brightly crammed hanging baskets, the interior calm and just a little austere with a mural that might be depicting Augustus Caesar, though not necessarily. There are gilt-framed mirrors and lots of dummy bottles of Deutz – an extremely creamy and toasty champagne that you don't see much in London: in Paris, it's all over the place. One of the selling points of Bacco is a sweet little rear terrace sporting huge and square umbrellas: and this is where I was seated on a warm and

sunny September lunchtime with my guest, Bruce Harris. Bruce has the rather unusual occupation of Maritime Arbitrator. "Not marine," he qualifies. "That is the sea. I deal exclusively with ships".

All that talk of water prompted me to order wine – as is seemly in a place called Bacco. If you say you are going 'to Bacco', you are irresistibly reminded of fags and shag ... but Bacco is in fact our good old fat and flatulent friend Bacchus, god of wine: and if you have to be god of something, it might as well be wine. So – a bottle of house red, a very decent Montepulciano at a very decent £18.95. There is a section of the menu called 'pre-food', and this is wholly made up of drink. There is a set lunch of two courses for £14.95, three for £4 more – but we went for the carte. I usually plump for the least ridiculous or time-wasting or off-putting

starter – but here, seven of the ten on offer I could easily have enjoyed. Though still managed to order a rather lousy one: roast pork 'porchetta style' with fennel, orange segments and crackling. Sounded good: wasn't. Just cold and fatty leftovers from a mediocre Sunday joint with indigestible fennel, unchewable crackling, and pointless orange. Bruce did much better with burrata (creamy mozzarella), roasted plum tomatoes, basil pesto and garlic. "Very good," he said. "Tomato just sweet, burrata rich and lovely". Before all that we were given a copita of chilled tomato soup with savoury biscotti: refreshing, but no great deep hit.

"For the past five years," said Bruce, "I haven't eaten meat. I found that I took against the smell ... except for lamb, rather oddly: I still enjoy lamb". But he was ordering the chargrilled brill with confit fennel and

Szechuan pepper sauce ... while I was seduced by spaghetti, simply because it had a 'hand made beef ragu, Bolognese style'. Always good to know that it is made with hands. The waiter said that the spaghetti was 'thick'. Well, I never expect my pasta to be particularly intellectually challenging, so I said fine, okay ... while nonetheless specifying tagliatelle, just to be on the safe side. And I must say this was marvellous: good, al dente ribbons in a sauce that was the best Bolognese I have had in a very long while – nuggety and clingy and gooiily rich. Bruce too very much enjoyed his crisp-skinned brill, though thought it might have done with a dash more salt.

Opera

In between arbitrating over ship disputes (and apparently 75pc of the world's maritime arbitrations are conducted in London) I wondered whether Bruce actually went on any ...? "No. A cruise, you mean? No. Why would I do that? I enjoy just sitting on a terrace with a glass of something, walking and swimming". Which is actually just about all you ever do on a cruise, but let it lie. His real enthusiasm is for music, and opera in particular. "Il Trovatore is maybe the greatest of all ... though in addition to Verdi, I absolutely adore Mozart – so very elevating. I also love Haydn: much more earthy". About six times a year he visits his house on the Greek island of Milos: "you know – where they found the Venus de Milo. Lots of goats there. There are signs saying 'Beware of the cows'. Not sure I've ever seen a cow ..." And talking of goats, we then were sharing the Italian

cheeseboard, and the goat one tasted of smoke and dung, as usual. The sheep wasn't much better (like curdled curd, as it generally is) – but pecorino in a crust of black pepper was decent, and the cow one was best of all (no reason whatever to beware of it). All this was served on rather pretty turquoise glass plates with fresh strawberries and raspberries. Then we were given complimentary limoncellos. A notebook and a photographer in a restaurant tend to encourage this sort of thing ... though I really am at a loss as to why Italian restaurants persist with the limoncello thing: it's almost as if they imagine that people enjoy drinking it, or something.

And that's it. No rounding off. Because I no longer actually fancy being a writer. So as to a clever ending ... well I just don't know where to start.

■ 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

■ BACCO

25 Red Lion Street, WC1
Tel: 020 7242 7900

■ Open Mon-Fri noon-3pm, 5.30pm-10pm. Sat 5.30pm-10pm. Sun closed.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Cost: Set two course lunch £14.95, three £18.95. Otherwise, about £110 for three course meal for two with wine.

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■ Vered Zimmerman with her Darling Bites hamper

from Belinda Clark and Berryscrumptious handmade raspberry and dark chocolate fudge are among the treats she offers with many products having won Great Taste Awards.

"Many are hand made from all over the British Isles and embody the spirit of British entrepreneurship," adds Zimmerman.

"The story of the British food industry has come full circle. Many of these products are from traditional recipes that run in the family. Fifty years ago no-one would have thought of reviving these traditions, now people are coming up with some fabulous artisan foods, trying to excel and taking pride in their products. I'm not a particularly good cook so this is my contribution."

Bridget Galton

■ Order from darlingbites.co.uk which features information and stories behind the producers and products.