

# Death and taxes call for bloody red meat

Joseph orders badly at an Argentinian noted for its steaks but suffers plate envy when he sees what he missed

In the Beatles song Taxman, the late George Harrison very memorably warned us against the beastly business of dying, because the government would be sure to tax the pennies on our eyes. It being traditional, apparently, to weight the eyelids of corpses with a couple of coppers – ever see it done? No, neither have I – but then I don't much associate with the recently deceased, it has to be admitted. But the point here is not the stiff, but the pennies. A desperate and rapacious government (and when is it not, regardless of its persuasion?) is always paying out vast amounts of taxpayers' money to creative accountants and murky think-tanks to come with ever more lucrative devices whereby the taxpayers may be screwed for more and ever vaster amounts of money. And the latest mooted iniquity is the so-called 'Mansion Tax'.

Now we all comprehend the principle behind the redistribution of wealth – and all those oligarchs we hear about who invest in prime London real estate and then simply sit on it (not literally – they are domiciled somewhere far more tax-friendly) and watch

the pot growing, are, of course, legitimate game. But it's not those who are going to be affected, is it? Because it never is. An annual tax of £15,000? Not even going to be noticed. But what about the very many Hampstead and Highgate residents whose houses are accidentally worth a preposterous sum? It's all they can do to keep up with rates, utilities and maintenance: such a tax will necessitate their selling the houses they somehow managed to pay for out of heavily taxed income. The threshold is £2m, and in terms of houses, £2m isn't really that much, these days: you see a £2m house in the Ham & High Property magazine, and you wonder what's wrong with it. And as we well know from VAT, the catchment soon will spread, and the rate will surely rise. Now if you actually earn £2m a year; then by all means let it be taxed at a higher rate – and if you win £2m on the Lottery ... well: who would object to a tax of £15,000? But even in that case, an ANNUAL tax for such a sum would be seen to be criminal. So all one can do, really, is be sure to keep Chief Twit Milliband away from Number Ten.

“It said the beef Milanese was marinated in garlic and parsley – it was like a thin piece of laminated vinyl

Many decades ago, I had a lease on The Flask Bookshop in Flask Walk. I was offered the freehold of the entire building for a little over £100,000; but it may as well have been a billion, at the time. You don't earn a fortune selling old books – as my guest for lunch the other day was ruefully agreeing: although Robert Harding is very much at the smarter end of the business, being a director of Maggs, the very prestigious antiquarian bookseller in Berkeley Square, a couple of doors away from Annabel's. Robert is a very affable fellow, who also happens to be Chairman of the excellent Savile Club – and, in common with myself, has a liking for red meat and red wine. So I thought that somewhere called The Bull Steak Expert in Holborn might

just hit the spot – and nor is red confined to the provender: red (and black) upholstered chairs, and the seemingly mandatory red 1950s pendants. It's very small and rather cosy, though you must try to ignore a large sub-Vettriano painting which looms, rather menacingly. Music is subdued though jaunty, and its absence would be much preferred. We were given a freebie of grilled aubergine – very good, in excellent olive oil – as we gazed at the meaty menu. So ... what to order in an Argentinian place that is self-professedly expert at steak ...? Well Robert caught on to the idea in a flash, going for a sirloin. In addition to that, there are three other cuts: rump (an old Berni Inn staple, now rarely seen), fillet and rib-eye, each available in three sizes: Robert's smallest sirloin was pretty huge. You can have all four for £157.25 (Lord knows how they factored in that 25p) and add on prawns or lobster tail, if still peckish. There are other meats and fish as well ... so what did I order ...? I ordered beef Milanese, because it's usually veal, and I was intrigued. Bloody fool. It said it was marinated in garlic and parsley, but it was still like a thin piece of laminated vinyl. The fried egg on

top was overcooked – and the chips absolutely magnificent.

But I am running away with myself here: for starters, I was having chorizo criollo – a really excellent whole grilled dense and meaty sausage. And because Robert had opted for a sirloin steak, he prudently chose as his starter ... steak tartare. I know: red in tooth and claw – what can I tell you? This came as a large neat cylinder (pinker than usual) and it was very much enjoyed – though it did have chilli and other things in it, which it really shouldn't. And so to the main event – and a severe attack on my part of appalling plate envy: his steak was thick and so very juicy-looking ... and I had breadcrumb laminated vinyl. He gave me a morsel of steak, as a charitable grandee might well to an embarrassingly slaving passing pauper: it was utterly, utterly sublime. And Malbec to drink, of course: can be highly alcoholic and headache, Malbec, so I asked the waiter the percentage. “Eighteen,” he said. We were duly aghast. He checked the label. “Sixteen,” he amended. I checked the label: fourteen, as it happens. An innumerate waiter – quite rare. As I toyed with vinyl and Robert

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wine Liz Sagues



## Cracking French wines lives up to their name

Recommendations by UK wine writers and sommeliers a hit

We all have moments when we recognise something unexpected in a wine. My most recent one was during this year's Absolutely Cracking Wines from France tasting a couple of weeks ago. What I'd poured into my glass smelled of gherkins.

I couldn't quite believe it, but another taster agreed. Then a more techie colleague, who hadn't seen the bottle, asked if the grape variety was pinot noir. It was: the wine was red burgundy. Ah, she said, that does happen – as a little Googling confirmed, with a reference to the same gherkin odour in an Argentinian pinot. Intriguing, and I've yet to find out why it happens, though the consensus is that it's not a scent to celebrate.

But this is a distraction.

Absolutely Cracking absolutely lives up to its name. It's a fascinating focus on what France does well, the wines chosen by people who aren't promoting them commercially, simply recommending what they enjoy to drink. Who are these francophile gurus? UK wine writers and sommeliers, 42 of the former, 29 of the latter; together responsible for selecting 176 wines at prices ranging from £4.30 to the £30 limit set by organisers Sopena, the body which promotes French wine here.

What conclusions can be drawn from the fascinating 2014 tasting? First: the most classic regions were severely under represented. Just 11 wines came from Burgundy and five from Champagne, while of the 19 Bordeaux 13 were white and two pink, leaving only four reds. At the other extreme, 38

choices came from Languedoc-Roussillon. The Loire blossomed too, with 23 wines – hail the revival of muscadet, with six different selections, and splendid chenin blanc in sparkling, dry and sweet guises. Next came the Rhône (18), Alsace (16) and the South West (15).

Most interesting – and often impressive – were regions/grapes which are rarely in the spotlight.

Some of the smallest categories had the biggest impact: the single fragrant white from the Moselle, for example, another from Bugey (a region even most wine professionals have never heard of, tucked close to the Alps) and the three whites and single red from Bugey's eastern neighbour Savoie. The grapes in these wines – notably auxerrois, altesse, bergeron, jacquère – are

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# Joseph Connolly at The Bull Steak Expert



## FACTFILE

**THE BULL STEAK EXPERT**  
54 Red Lion Street WC1. Tel  
020 7242 0708

■ Open Mon-Fri 12 – 3pm, 5.30 – 10pm. Sat 5.30 – 10.30pm. Sun closed.

■ Food: 7 (stick to steak)

■ Service: 6 (too omnipresent)  
■ The Feeling: 7

■ Cost: About £120 for loads of man-grub and wine.

every single sip you take. Good grief: it's almost as if they are trying to chivvy you into ordering more ...! So we did that. Well look: you might as well spend it, you know – because when we all are compelled to sell our comparatively modest houses in order to avoid a crippling 'Mansion Tax' we will be rendered at a stroke both homeless, and rich. Rich, yes – but not for long: there's always inheritance tax to clear up all the slack: beware the pennies on your eyes.

■ 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](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk)

relished his steak, I glanced through the window at the passing cavalcade: business women, very largely – some smoking, some on their mobiles, most doing both.

No one, I suppose, actually plans to be a bookseller – and so it proved with Robert. As a boy, he was consumed by classicism and

ancient history, and went up to Manchester to read archaeology. From which he dropped out after just one term. "It wasn't what I wanted any more. I was a passionate book collector by then, and so I went to work at Maggs as a nine month fill-in". Where, thirty-seven years on, he still is.

He collects books on book collecting, as well as seventeenth century literature. At Maggs, he is in charge of the Early British department: "basically," he says, "Chaucer to Dr Johnson". One of his sons is at Sandhurst, the other doing a Masters in sociology. What,

I wondered does one do with a Masters in sociology ...? "Good question," said Robert. "Probably go on to do a PhD in sociology ..."

So one of us had a cracking lunch, anyway – in an easy and casual sort of place, though with staff who pour more wine at



■ Vineyard in Savoie whose wines shone in the Cracking tasting

picture by Timo Tervo

just as unfamiliar.

So is petite arvine, limited almost entirely to Switzerland's Valais canton. But a Swiss emigré grows it to delicious effect in southern France, where the rules forbid it being called even a vin de pays. So Hildegard Horat's Bu N'Daw is labelled Vin de France – an appellation which despite its catch-all character can indicate some very superior wines.

The grape of one of my top wines of the day, one I wanted to drink rather than spit, might just be recognised by adventurous drinkers. Château

de Cabidos Cuvée Comte Philippe de Nazelles Sec is made from petit manseng, grown in the Pyrénéan foothills inland from Atlantic. Sommeliers from Hakkasan chose two different vintages, 2008 and 2009. The latter was my first choice, but both had immense character; concentration and layered complexity, well deserving their Vigneron Indépendant gold medals.

Good news is that Theatre of Wine, Tufnell Park, lists them both, £12.90 and £14.90, as well as two Cabidos petit manseng sweet wines, among its

extensive and tempting French selection.

But the Cracking selectors' favourite retailer was The Wine Society, source of more than 20 of the wines – no-one else made double figures.

From it, you can buy Château de Vaux les Gryphées 2013 Moselle, £9.95, and Domaine Peillot Roussette de Bugey 2012, £14.50, as well as 19 other delights.

■ Details of all the wines chosen are in the tasting booklet. Contact Sopexa – [emmanuelle.besnard@sopexa.com](mailto:emmanuelle.besnard@sopexa.com) – if you'd like a copy.

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