



# Roll out the barrel – but only for the right cuveés

Chablis growers know that oak overpowers less structured wines

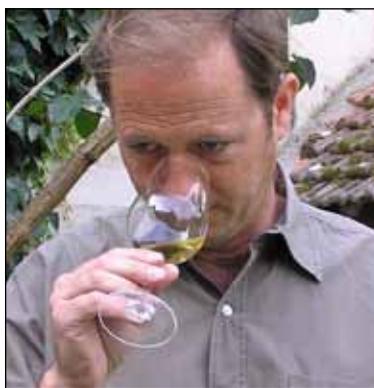
**D**own in the far south of Italy, a wine grower memorably summed up to me the style of wine he didn't want to make: "I don't want a wine of St Joseph." And by that he meant the first century BC carpenter, not the appealing appellation in France's Rhône valley.

In the years since that encounter, I've heard the same sentiment expressed, if perhaps not quite so picturesquely, many times. Its utterers don't want to make wine that shouts of the barrel-maker's craft, where vanilla-laden new oak hides the true character of the liquid. I entirely agree.

So that's why I love chablis. In the cellars in Chablis town and round about, there are plenty of oak barrels to be seen, a good number of them new. But they are used, almost without exception, with discretion, and only for the bigger, more structured wines – the grands crus particularly – which support such treatment.

Sometimes, a very good premier cru, or even a generic chablis, will seem to hint of contact with barrel. But no, this is the character of fine wines which through careful handling from vineyard to bottle have a concentration as generous as oak-aged wines, but without the possible disadvantages. Even if you know a particular cuvée has seen only stainless steel tanks, its style can come as a considerable surprise.

So let's start meeting some of



■ **Cyril Testut**

the people who turn the region's chardonnay grapes into these splendid wines. Of those growers I met during my very recent visit to this gently hilly, limestone-soiled part of northern France, Cyril Testut was responsible for some that I enjoyed most. He's made wine elsewhere, notably in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and had aspirations to devote his life to art, but has decided his vocation is chablis – an affection which shows in his careful treatment of his old vines and his attention to harvest timing: "A lot of people harvest too early. If you do, it's too late for the wine."

Even with optimum ripeness, all his wines have a fresh, complex, elegant minerality – his Montée de Tonnerre premier cru, in both the 2010 and 2011 vintages, has the "licking stone" quality of finest chablis.

At Domaine Testut, which is built into part of Chablis town's 14th-century fortifications, work is in progress to offer visitors a smart new tasting room, its fireplace embellished with a stone-carved ammonite, pointing

to the origin of the Kimmeridgian limestone into which the vine roots delve.

There are also ammonites – found in the vineyards – in the atmospheric vaulted tasting area at Domaine Vrignaud (it can't properly be called a cellar, as the high water table in the village of Fontenay-près-Chablis precludes any below-ground activity). And the wines are equally fine. This, another family operation, is almost twice the size of Cyril Testut's, but both export at least two-thirds of their production. The UK tops Testut's customer list; at Vrignaud, Japanese and Americans are the biggest buyers.

## Farmed organically

The Vrignauds' vines are farmed organically, a practice which "better expresses the terroir", says Axelle Vrignaud, whose husband Guillaume is the fifth generation to tend the estate. After the initial shock of the change of practice, the vines are healthier, more prolific and more robust, she adds. Again, the basic chablis is delicious, there is steely style and remarkable length in the Fourchaume premier cru – and the old-vine cuvée is one of those the innocent drinker might well mistakenly take for an oaked wine.

Stockists: Domaine Testut: [www.houseoftownend.com](http://www.houseoftownend.com), chablis 2007/2010 £12, grand cru Grenouille 2009 £35. Domaine Vrignaud: [www.jascots.co.uk](http://www.jascots.co.uk), chablis 2011 £15.85, Fourchaume 2011 £22.25 (case discounts on both), Fourchaume vieilles vignes 2011 £29.80. Free delivery on all £100-plus orders.

# Anecdotes of an adman served up with trusty English classics

Our reviewer finds good food and congenial company in an opulent setting – but he does have a bone to pick about the chicken

**Q**uite daring, really – to call a restaurant Plum + Spilt Milk. Because to me that spells just a mess all over the table, oh yuck – and who do you think is going to clean up that little lot then, matey? And did you get the "+"? Not "and", nor even "&" – but "+". So is it actually called Plum Plus Spilled Milk, then? Dunno. The name – because we are in railway land here – actually derives from the colours of the livery of LNWR carriages of old: cherry and cream, to a sane person

– which does, you have to admit, sound a whole lot more appetising than their slightly weirdo version. Anyhoo ... here is yet more evidence of a King's Cross that is progressing in leaps and fantastically expensive bounds: the scale and speed of building and expansion around these parts truly is prodigious. The restaurant is within the newly reopened Great Northern Hotel, slotted in neatly between King's Cross and St Pancras stations, and a rather cool yellow brick counterbalance to the rusty crenellations and gothic excesses of the St Pancras Grand.

“By God has somebody tipped an absolute fortune into the refurbishment of this place...! An abundance of deep-buttoned wing chairs – and that's just on the staircase. Much marble and chandelier, lots of glossy panelling and silver.

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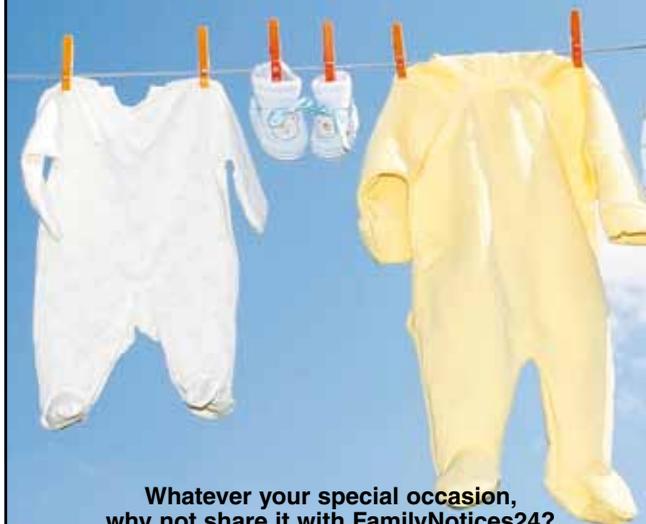
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## Joseph Connolly at Plum + Split Milk, King's Cross



■ Joseph with guest Noel Bennett – in a montage of images by Ham&High photographer Polly Hancock

On the ground floor is a rather groovy bar, the three windows of which each bear a single large letter: G, N, H. Which I thought might have stood for, I don't know ... Good Nosh Here, maybe. But no: it turns out of course to be Great Northern Hotel, is all.

And by God has somebody tipped an absolute fortune into the refurbishment of this place...! You can always tell when a restaurant or hotel has been dickied up on a wing, prayer and shoestring – and here is not it. An abundance of deep-buttoned wing chairs – and that's just on the staircase. Much marble and chandelier, lots of glossy panelling and silver. The restaurant itself is atop said liberally upholstered staircase, and all the way up there is a frieze made up of randomly stuck-on stickers, all extolling the virtues of milk: plums don't get a look in. And is the restaurant done out in

cherry and cream, then? Well – off-white leather banquettes, yes OK, but that's as far as it goes. Parquet floor, polished walnut chairs, black and silver tables and clusters of dozens of decanter-type pendants, each of which, we learn, sports a mouth-blown bulb. Lordy Lordy – and you thought you were busy...! Listen, chum – there are people out there mouth-blowing light bulbs: who knew?

### Pretty damn small

My guest for lunch was Noel Bennett – former vice-chairman of the Chelsea Arts Club, of which he has been a member for nearly 30 years, and a veteran director and producer of TV commercials. He really liked the menu here: “Do you know,” he said, “I could order every single thing – it all sounds marvellous.” Why, do you suppose...? Because it's English: defiantly English – not in the way

of Marcus Wareing's Gilbert Scott in St Pancras next door (where ancient traditional recipes are reinvented) but simply because it lists the trusty classics ... though no roast, alas: a fortune awaits the restaurant (apart from Simpson's) that will offer a Sunday roast on a Wednesday. So Noel ordered fish soup followed by lamb shank hotpot with turnips and glazed potatoes; I was having potted shrimps and rocket ... and then I rather fancied roast chicken from the set menu, but the charming smiley waitress in black shirt and striped butcher apron said it was rather small when compared with the grilled free-range chicken with spring greens and new potatoes from the carte. So I had the grilled chicken from the carte – which actually was pretty damn small, so heaven knows, really. And rather dry and clothly: why I wanted roasted. Oh well.

Prosecco came in a fluted flute easily a foot tall: looked like something drunk from by an unscrupulous and bloodthirsty sheriff in a Hammer horror. Thick rim, though – so I was delighted to see that the glasses for the Nero d'Avola were Riedel: large, thin and beautiful masterpieces. The potted shrimps were pretty good – not too heavy on butter, but would have been much better off just slightly warm. Noel said that the soup was “very good: fishy, spicy – and lots of tomato”. He was just slightly jet-lagged, having the day before got back from Los Angeles. “I normally get up at five,” he said, “but this morning I slept in till nearly nine...! I was there with a chum. We drove across the Mojave Desert to Las Vegas. Bit like a male version of *Thelma & Louise*.” Well ... given that they were not hell bent on revenge on womankind and did not, in fact, end up by driving off a cliff, not very like it at all, actually: but even so. He used to film commercials a lot in LA back in the 1980s: “It was always cheaper than building a set at Shepperton.” So how many ads has he made, then? And any we might remember? “Well – more than a thousand, I'd say. Levi's, BA, Martini ... Club 18-30 – all that sort of thing.”

### No complaints

And so to the mains: well I've told you about my chicken – just a lump of chicken, really. The veg were properly done, and the gravy that came in a weeny silver tankard helped the dryness rather, and was really rather good (if weeny). Noel's hotpot did look grand: the great shank bone protruding from a black cocotte, a decent skimming of nicely thin potato giving way to vast amounts of tender, silky meat. “It would be easier to eat on a plate – but otherwise, no complaints.” No complaints about his pudding either – an Eton mess, piled high into a footed sundae glass, rich and gooey with soft strawberries and crunchy meringue. Here's what he said: “It's tasty, tasty – very very tasty” – which is, I remembered, from a Kellogg's Bran Flakes TV ad ... though not one of his. Did

he recall his very first ...? “Oh God yes. I was just an assistant director then. We were in the Bahamas, and Pamela Stephenson was in the shower, wearing only a tiny thong. My job was to keep handing her back the bar of soap as it slipped from her fingers. A soap ad, you see. Palmolive, I think...” I ventured that it can't have been much of an ad if he can't remember the product, and he sulked only briefly. “Ads are so different now,” he said. “These days, the client just wants the product visible on screen from beginning to end, while the copywriter and director want to show anything but.”

In Vegas, he told me, there was a glitzy show starring Michael Jackson...! “He was actually there, singing, moonwalking – amazing! But he wasn't, of course.” No indeed, I said: the devil's work. Maybe soon, I thought aloud, you won't have to call on actors for your commercials – just draft in a hologram. He nodded. “And you too,” he said. “You could have lunch with ‘virtual’ guests.” Hmm – now there's a thought: merely a vision of artificiality who doesn't really think, doesn't really talk and doesn't really eat. I once knew a woman who was just like that.

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *England's Lane*, is published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## FACTFILE

### ■ PLUM + SPILT MILK

Great Northern Hotel

King's Cross, N1

Tel: 020 3388 0818

■ Open daily from 7am to midnight.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆

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