



**Joseph Connolly** goes back to one of his old haunts to see if time – and gentrification – has been kind

# Author of his own demesne

**F**LASK Walk. Well – I've been here before, of course. From 1975 until 1989, to be precise – that's how long I was the shadowy fixture hovering like doom at the rear of The Flask Bookshop. Readers of a superior vintage will remember it well – I sold modern first editions and art books along with general antiquarian and literature: rather lovely, in its heyday.

It was in between the butcher (Joe Steele, sadly missed) and the baker (Rumbold, likewise). I should have been a candlestick maker, really, though I doubted there was a market. The site is now occupied by a wholly unique boutique run by the very delightful Zana who herself makes much of the stock – devour velvet jackets and capes, silken throws (as publicly cavorted in by the Blessed Saint Kate of Moss!) and all at knockdown prices.

Before the mid 1980s, though – when old and useful shops began to give way to video rental outfits and designer label clothes – it was all rather special. On Saturdays, the shop was always so rammed that people had to wait on the step for others to leave so that they could squeeze themselves inside.

Doctors and solicitors made up a surprisingly high proportion of the clientele – along with one or two names from film and television. Who? Well... there was David Attenborough, Alan Bates, Peter Barkworth, Janet Suzman, Peggy Ashcroft, Gayle Hunnicutt, Robert Powell, Gordon Jackson, Judi Dench, John Alderton, Connie Booth, John Hurt and Peter Cook, not to mention two-thirds of The Goodies. Once I had Michael Palin, Terry Gilliam and John Cleese following a hugely liquid lunch – and, I am delighted to report, it all got very silly indeed (the state of them lending no

scope at all for something completely different).

Both Jeremy Irons and Peter O'Toole tended to favour wearing the costume of whatever play or film they were currently acting in, each making sure that this generally centred around topboots, a very dashing brightly-lined cape and wide-brimmed fedora (with, in O'Toole's case, a longish cigarette holder).

Authors, though – they never came in. Two very famous authors lived just down the road and passed the window almost daily, and not once in 14 years did they ever come in. Authors, they don't like to spend money on other people's books. There was just one exception – Kingsley Amis, a hero of mine long before I met him. And where would we totter off to for lunch? Why The Flask, of course: where else?

It always used to have the air of being rather dirty in those days – and of course the regulars just loved all that. The frosted etched glass windows (recently removed, alas) let in little light, the pubby memorabilia was strung with cobwebs, and the ceiling was sticky ochre from a century of fags. The food – apart from the legendary and award-winning chips – was really not up to much, but that was hardly the point.

Not that I drank a lot either – spilled a fair deal of it from shaking with laughter over Kingsley's unstoppable and inimitable mimicry: not just the appoleptic Evelyn Waugh and the cringe of Malcolm Muggeridge, but abstract expressions as well – mortification, heartburn and childbirth being three of the most unforgettable. Then he would look at the heeltap in his glass: "We need another" he said. Gosh – it was always so very difficult to leave: "We need another".

I hadn't been to The Flask for years – and then recently I found myself having lunch there twice in

## FACTFILE

- **The Flask**, 14 Flask Walk, Hampstead
- Telephone 020-7435 4580
- Food: ★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★☆☆☆
- Hours for food: Mondays to Fridays noon-3pm, 6pm-10pm, Saturdays noon-10pm, Sundays noon-9pm
- Cost: Under £30 for two with drinks

a week. The whole place not long ago underwent a refurbishment, but it was a clever one. It still looks like a traditional Victorian pub, is the point: dimmish, with dark oak tables and chairs, old Hampstead prints and this enormous red buttoned velvet horseshoe-shaped banquette dominated by a far too broad table (hell if you're trapped at the back of it when your brimming innards are nudging for a visit to the Gents).

And although for many the main draw here is still the well-kept Young's ales, food is now well to the fore, though in a good way – for here is no poncified gastropub, but just a pub that serves honest-to-goodness high quality grub in generous quantities at very reasonable prices.

The first luncheonette was with the editor of this very august journal you now are holding. I say luncheonette because editors are busy and important people, while hacks such as myself are the very reverse of that – so while I can generally send a lunch sprawling on out into teatime and beyond, grown-ups have to be more circumspect.

He very much enjoyed his portobello mushrooms and melted goat's cheese on a large bed of salad – not bad for £8.95, but my haddock and chips at just a pound more was even better value: proper crusty batter, thick and real wedgy chips, and even a

soupcion of mushy peas. He had a chardonnay, I had an excellent rioja rose (£5.50 for a stonking glass) and then he was off in a puff of smoke to create the paper before you, while I wandered on to the Heath, there to make a daisy chain.

Then I went again on Easter Monday with my son. He was in no doubt about what he was going to order: sausages and mash in onion gravy – because about a year ago he had eaten that here and pronounced it the best sausages and mash in the whole wide world. I had four large slices of excellent hand-carved ham, very lightly griddled, with more of those wedgy chips and – because it was Easter – an egg on top. Tender and flavoursome ham, a properly gooey yolk, and a snip at £8.95.

But what of the bangers...? Well pretty good, actually – more than pretty good, was the verdict: just not so fantastic as the first time (ah, but when ever is it?). That too was £8.95, and he eased its passage with a pint of Peroni – about which, in common with all lagers, it has never been possible to say anything at all – and I had more of the Spanish rose: £26 the lot: very good.

The wine list is sound, and not at all greedily priced – 13 whites, 13 reds, two roses and half a dozen champagnes and sparklers.

Music, though, exudes like a weeping sore, the giddy limit being a ferociously jangly flamenco version of Stairway to Heaven (who is it who actually picks this stuff?) – and in the Gents there are rudish pictures: French "art" and saucy old engravings.

And then we left. Of course, it's very much easier to leave the place these days, now that Kingsley's so long gone. Do you know what? We need another.

■ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack the Lad and Bloody Mary, Faber and Faber, £8.99.*

## It's good value – at any price

**T**HREE extra letters have joined the regular abbreviations in the notes I write at wine tastings. The principle they represent isn't new, but it's one which is even more important in these cash-strapped days. So raise a glass of VFM – value for money – wines.

One important point to remember before we move into recommendations is that VFM doesn't necessarily mean wines right at the bottom of the price pile. Those letters identify quality and pleasure, money well spent.

This time of year sees all the major high street retailers showing off to the wine press what they'll be putting on their shelves in months to come, which means there will be plenty of opportunities to return to this theme, among more specifically-directed columns. So I'll start with just a selection of some of the best VFMs I've encountered so far.

First stop, Marks & Spencer. Its wine choice continues to be both impressive and interesting, and the 95 pages of my copy of its spring tasting booklet are generously littered with the magic letters. Two of the best new wines, particularly in VFM terms, are the Tierra y Hombro sauvignon blanc and pinot noir from Chile's Casablanca Valley, both £5.50. They should be in most M&S stores this month.

The sauvignon has splendid varietal style, bursting with scent and Kiwi-like tropicality but also plenty of green fruit crispness – very, very pleasurable. The pinot (there's a tiny touch of merlot and

chardonnay adding complexity) shows how well Chile can now handle this tricky grape: not a burgundy taste-alike but with attractive aromatics, pure and balanced despite its hefty – though not obvious – 14.5 per cent alcohol level.

Better suited to lunchtime drinking are two 12 per cent French reds, the fresh, juicy gamay vin de pays de l'Ardeche (£4), which has an attractive touch of black pepper among the long-lasting fruit, and the Cotes de Gascogne (£5), a vibrant, velvety purple-red wine with crunchy perfumed fruit and a hint of almonds.

For two whites which punch above their price, go for Vinalta chardonnay from Argentina (£5), creamy, fresh and pure, and Saint Bris sauvignon blanc (£8), stylish, crisp and minerally – a wine which makes your mouth water in anticipation of more.

But just to confirm that VFM needn't mean cheap, I wrote

those letters against the most expensive wine (other than fizz) in the tasting – a glorious 2005 Hermitage from Alain Bourgeois at the Cave de Tain l'Hermitage (£24), a wine whose rich ripe fruit, elegance and maturity persistently whisper Rhone. With 10 per cent off if you buy any six bottles, all these wines are very tempting indeed.

But don't worry if M&S isn't on your usual shopping route. The letters appeared on lots of wines at the tastings run by Majestic, Oddbins, Tesco and Waitrose. And the recommendations will follow in future Grapevines.

LIZ SAGUES





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