

AVE you met The Wine Gang? Its members – Tim Atkin, Tom Cannavan, Anthony Rose, Joanna Simon and Olly Smith – are among the most respected of UK wine critics and through www.thewinegang.com they spread their tasting experiences far wider than is possible through their printed columns, individual websites or broadcasts.

It's a subscription site, but the £20 a year it costs is very well spent. As the gang says: "Our independent assessment of at least 200 wines per month empowers you to buy smarter and drink better."

Next month, though, you can meet all five members in person, as they launch their first Christmas Wine Fair at Vinopolis, London's wine experience, an easy stroll from Southwark or

The gang are here to entertain you



London Bridge tube stations. There will be more than 600 wines there to taste, at least half of them rated gold, silver or

bronze by the gang and the rest selected by 60 exhibitors to show what's new and exciting this autumn. Boring, big brand wines are banned!

Gang members will lead free walks round the stands, whose welcoming pourers will come from such major retailing names as Majestic, M&S, Oddbins, Waitrose and The Wine Society. There are lots of independent merchants signed up, too, with more unusual offerings, including Lebanese wines and historic Madeiras. Bottle prices will, generally, range from £6 to £25, with special offers on the day.

Live jazz will add to the atmosphere and the gang

promises some extra fun activities.

The event, on November 7, looks set to be the hottest wine ticket in London in the lead-up to the festive season and the gang is offering Ham&High readers five pairs of free tickets to the morning session. To enter the simple competition (the answer to the question is in this column), log on to www.thewinegang.com/hh.htm. You must enter before midnight on October 20.

More than that, readers can also buy tickets at discounted rates: £12.50 instead of £20 for the morning session, £17.50 instead of £22.50 for the afternoon. For these, log on to

www.vinopolis.co.uk, click on "special events" and then select November 7 on the calendar.

Choose your tickets (maximum two per person at discounted prices) and before going to checkout enter the session discount code OWCAM (morning) or OWCPM (afternoon). You can also buy by phone on 020-7940 3000.

Tickets are selling fast, so buy now. If you enter the competition and win, the cost of up to two tickets will be refunded.

The Christmas fair's intention is to broaden wine horizons: very much the ethos of The Wine Gang, established because of members' frustration at not being

able to share all the pleasures (and some of the disasters) they encounter at the many press and trade tastings they attend.

Among the features which make their initiative so appealing is that they cover wines from all the major retailers, highlight the very best they taste each month, have a broad and efficient search facility and, to retain their independence, accept no wine advertising. The site's success shows the value of their approach.

"We are a team, but we are not a bland committee," they say. Put them to the test: go to Vinopolis on November 7.

LIZ SAGUES

THE Beatles, I suppose, are the closest I get to any formal religion, and so that fabulous day in 1992 when I actually stood, gasping and amazed, in Number 2 Studio in Abbey Road, where the whole of the canon was actually created ... ! I was at a press thrash to commemorate the 30th anniversary of their debut single Love Me Do (and in three short years, we shall be celebrating its 50th ... but oh, please please me by just not going there). There was an enormous cake in the form of the big bass drum, and rumours abounded that Beatles would be there. Real ones. We were all aquiver. When I'd walked across the legendary zebra in order to get there, I'd expected Beatles to be on it. I still always do. Call it a quirk. Call it wishful thinking, optimism, nostalgia for a youth long gone. Call it derangement.

No Beatles did turn up, but they were with us in spirit. As they are to all the thousands of fans who still risk death by posing for photos on the zebra, and scrawling their devotion on the perimeter wall of the EMI studios. I crossed that zebra again, just the other week – the warmest evening of the year. No Beatles on it.

My wife and I were on our way to L'Aventure, a long established and rather upmarket French restaurant on one of the rather swish and chi-chi avenues leading off the actually very boring Abbey Road. L'Aventure, I was musing ... an odd and rather daring name for a restaurant, really. I mean – an adventure, it suggests, doesn't it, an element of bravery, a plunge into the unknown, with just the batsqueak whisper of danger hissing and lurking in its slipstream. Maybe this association is wholly down to Enid Blyton's Adventures of the Famous Five. Well for the purpose of this review, try to content yourself with the Adventures of the Unknown Two: cut-price and shabby, yes

Indiana Joseph and the temple to food

L'Adventure, as its name suggests, certainly put **Joseph Connolly** and his trusty sidekick to the test – along mazes, grappling with chair monsters and into foreign territory. But when it came to treasure, did X mark the spot?

maybe, but I'm afraid that it's all I've got for you.

Blenheim Terrace is the spot, though we nearly went into the wrong place altogether – because there are two, you see, right next to one another, each with invitingly enclosed and leafy front gardens. The other is called Vineria which, I don't know, also strikes me as an iffy name for a restaurant, but maybe that's just me. Anyway, L'Aventure looks perfectly charming with its canopied entrance, the interior very French country-style with whitewashed walls, heavy dark furniture and tapestries on the walls. But – this being the warmest evening of the year, after all – we went for a sweet little table for two beneath the shadowy arches of trees whose leaves and the just glimpsed patches of indigo sky were spiked by white and starry little lights. The stage is set, then – so let us begin: Un Awfully Grand Adventure.

The deal here in the evening is a two-course dinner for £29.50, or three courses for £37.50 – pretty steep, no? Not that they seemed to be feeling the pinch – the place was fullish, and more and more diners kept on coming, most of them regulars, I'm sure. You just had to notice that they were all much better dressed than one is used to, these days – when standard London attire would suggest that everyone around you

is just about to finally get around to tackling the dredging of that troublesome sump, followed by a little light loft lagging, or else maybe a hike in the Pennines. But here – my goodness: ladies in dresses and skirts and high-heeled shoes and jewellery. Men with ties around their necks – not a T-shirt or football strip in sight. (God – the other day, in Jermyn Street, of all places, I saw a pot-bellied man in his 60s wearing a vile blue nylon thing on which was printed 'Fly Emirates' (whatever type of fly that may be) right across his beastly nipples.

The waiter was very polite, attentive and French. Good bread, excellent butter and a bottle of Evian all arrived promptly. He asked whether we would like him to translate the menu and, in order to demonstrate my facility with language, I told him Non. Whereupon my wife kept pointing to things and saying What's this mean and What's that mean and I was going "Mon Dieu! Je ne sais, do I? Just order quelque chose you can capeesh!" Which turned out to be fish soup, and I went for le feuilleté d'escargots. I've had this many times at a very good restaurant in Dovehouse Street, Chelsea, called Le Colombier (dovehouse – geddit?). The version here was not as good, the thin leaves of pastry having fused and congealed – but the snails and mushrooms were tip-top: very chewy (this is good) and flavoursome in a luscious sauce that sported a star anise. The fish soup was not what was expected – a thick lobster bisque, really (I think she wanted bits in) supplied with samphire, croutons, parmesan shavings and a ladleful of something so very garlicky that had it been stirred into the soup, as was doubtless intended, then garlic and only garlic would have reigned supreme.

Supreme, yes ... she then went for the supreme de volaille en



Out in the jungle ...
Joseph Connolly at
L'Aventure in
St John's Wood.

risotto de champignons, and I ordered mignons de veau poches aux girolles (look: if I can understand it, you can too). While we waited, we sipped the house red – a decent Languedoc at £19.50, all the others on offer being very hefty marked-up: not a place for bargain wines. I was gazing at a delightful still-life, just across the road – a spotlit fruit shop, its piles of colourful gorgeousness just so very perfect, one man beside it, motionless: like a Hopper, just not depressing. Lord, though – my rickety garden chair was bloody well killing me. Asked for a cushion – got one, but it dropped through the gap between the two meshy slings. Picked it up and stuffed it back but it dropped between the gap between the two meshy slings. And then a meshy sling fell off. Drank more Languedoc. The people at the table behind were saying that they'd managed to make four-eight-five-kay profit on their place in Spain, that they produced their own foie gras, that the Margaux they were drinking was really very drinkable, and that on the whole this was a funny sort of a recession, didn't everybody think?

The mains were beautifully arranged on the large white plates

in that traditionally haute cuisine way that I think we're all frankly getting a bit tired of. The chicken, though, was very bouncy indeed, its accompanying risotto good but so very buttery as to raise its richness to a whole new level. A similar story with the veal – rather overdone, and not as meltingly obscene as one has a right to dream of. The rosti was burned at the edges, the sauce suitably intense, though all with the air of having hung about a bit. We shared a raspberry mousse affair – an unremarkable and oversweet cylinder on a Pollock of coulis. The waiter was visibly distressed when I told him of our disappointment with the meat, quite rightly saying that we should have sent it back. Well ... it wasn't at all bad, or anything ... just not wonderful. He said afterwards that the chef agreed with us about the chicken, but not about the veal. Mmm ... both were on the bill, though.

L'Aventure is a beautiful and clearly much-loved local restaurant – it's just not as good as it thinks it is, nor as good as the prices might lead you to expect.

The evening was still so warm, and so, fresh from our fairly lukewarm adventure, we

"My wife kept saying What's this mean? and I was going, Je ne sais, do I? Just order quelque chose you can capeesh!

wandered off home – of course by way of the zebra. No Beatles on it.

□ Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary* (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All past restaurant reviews may be seen on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **L'AVENTURE**
3 Blenheim Terrace, NW8
Tel: 020-7624 6232
- Open Monday to Friday 12.30pm to 2.30pm, Monday to Saturday 7pm to 11pm
- Food: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Around £100 for two with wine for dinner, less at lunchtime

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ When using an extension lead, always ensure that you fully extend the lead when it is in use – otherwise there is a possibility of the cable which is still rolled up overheating and melting.

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