

**N**O LOVE Lost. That's the title of Damien Hirst's predictably quite ludicrously over-publicised

hanging of brand new paintings in one of London's great treasure chests, The Wallace Collection in Marylebone. Yes yes – paintings: the media were held in a collective thrall by this perfectly wondrous revelation that our most famous living artist had himself, apparently unaided, dipped a paintbrush into paint, and then actually applied said pigment to canvases. Lordy. And I remember Hirst from the old and loony Groucho days when all he was dipping was his nose. He was one of a bunch of wild men in those far-off times, before the insidiousness of middle age crept up on all of them like a thief in the night, stealthily making off with the splendour of their lions' manes, and all of their awesome roar. Keith Allen has now mellowed into a maker of very decent TV documentaries, no longer driven to the brink should anyone with a death wish casually refer to him as "Lily's Dad". Alex James, the pin-up bassist from Britpop's Blur, is now as dry and clean as a newly talcumed baby's botty – writing for The Spectator, churning on about the cheese he makes and cavorting ceaselessly in box-fresh country tweeds. And Hirst? Well when not benefiting from hundred million pound auctions of artefacts made by others which he has personally okayed ... is now, apparently unaided, dipping a paintbrush into paint, and then actually applying said pigment to canvases. The result? Well what can I say? Finally, after centuries of waiting, at last there are some pictures in the Wallace Collection that are actually worth looking at. Never mind all the bloody Rembrandts and Van Eycks and Rubens and Titians and the rest of those purveyors of middle-of-the-road and umbrous schlock: here, in the great Damien Hirst, we have a true and magnificent artist of epochal value and stature demonstrating with heart-stopping genius just exactly how it all should be done.

Kidding, of course. Actually, it's very awful. Unbelievably so. Not just passing poor, but GCSE bad. Roughly two dozen canvases ranging from large to clumsy, each of them a variation on a pale

# We've been framed

Joseph Connolly is certainly feeling blue after a visit to Marylebone's Wallace Collection – what with Damien Hirst's 'GCSE bad' paintings and a terrible a la carte meal in the Oliver Peyton restaurant



blue skull set amid a deep blue background which has apparently been applied with the back of a spade. Windsor & Newton must have had a field day: offloaded cartloads of the stuff. Some look as if they have been crossed out – this an evocation of Bacon, we learn. Others have stylised dots – to remind us of the stylised dots – and one or two have stiff and mawkish roses and butterflies, a bit like Cath Kidston aprons, but with none of their colour, flair, joyousness or wit. The only thing to break the blue is the occasional lemon: just an oval of yellow, though, with nothing at all lemony about it (Matisse could do this and actually make it smell of lemon). There is a rumour that yet another of these mysterious Russian oligarchs we keep on hearing about has pre-bought the lot for fifty million quid. Well the sooner he takes them home the better. We might call this entire farrago the artist's Blue Period – in that certainly the few who were walking the dutiful

gauntlet did seem very depressed by it all. But just around the corner is Hals's The Laughing Cavalier, which perked them up no end (he's not actually a cavalier, and nor is he laughing: looks bemused, is all – as, no doubt, did I).

There's a restaurant here, you know. Oliver Peyton is the man responsible: I put it this way because the lunch was on a par with the Hirsts. I've eaten here before and enjoyed it, but if ever a place has so totally taken its eye off the ball ... oh my God. Start at the beginning, will we?

I'd booked a table for one o'clock, and at one o'clock my wife and I were second in a queue of six waiting to be greeted and seated. But ... no greeter. I waited. The queue got longer. I approached a waiter who said someone was coming. Someone didn't. Then someone did. A chap (turned out to be called Harry) who then started having a good old chinwag with the woman in front of me about

puddings: she wasn't waiting to be seated, then – had just come to talk about puddings. I don't often lose my cool in restaurants, but here was an instance. "I have waited 12 minutes," I told him: "I insist upon my table. Now." He demurred, and then rather sulkily took us there (well tucked into a corner: he knew a trouble-maker when he saw one).

It's a lovely space – a glassed-in patio garden with urns and trees and a great sense of light and even frivolity, what with the grandly cushioned and tasselled wrought iron thrones and banquettes. There is a set two-course lunch at £19.50, but it was sorely untempting: roast broccoli and artichoke as a main? Not really. So, going a la carte, my wife ordered game pate followed by seared hand-divided scallops with a salad of confit tomato, broad beans and pea shoots. I was eager for this tian of white crab meat, marinated avocado with a confit of cherry tomato: sounded great.

## FACTFILE

### THE WALLACE

Hertford House, Manchester Square, W1

Tel: 020-7563 9505

Open every day for breakfast (10am to 12am), lunch (noon to 3pm) and tea (3pm to 5pm). Dinner only on Friday and Saturday (5pm to 9.30pm)

Food: ★★☆☆☆☆☆☆

Service: ★★☆☆☆☆☆☆

Cost: Set lunch £19.50 for two courses, £23.50 for three.

A la carte about £90 for two courses for two with wine.

Much less if you look as bloody browned off as I did.

Then an entrecote with chunky hand-cut chips. Or not: the waiter informed me that there were new potatoes only because since yesterday there were no chips and, he added, cryptically, "would not be for a very long time". And oh yes – the entrecote is, in fact a rib-eye. Here was the first intimation that not one element of this lunch would turn out as billed. My white crab meat tian? Ninety per cent the cheap pink stuff, with a slick of mayonnaise – not what I ordered, and not good either – with the garnish of one black hair, and conceivably an eyelash: nice. The game pate was an ice-cold hard heel of condensed and crumbly offal: offensively inedible – actually repulsive. All of this was abandoned.

Peyton & Byrne, the father company, is a respected bakery, but the miniature brown loaves here were as nothing: no flavour, no aroma, all texture. The scallops were good and much enjoyed – but three in number, and very small: this as a £16.50 main course. The steak was not medium, as requested, but well done, probably because it was so damn thin. The accompanying

Bearnaise sauce was an insult – at best a liquid and separated Hollandaise with no tarragon, no shallot ... oh dear oh dear oh dear. The pudding we were going to share, a chocolate Liegeois, was of course unavailable. So we went for the signature dessert, The Wallace: "praline ice cream, espresso, hot chocolate sauce and crème chantilly". I love hot chocolate sauce. What we got was a scoop of indifferent ice cream that could, I suppose, have been praline, another scoop of coffee, white froth and unadvertised nuts: no hot chocolate sauce. I queried its absence and the waiter agreed that it was indeed a mystery. And there we left it.

Harry came over, his manner quite new. He had picked up on the vibe here, and was filled with apology for the whole fiasco. "I'm just filling in here," he told me repeatedly. "Everyone's ill, you see." Yeah well – I was pretty sick myself. He slashed the bill – which, with a £17.50 bottle of wine, was a ludicrous £90 – to £25 because, he said, "All I want is for you to be happy and walk out of here with a smile on your face." Well out of here we were certainly walking – in search of much needed refreshment and goodness in the form of all the wonderful pictures here (and in particular Fragonard's cheeky young woman on a swing). I tried the smile, I really did – but as I elbowed my way through the very lengthy queue of yet more deluded souls waiting to be seated and greeted, all I could give him was the raising of an eyebrow, and this he quite mournfully acknowledged. Oh well. No Love Lost.

Joseph Connolly's latest book is *Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design* (Faber and Faber, £25). All past restaurant reviews may be seen at [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## Game of try and seek the best pinot noir

**T**HE time of year for quizzes and parlour games of the Trivial Pursuit ilk is looming, so let me get in early with this vinous question: which country lies third in the world league table for plantings of pinot noir?

Given the amount of enthusiasm for one particular bottle from that grape variety at the most recent Marks & Spencer press tasting, the answer is likely to be common knowledge soon. And it is: Germany.

It shouldn't be so surprising. After all, despite the near two-thirds to one-third split of white to red wine grapes the Germans grow, they actually drink a lot more red than white, and they do like pinot noir.

They also make some fabulous wines from the grape, though – like good pinot world-wide – that can be expensive.

But not always. The M&S bottle, Palataia 2008, is largely the work of Gerd Stepp, who for

a good number of years was one of the company's full-time winemakers. He has now moved on, though still consults for M&S. And Palataia is not only delicious, with pure, scented, red fruit pinot character, depth and length, but it's also a bargain – £8 buys a bottle which will knock many posher, pricier pinots into oblivion.

Think of any country where wine is made, and most likely pinot is planted there. France, as you'd expect, heads the league, with the US second. But increasingly the variety – a difficult one for the growers, but for wine drinkers a pleasure – is producing fine results in unlikely places. So last weekend I took some

friends on a pinot world tour, setting Palataia against wines from five other countries, and there were delights wherever we went.

First up was a burgundy, Louis Jadot Côte de Beaune-Villages 2007 (about £11, Sainsbury's, Waitrose and independents), pleasant scents and flavours but disappointingly tart on the finish.

Next was Palataia, which went down a lot better. Then came a wine I'd particularly enjoyed at Oddbins' press tasting

earlier in the week, Ribbonwood 2008, Marlborough, New Zealand (£14), juicy and fresh, opening up stylishly with the mushroom terrine and braised pheasant on our plates.

Wines from the Americas followed, all also very appealing. Santa Helena 2008, Casablanca Valley, Chile (£8, Co-op), ripe and warm, again blossomed with food, showing rich, tasty depth. Way out of the ordinary, in location and style, was Saurus 2007, Familia Schroeder, Patagonia, Argentina (£10.45, from the innovative beef, wine and more online outlet [www.pampasplains.com](http://www.pampasplains.com)): plummy, cherry fruit and big, intense flavours.

The final wine was an unexpected pleasure for me. As you may well realise from the dearth of Californian recommendations in these columns, I don't like heavy, sticky-sweet reds, but Sonoma-

Cutrer 2006, Sonoma Valley (£20, Waitrose – £16 in December – and Majestic) had a savoury edge to its sweet fruit and a good deal of elegance.

The message from the evening is that if you love pinot's style and character, take a world view. But I can't end without recommending one superb new burgundy discovery: Olivier Bernstein at Berry Bros. The

2007s are still in bond and only the Chambolle-Musigny Les Lavrottes (six-bottle case £276) is anywhere near ready, but there couldn't be a better investment for 2010 and beyond.

NB: for bargain-hunters, all M&S French wines are discounted 20 per cent until November 29.

LIZ SAGUES



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