

As a budding boy, before I happened upon the fabulousness of Ursula Andress and Elizabeth Taylor, the pin-ups in my study at school were a motley – an overlapping and glossy selection of E-Types, Aston Martins, Colts and Purdeys.

I know, I know – cars and guns: amazing I blossomed into the aesthetic and sensitive flower that I am today. It was the look of the things, really: I didn't terribly want to drive or shoot – or not to kill, anyway. I've never done that – strikes me as rather vile. Give me a roast grouse on a plate with bread sauce and game chips and I'm your man; don't make me responsible, though, for a bundle of feathers plummeting to earth.

But the Purdey shotgun truly did strike me as a thing of beauty. One commissioned them, I learned, as a brace, so that one could be loaded as the first was discharged. The cost was equivalent at the time to a small Georgian house in Hampstead. Then I heard of the other fine gunmaker Holland & Holland – which one might easily assume is already a brace, but no.

I was reminded of all this in Bruton Street in Mayfair just the other week – a rather stylish thoroughfare off Bond Street boasting not just the premises of Holland & Holland but, on the corner of Berkeley Square, the Jack Barclay showroom, spotlit and bursting with Bentleys. Cars and guns – I know. But I was here for neither thing – I was here (as per usual) in quest of grub.

The Square is the home of two Michelin-starred chef Philip Howard, and is one of London's very finest – although you wouldn't particularly think so to look at it: large plate glass windows screened by dull and nondescript net curtains at the base of a cuboid and undistinguished block. And even within the L-shaped room – although the floor is dark and high gloss parquet, with much good leather upholstery strewn all over the place – the officiness feel is perpetuated by the plain white walls punctuated by very vivid abstract paintings and not much else at all. It could be the dining section of a Business Class airport lounge – or maybe an anteroom in Mad Men into which someone had decided to set a lot of tables. These tables are good,

Go Dutch, and treat yourself to excellence

Joseph Connolly goes full circle and finds fantastic food and perfect service in Mayfair



Our reviewer raises his glass to the abstract.

though – large, circular, and acres apart from their neighbours: you could plot a coup in here with cavalier ease, and no fear at all of the dropping of eaves.

All is calm, well ordered and anonymous, which is how people who habitually frequent such high-end restaurants evidently like them to be. The napery and stemware are as fine as you would expect, and every table sports a weird little sort of glass kind of sculptural affair. It looks like a slay decapitated penguin with lumbago, spouting a curious stream of sputum: could be Murano (it's awful enough).

Oh yes – and talking of Murano, I was here with my plutocrat chum – Pluto to his intimates – who the day before had been lunching at that very place: Murano, I mean. And the day before that? St. John. Plutocrats eat as plutocrats will –

and quite right too. As he says himself: "well otherwise ... what's the point?". For those less blessed, the set lunch at The Square is really the only affordable way to go, and even so we are talking £30 for two courses, £35 for three. These prices are at the upper end even for Michelin starred restaurants, but what is unusual is that only two choices are offered for each course – though by happy chance, between us we had all four selections from the hors d'oeuvres and entree sections, ducking the puddings in favour of cheese (unwise – but I'll get to that later).

But first, the mandatory amuse bouche. Here was a shot glass of cauliflower puree with mushroom cream, and at the base a jellyish texture which combined with the rest of it to caress the tongue and detonate so much astonishing

flavour. It's a thing to sigh over, and rather want more of. As was my starter: a single raviolo of cepes with roscoff onions and a veloute of truffle. This last bit says it all – it was as smooth and luxurious as the words themselves; this sauce was bubbly like an Aero and made even finer by the hunk of parmesan that was, at the table, grated on top of it. The mushrooms had layers and layers and layers of flavour: sublime.

Pluto, meanwhile, was making very short work of a terrine of chicken with thin grilled leeks, overlaid with long and runny rippling ribbons of what turned out to be almost molten foie gras; he swallowed, he nodded – this for him is the ultimate praise. And the selection of little rolls is terrific – particularly the walnut and raisin. On the table is a fluted cone of butter, and alongside a

FACTFILE

THE SQUARE
6-10 Bruton Street, W1
Tel: 020-7495 7100
Open Mon – Fri 12 - 2.30pm; 6.30 - 10pm. Sat 6.30 - 10.30pm. Sun 6.30 - 9.30pm
Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
Cost: About £130 for three course lunch for two with wine.

more traditional slab: one salted, one not. And soon after you slice into them, they are replaced with fresh ones.

I then went for the roast breast of mallard with crushed pumpkin and chestnut with trompettes. This was beautifully presented – all these little slices placed vertically around a hillock of pumpkin so as to form a crown, this surmounted by the cutest tiny pie – perfect pastry, and crammed with the deeply wonderful leg meat. The breast just simply melted – for once a cliché come true – while the sauce had a near voluptuous intensity. Pluto didn't want the duck because among the many things he owns are several farms, from which he is supplied with duck a-plenty (as well as goose, venison and occasionally wild boar). So fillet of pollock for him, with an emulsion of hand rolled farfalle, autumn vegetables and parmesan. He swallowed, he nodded – but I tried to get more: "Good, was it?" "Mm. Very." "And ... the texture?" "Texture ...?" "Yes – you know: the texture ...?" "Well ... it was fish". And there you have it.

We were drinking a Domaine Fontanel 2001 – a Rousillon with a bit of age on it. Normally these are reminiscent of good young claret, but here was much more

of a burgundy feel: not too painful at £39. This is not the cheapest on what must be one of the finest lists in London: 80 pages of glory. The young sommelier was telling me that she'd only been here a month – hotfoot from Chez Bruce, a reputedly wonderful restaurant, yes, but it's in Wandsworth, and I don't even know where that is. During this month, however, she had sold – among many other treasures – two bottles of Petrus of the same year as our Roussillon... but at £1,270 a time. In some places this recession bites harder than in others.

So we were purring – and God, so very full. Couldn't go the creme caramel, nor the rum and raisin soufflé with banana ice cream which were temptingly on offer. So, like idiots, we went for cheese, which came with a £5 supplement. From the peerless trolley, I limited myself to just seven, like the pig I can become in places such as this. Stinking Bishop was the star of the show. Then, just as I was close to explosion, there was some complimentary Torrone – the soft kind: a sort of Italian nougat with hazelnuts and pistachio. Yum.

You really should go here, you know. It's very fine. The bill can be a bit of a problem, but it is nearly Christmas, after all – and you could always do a Holland & Holland. I just made that up. Could it catch on, do you think, as a new and alternative expression for the two of you going Dutch?

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

The right time to open that special bottle

CHRISTMAS DAY 2009 isn't well-omened for wine drinking, nor, equally unfortunately, is New Year's Eve. But December 3 holds lots of promise.

For those predictions I'm indebted to the biodynamic calendar for wine drinkers developed by Maria and Matthias Thun, gurus for everyone who argues that the rhythms of the moon influence all living organisms.

Whether you accept the principle or not, there's little dispute that some very fine wines indeed come from growers who follow biodynamic practices.

David Motion, even more renowned in the music world than as a wine seller, is a rational wine lover. He is also convinced, from personal experience, that the days the Thuns identify as fruit or flower equal drink with pleasure, while on those categorised as leaf

or root, it's better to avoid opening any bottle you cherish.

So he chose December 3 for The Winery's pre-Christmas tasting, an evening which glows a glorious flowery yellow on the Thun calendar.

The bottles to be opened are still a topic of animated discussion between owner Motion and his knowledgeable, enthusiastic staff, but from the experience I've just had they are going to be wonderful.

Happily, though ignorant of the calendar, I'd chosen to call on a fruit day, but I suspect what I tasted would have proved almost as enjoyable had it been leaf or root.



The joy of a small, individual shop is that its shelves – and those of The Winery, in Clifton Road, Maida Vale, stretch up to the ceiling and are stocked with bottles which reflect the owner's taste and knowledge, not the brands selected by a distant head office.

In Motion's case, Germany is emperor: "My mother is German, so there's something in the DNA..."

But the wines which fly off his shelves are not the bland, sweetish liquid which tarnished the country's reputation for so long. These are modern dry rieslings, wines

of brilliant purity and style, with fine acidity, elegant fruit and stony minerality reflecting the soils of the vertiginous slopes on which they grow.

They're unique and memorable. Days after tasting the three Motion opened for me, my mouth waters still.

First was Riesling trocken 2008, Riffel (Rheinhessen) £10, delicate, floral-scented and very classy. Then came Riesling Kabinett trocken 2008, from Clemens Busch, one of the Mosel's greatest growers, £14, broader and more robust, with huge, crisp length.

But even greater was 'Landgeflecht' Riesling trocken 2007, Peter Jakob Kuhn (Rheingau) £25, so balanced and pure – superb. No wonder, with teaching material like this, The Winery's German wine courses are always oversubscribed.

Though Motion offers the largest choice of dry rieslings in

the UK, France fills rather more shelf space, especially classic burgundy such as Hautes Cotes de Beaune 2007, Thiebault Huber-Verdereau, £18 – but outshone for me by a stunning German pinot noir, Spatburgunder Walporzheimer Garkammer 2007, Adeneuer (Ahr Valley) £34.

No space left for the fine Spanish wines I also tasted –

perhaps you'll encounter one next Thursday.

The tasting – 5pm to 9pm but go early to avoid the crush – is free, and you don't need a ticket.

Other Clifton Road shops are joining in the festive evening, so there will be a chance to celebrate more examples of the small and beautiful.

LIZ SAGUES

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ If you are venting (bleeding) your heating system, have a rag or cloth ready; if you always place one over the valve before you start the venting, this will prevent mucky water staining your wall, carpet or your clothes as it begins to leak out of the radiator.

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