

The ballad of Boundary Road

POETRY is on a roll – it's all just so-o-o very trendy again. This happens, from time to time, the last occasion being possibly when that W.H. Auden tear-jerker was read out in Four Weddings And A Funeral – and now, just recently, we have T.S. Eliot voted the nation's favourite poet. Yes, I know: T.S. Eliot. And that's this nation we're talking about then, is it? Nonsense, of course. For decades he's been accepted as the nation's greatest 20th century poet in that we always accord things and people with greatness when we'd frankly much rather be elsewhere. At a time when Olivier was indisputably our greatest actor, what we loved as a nation was Norman Wisdom. But Eliot – the favourite poet, full stop? In that we all of us cosy up to The Waste Land of an evening, do we? I think not. What about Tennyson, Wordsworth and Kipling? Keats and Betjeman? What of Pam

Joseph Connolly pens an ode to a missed opportunity at Mediterranean bar and grill Poem

Ayres, Patience Strong and E.J. Thribb? Oh well. There's a CD just out with an assortment of actors reading a poem to the accompaniment of some much venerated musical classic (John Cage's four minutes and 33 seconds of silence could well be the safest choice here). We've got Honor Blackman (Cathy Gale from The Avengers, not to say Pussy Galore from Goldfinger) telling us that she wandered lonely as a cloud, which is hard to imagine. And Joanna Lumley (Purdey from The New Avengers, not to say Patsy) will be reading Shakespeare's sonnet number 18 to a background of Beethoven. That's the gorgeous "Summer's Day" one that ends with the aching and sweetest couplet:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Not that Lumley really needs such beauty: I could happily listen to her reading from Ant and Dec's new memoir – or even The Guardian, more than which I cannot say.

And so we find ourselves but a fit away from Poem, a newish restaurant in Boundary Road, billing itself as a Mediterranean bar and grill. It's a pleasant little strip, this – site of the Saatchi Gallery, briefly, before it decamped to Chelsea, such action at a stroke sorely depriving NW8 of a constantly changing truckload of lumber. Poem itself is right on the corner – a glassy box with this funny bronze and panelled overhang: looks as if the whole shebang was delivered in kit form on the back of the very same truck that had just hauled away all of the jokes from Saatchi's. I was there to meet Matthew Lewin – ex-editor of this very paper, ex-restaurant critic of this very paper, and now the man responsible for the highly respected restaurant review website Matthew's Table. And amazingly, he'd never been here before – so there we were, a pair



Rhyme time ... Joseph Connolly at Poem.

of poetical virgins who, like an echo of Marvell's Coy Mistress, peeped from behind our fluttering fans, tentative in toying with this new hurly burly. But soft – just one stanza at a time...

Being a pro, Matthew grabbed the seat that ensured him a panoramic view of all the essential doings, while I was dumped with the sight of two council blocks on Abbey Road and a ceaseless convoy of buses. So I craned my neck to have a gander: attractive light and airy space with maroon walls, stout white pillars, a large imitation bamboo and an immediate and smiley welcome from a waitress who turned out to be (a) Kosovan and (b) the wife of the cook who actually owns and runs the whole place. She dealt, I thought, in a very statesmanlike manner with the deaf and dotty old lady at the table alongside: "Are the Spanish onions," Deaf and Dotty wanted

to know, "how we like it?" "How you like it?" "They are? Did you say they are?" "How you like it?" "Do speak up. Did you say they are the way we like it?" "Yes. Just the way you like it. OK?" Ole.

The menu is rather clever for a place that is open all day long: first, a list of more than 20 tempting and brunchy things that may be had as either the newly fashionable small plate (£5.95) or else in grown-up portions for roughly a fiver more. Then there are more traditional mains to follow a starter, should one not be in the mood for dipping and grazing. As the place calls itself a grill, Matthew was keen to try the 28-day aged Aberdeenshire steak – so an entrecote at £14.95, preceded by seared tuna with red chard, rocket and chives. The tuna he said was no more than OK, largely I think because of the cut: three very thin slices.

FACTFILE

- POEM**
- 94 Boundary Road
- St John's Wood
- Tel: 020-7372 3897
- Open all day
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Around £60 for two courses for two, with a couple of glasses.

This doesn't really work with searing: cooked on one side, raw on the other, you see: should've been a chunk. My risotto with broad beans, peas and mint wasn't wholly successful either: very large-grained rice (neither arborio nor carmaroli, methinks) – and when broad beans are unpeeled they become a law unto themselves, putting up the mother of a struggle before allowing themselves to be swallowed. There was none of the creamy goo that a slow-stirred risotto really must ooze: there isn't room for poetic licence. Here, though, in the immortal words of the balladeer Gilbert O'Sullivan, Nothing Rhymed.

My main dish was breast of free range corn-fed chicken with rosemary. This came bashed out like an escalope, and to share between us was a huge wooden bowl brimming with frites. But uh-oh – trouble on the steak front: Matthew had specified medium rare, and here was medium plus. These mains had taken a very fair while to arrive, and for this reason a ravenous Matthew was undecided as to sending it back. But he did – and within about five minutes he received another steak, just as he wanted it, with fresh fries to boot. And the delightful and apologetic waitress said that it was all her fault – she had told the cook (hubby, of course) medium, and had forgotten the rare bit. How loyally uxorial of her to keep him in the clear: a sort of poetic justice.

My chicken and chips proved to be greed-inducing. They were all right, no more, but God I was wolfing them down. The flavour and my compulsion were reminding me of something, and I simply couldn't place it. And then I could: Chicken in a Basket! Yay! I could almost taste the wicker. So yum yum, then – but in a fairly ghastly and retro way. Finished the lot, of course – and then fell headlong into a black-and-white home made chocolate mousse: quite excellent, but Matthew rejected even a taster because – are you ready for this? – he hates chocolate! I didn't think such a thing possible. His gastronomic dream is to dine at El Bulli, the legendary Spanish restaurant which is consistently voted the greatest in the world (and therefore, frankly, I'd much rather be elsewhere). Annually, they serve just 8,000 covers and receive a million requests; Matthew has been applying for three solid years, and so far nada.

Poem would be great, I'm sure, in the evening – buzzing with young, hungry and thirsty people, entering into the vibe. But as for us two... well Matthew went off on his bicycle wearing a bright yellow puffy vest and a black plastic bullet helmet looking for all the world like a well-fed wasp – while I, on foot, got lost: took a completely wrong turn and just wandered (lonely, as a cloud). Got back to Hampstead eventually, hell bent on penning a couplet that might just sum up my entire existence:

So long as Ed can read and pay the fee

So long lives this, and this gives grub to me.

Not Bard. Could be verse.

Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary (Faber and Faber, £8.99). He has yet to publish a Collected Poems. All past restaurant reviews may be seen on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

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A clear way through the claret minefield

THE time is coming to raise your glass of claret – the ultimate Christmas dinner drink, certainly for traditionalists. But if claret doesn't regularly feature on your vinous shopping list should you buy right bank or left, a fresh young vintage or one which has that classic leathery maturity, a supermarket bargain bottle or something more individual by the case? The choices are difficult, and very individual.

There's no way that I can provide any comprehensive guide in this limited space, even if I dared. So what follows is simply some ideas and some pleasures I've encountered recently.

A claret virgin? You'll need a useful introduction like that provided by The Wine Society's Everyday Bordeaux case, eight reds, two whites, each from a different appellation, and accompanied by an informative booklet on the region, for £99

(www.thewinesociety.com). I've not tried them all, but two stars are the fresh and fragrant Chateau Bel Air blanc 2008 and the rich, oaky Exhibition Haut-Medoc. You can buy the bottles individually, too – these two are £8 and £12 respectively.

Buying direct from the chateau might sound ambitious, but Gavin and Angela Quinn, UK emigres to Bordeaux, make it easy, with bottles cellared here for quick delivery and a freephone number (0800 316 3676) direct to them at Chateau Bauduc. The wines are very good indeed and excellent value – Gordon Ramsay and Rick Stein restaurants list them and two mouth-watering whites, Bordeaux blanc 2008



(£9) and Les Trois Hectares (£11), carried off silver medals in this year's International Wine Challenge. There are tempting case deals – look at www.bauduc.com for details.

At home on the high street, Nicolas has an exhaustive selection, but you'll have to seek advice from shop managers, as I missed the winter press tasting. But from other tastings I did get to, here are some more suggestions.

Majestic showed off some very want-to-drink wines, starting with the bargain Chateau Le Fregne 2007, Medoc (£7, two or more £5 each until January 4 – remember, Majestic's minimum purchase is now six bottles rather than 12). More concentrated and serious, but still very

pleasurable, are Chateau Orme Brun 2007, Saint-Emilion grand cru (£13, £10 two-plus), Chateau Caronne Ste-Gemme 2004, Haut-Medoc (£13, £10 two-plus), Segla 2004, Margaux (£20), Lacoste-Borie 2005, Pauillac (£20). And traditionalists should love Chateau Moulin a Vent 1999, Moulis (£10, £9 two-plus) or Chateau Destieux 1997 Saint-Emilion grand cru (£20, £15 two-plus).

At Marks & Spencer, Mauregard Bordeaux 2008 (£5) is ripe and fruity, but the Margaux Initial de Desmirail 2006 (£15) is so much classier.

And Tesco has a very smart Puisseguin Saint-Emilion, Reserve Saint-Clair 2006 (£14), pure, scented and balanced.

Finally, if you watched BBC4's three-part wine series early this year, you'll remember the starring role of Berry Bros and Rudd in the revelation of the Bordeaux and Burgundy buying business.

The results on the shelves of Berry's wonderfully atmospheric shop in St James's don't have to crack the credit card (though Pauillac de Latour 2005, £47, is wonderful). Try Chateau Campillot 2005, Medoc (£12.20) – big yet approachable, a wine to win more converts to claret.

Claret clones abound worldwide, but one interesting choice

is two vintages, 1999 and 2005, of the fine Katnook Estate cabernet sauvignon from Coonawarra. The youngster (£15.30) is still a bit gawky, but its older sibling (£23.80) is a suave, mature treat. Buy both (www.bibendumwine.co.uk) for Christmas 2009 and 2015.

LIZ SAGUES

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

When doing any DIY, always try to start in the morning. It might sound obvious, but if you do need any material or parts, the builders' merchant will still be open. Otherwise, if left overnight, who knows when you might get a chance to finish it off!

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111