

Gail's bread sells like hot cakes

where there is a local residential community rather than in Soho or Piccadilly Circus."

Touring the factory, I saw the years-old sourdough starters – made from apple juice, flour and water – that have to be fed regularly to keep the bacteria alive. They were mixed with the contents of vast sacks of flour – 25 different varieties – piled from floor to ceiling in huge vats with rotating dough hooks. Thereafter the bread is cut, proved, shaped, stretched and kneaded by hand.

"A hundred years ago, each neighbourhood had its own little bakery, that's the idea, using great ingredients baked by hand, taking the time and not accelerating it with chemicals or preserving it with additives," says Avidan. "Most of our customers are regulars who know our staff by name, some have come every day for the last five years, some twice a day."

BRIDGET GALTON

☐ Gail's Garden Party takes place on Saturday September 11 this year in Oriel Court, Hampstead.



Finishing touches ... far left, handling the dough; left, Gail's Bakery in Hampstead; top, a baker gets to grips with making some fruit bread and, above, some olive bread fresh out of the oven.

of strategy with the tiny table. The generous blackened hunk of salmon was adored by Adrian – his chopsticks moved at the speed of light. There were three large battered prawns – always a treat – and with them a flat little battered cakelet of something. We sampled that and there was a meeting of tastebuds: it was swede, and vile.

The noodles were served in a large blue and white bowl – it was more of a soup than I had envisaged, and so one dips in one's little porcelain ladle, scoops up yummy noodles and stock, and watches it all slither off the little porcelain ladle and back into the blue and white bowl.

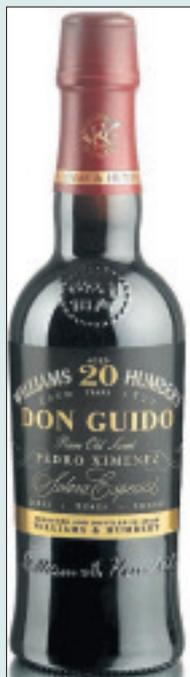
These ridiculous Fisher Price spoons and chopsticks are useless for most things – I got a fork and attacked the chicken, which was marvellous: very tender and moistly gooey sliced breast with the crunchiest coating – and the noodles too, once they'd made it in to your mouth, were very flavoursome and comforting.

There were only two puddings on offer: Japanese red bean cake (made even more alluring when you learn it is 'hardened by seaweed gelatin') and ice cream. What appeals, Adrian ...? He considered. "Mmm ... neither, actually". But in order to show willing we had a scoop of 'golden chestnuts' which tasted quite nicely of nougat, and one of green tea, which was a dead ringer for dung. And there you have it: a rough and ready place where you will have an enjoyable time due to the food (eventually), the very good value, the location and the puppyish enthusiasm of the staff. Well either that or they're ignoring you completely.

No one batted an eyelid as we left – but out in Heath Street we heard a rapping on the door: and there was the pretty waitress, smiling and bowing to us. So very Japanese.

Love Is Strange is a novel by Joseph Connolly (Faber and Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

Sherry is the new summer sunshine tippie – without a vicar or a great aunt in sight



A sipping success ... Above, Williams & Humbert Don Guido VOS was one of the stars at the tasting, along with top right, Gonzalez Byass Apostoles VORS.

SUMMER may not immediately seem the sherry season, but why not? One of my happiest lunchtime memories is of sipping chilled fino throughout a leisurely lunch in sherry's home town, Jerez.

The pedestrian-only street was crammed with outdoor tables, and on just about every one was a similar bottle of dry, tasty, food-companionable sherry.

Yet here, despite our enthusiastic following of continental patterns of eating and drinking, sherry retains a wholly undeserved image as the maiden aunt's/vicar's tea party tippie. So it was encouraging a few weeks back to see an unusually large crowd of influential wine communicators abandoning the sunshine outside for the tasting tables inside Wines From Spain's Marylebone office.

The theme of the day wasn't light summer sherries, however. The Sherry Institute of Spain was celebrating new labelling rules for older wines, where in the past confusion has reigned. Now there are clear categories, though still with a little Latin latitude: one is simply reliquia (or sacristia) – indicating a sherry of extreme but unknown age.

More specifically, the labelling starts with a simple 12 or 15-year-old marking. VOS indicates 20 years old, an acronym which expands to Very Old Sherry or the much more poetic Vinum Optimum Signatum. Similarly, there is 30-year-old VORS, Very Old Rare Sherry/Vinum Optimum Signatum. All these are non-vintage; a wine of a single year is identified by the word anada.

But age is only the beginning: the style slalom follows. The

30-plus bottles opened ranged from dry, savoury amontillados through amber or walnut hued palo cortados and olorosos, redolent of nuts and much, much more, to the raisiny black intensity of pedro ximenez sweeties.

And while sherry's reputation for providing often astonishingly good value for money was confirmed in these wonderfully complex and rewarding wines, there were just a few reliquias which demanded a deep, deep pocket – £325 for a single bottle.

Back to reality... These are wines where you need expert guidance, and one of the most digestible explanations I've encountered is on Jamie Goode's website, www.wineanorak.com/sherry.htm. Though the rather similar Sherry Institute tasting Goode attended was in 2008, his notes remain valid, for consistency and long life are characteristics of fine sherries.

Before my own recommendations, one general and one specific comment. It's fascinating that the high alcohol level of these sherries – mostly 19 to 21 percent – is much less obvious than in many hefty 14.5 percent red wines: it's all down to balance. And the PXs confirmed how spending a little more can bring sweet rewards – these aged examples were less oily or cloying than younger, cheaper wines I've encountered.

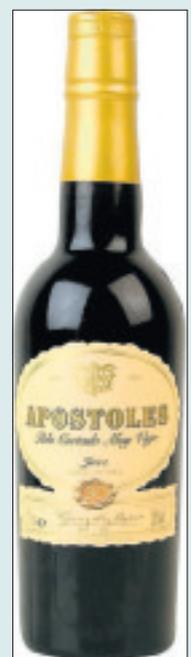
I'd happily buy most of the sherries at the tasting (and many others in the same style), but stars included: Amontillado: Gonzalez Byass Del Duque VORS (37.5cl £17, www.cambridgewine.com – this independent merchant has a very fine range of sherries, well-priced, and offers big discounts

on unmixed cases), Valdivia Sacromonte seco 15-year-old (50cl £16.55, www.slurp.co.uk). Palo cortado: Williams & Humbert Dos Cortados VOS (37.5cl £14-£15, www.oxfordwine.co.uk, www.sohowine.co.uk, www.cambridgewine.com, www.theatreofwine.com), Gonzalez Byass Apostoles VORS (37.5cl £16.30 – £17, Waitrose, www.cambridgewine.com).

Oloroso: Valdespino Solera 1842 VOS, (75cl £30.70, Moreno Wines in Maida Vale (www.morenowinedirect.com/020 7286 0678), Valdivia Sacromonte 15-year-old (50cl £16.55, www.slurp.co.uk), Williams & Humbert Dry Sack 15-year-old (37.5cl £12-£13 www.sohowine.co.uk, www.cambridgewine.com, www.theatreofwine.com). Pedro Ximenez: Valdivia Sacromonte 15-year-old (37.5cl £17.45, www.slurp.co.uk), Williams & Humbert Don Guido VOS (37.5cl £14.50, www.sohowine.co.uk).

Sip, and enjoy Spanish sunshine.

LIZ SAGUES



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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

☐ If you think that your toilet might be leaking slightly, before calling out a plumber, check to see that the problem is not just condensation. This can be improved by fitting an extractor fan or improving ventilation when taking a bath or a shower.

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