

On the outside, looking in

IT IS impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him". No less true today than when Bernard Shaw bunged it down, nearly 100 years ago. Although these days we don't always go so far as to hate or despise – merely we will get bloody annoyed or, worse, completely fail to comprehend. Not the nuance, the subtle undercurrent or the general thrust of the thing, you understand, so much as the actual articulation. In London, the daily tsunami of alien accents and regional dialects allied to the grunts, repetitive expletives and 'txt-speak' of the younger crowd all combine to make it very hard indeed to decipher a sausage.

I thought of all this the other evening at dinner, and for two solid reasons: our otherwise fairly able and dextrous waiter was thoroughly incomprehensible, and Clos Maggiore, the restaurant in which I was dining with my cousin Andrew, is but 30 seconds stroll from Inigo Jones's masterwork, St Paul's in Covent Garden, beneath whose portal Shaw's Pygmalion (and later, My Fair Lady) very memorably opened. It must have been extraordinary in those days for all parties concerned – the elite, pouring out of the Opera House in white tie and gowns, briefly brushing immaculately tailored shoulders with the fruit and veg mongers and flowergirls, all girding up for yet another hard day's night. It is here that Professor Higgins rails at an outraged Eliza: "You squashed cabbage leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns, you incarnate insult to the English language!" So Lord knows what he would have made of our waiter: the man was speaking English, of this I feel reasonably sure, but the accent was a little bit Clouseau, a little bit Mexican revolutionary, with maybe a smidgen of Pavarotti and the darkest undertone of a Bedouin. Andrew and I debated the matter in depth and concluded that in fact what he was speaking was fluent Dalek – played in reverse on a reel-to-reel, and speeded up considerably during the remix.

Clos Maggiore itself is an

For all its glamour and luxurious food, **Joseph Connolly** find the experience of Clos Maggiore oddly disorientating – with its incomprehensible waiter, missing cutlery and flashing lights



Feeling a bit off-balance ... Joseph Connolly at Clos Maggiore.

impossibly glamorous and romantic-looking restaurant – indeed, it could itself be a Technicolor film set: the American 1950s idea of how a London restaurant (for the better sort, of course – no squashed cabbage leaves here) would inevitably appear. Its fascia is claret, black and gold, with iron railings to keep away the riff-raff, these surmounted by window boxes crammed with flowers so perfect and colourful that they just must be artificial props, no? Well no – all real and vibrant, as are yet more bursting from tubs flanking the door. The cosily inviting windows have to either side of them a lantern lit by a flickering flame.

So we wander in (I washed me face and hands before I come, I did) and Andrew, who had booked the table, informed the lady in the very cramped

hallway that he had requested the Conservatory. He knows this place – I'd never been – and of all its various crannies, he deems the Conservatory the nicest. "No," said the lady, "you're not in the Conservatory. You're upstairs". Not even the ground floor, then. Andrew took it with good grace, but I could see he was miffed – and then I found out why. It turns out he had booked three weeks earlier, to be told that they don't 'allocate' tables until a week before the dinner in question. Which is a new one on me. So he phoned two weeks later – but still they weren't allocating. He phoned yet again just days before and said "Look – just allocate me, God's sake". And now we were shoved upstairs: they really want to look at that.

Although it's nice enough up there – small low-lit and hushed. Fellow diners were whispering

– but one party about to leave, they weren't: "Is the service included?" a man asked shortly – to which a waiter replied with hesitation "I can take it off ...". The man nodded. "Take it off". Which didn't augur well. The food here is rather luxurious, and they want you to know it. A pleasant amuse bouche appeared – homemade breadsticks and two dips in little copper saucepans: one goat-cheesy, one truffley, both moreish. I ordered a light partridge and pheasant mousseline with a chestnut, coppa ham and game sauce – while Andrew wanted pan fried foie gras and stuffed chicken wing (Jesus, there are people stuffing chicken wings) with roasted hazelnuts and poached quince. He deserved a good meal – he was recently back from cycling with a pack of old university chums from London to Brussels

FACTFILE

- ❑ **CLOS MAGGIORE**
33 King Street, WC2
Tel: 020-7379 9696
- ❑ Open Monday to Saturday noon-2.15pm, 5pm-11.15pm, Sunday noon-2.15pm, 5pm-10pm.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: About £110 for a three-course meal for two, with wine.

in two days flat, in aid of a worthy cause. I put it to a few members of my club that we ought to maybe consider something similar, but it was estimated that even with a good strong headwind behind us, it might take four years – so we abandoned that idea and had a drink. Andrew liked his starter – though the foie gras was not as sinfully creamy as you yearn for. And it wasn't a chicken wing at all – just a piece of chicken. My mousseline was very good indeed – ethereally light, and perfectly married to the rich and gamey sauce.

To follow, I was going for oven roasted corn fed chicken breast, Israeli couscous and garden herb risotto, burgundy snails and chicken jus – while Andrew ordered something similarly luscious-sounding: caramelised honey-glazed Gressingham duck breast and endive meuniere in a ruby port sauce. And an extra of pomme puree, which was sublime. My chicken breast was very well flavoured and tender, the couscous the star of the show: ordinary couscous I find an unbearable waste of time, but these glorious little baked wheat pearls – as green and glossy as petits pois, and exploding on the palate like poshly soft and savoury Aero – were utterly delightful. And the three black snails were properly chewy and good. But when the food was served, neither of us ate

a thing. We were hungry – but we looked. Just looked. Because we had no cutlery. So Andrew said to our waiter, when eventually he sashayed along: "Could we please have some cutlery, when you have a moment ...?" He looked at us with blank amazement. He stared at our knifeless and forkless places. And then he said quite gravely "Mgerflo bumbly, speck dagurty murven murven plipplop", and beetled off to see to it.

The wine list is ridiculous, quite frankly. A hundred pages in a big ring binder which kept on coming apart – and I shouldn't be surprised, due to my fumbling, if a good few Chiantis and Rhones have now put down roots in Argentina. We went for a Valpolicella, largely because – at £31 – it was one of the few more affordable options. Andrew enjoyed the duck: "Excellent," he said. "Skin just crispy enough". And had he room for pudding? He had indeed. At this point, bizarrely, all the lights were suddenly and dazzlingly bright – like when they want to chuck you out of nightclubs and parties. Everyone looked around guiltily and chuckled with nerves. Then the lights went right back down to fashionably dim, and we all, with relief, removed our shoulders from our ears. So – a roasted William pear (very lopsided – looked like a glossy performing seal) with gingerbread ice cream. He loved that. In fact – we loved all the food here ... but ... but ... the whole experience was jerky. They think it's suave, but it's jerky, and one is somehow made to feel rather like a clodhopper in diving boots interloping upon their private choreography. So if only we could have been part of the dance – and if our waiter did not sound as if he had just washed up from some undiscovered island set in an ocean still to be charted ... well then wouldn't it be luvverly?

❑ *Joseph Connolly's novel WINTER BREAKS is a seasonal sequel to SUMMER THINGS. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Opened wine will keep – if you look after it

ONE big downside of being a wine writer is the embarrassment it causes friends and family when they're inviting me on any occasion which involves opening a bottle. But it really shouldn't be an issue. Wine is a pleasure, sharing it increases that pleasure – and I'm always ready to try other people's choices.

But what does upset me, far more than any bottle I find unpalatable, is fundamentally bad treatment of wine. A classic example: a half-finished bottle of fino sherry kept for weeks in a warm kitchen, resulting in a brownish, oxidised, nasty mouthful. That happened recently, from a friend who should have known better.

Another: red wine served far too warm – today's room temperatures are much too

steamy for most reds, so cool them for 20 minutes in the garage or fridge before serving. For all wine colours, it's far better to err on the chilly side, as everything warms up after a few minutes in the glass.

Good wine handling isn't complicated and the essence of it is to remember that wine is a living product. You wouldn't leave the remains of a cooked chicken or salmon uncovered for ages at room temperature, so think of wine in similar careful terms.

An opened bottle will still be enjoyable several days on, with

the right treatment. There are various preservation devices you can buy, from vacuum



pumps to inert gas sprays, but they're not really necessary. More simply, as soon as you've finished pouring for the evening, cork the bottle and put it in the fridge (reds included, though they need to come out 30 minutes at least before reserving).

If there's very little left in the bottle, decant it first into a

smaller one (the less oxygen in contact with the wine, the better).

It's quite remarkable how long many wines treated this way remain in good condition.

I've left half-full bottles for a week or more when

I've been away, to find they're hardly changed when I get back (but those are usually wines I didn't enjoy, hence the remainders...).

There are, too, some lovely wines which don't need to be finished quickly – though,

again, keep them in the fridge. Port, madeira, marsala, medium or sweet sherry, even many unfortified sweet wines: all last well after opening. Some of the fortified wine styles, in fact, owe their success to their ability to survive the worst possible treatment – think of madeira's rough passage from its island birthplace to export destinations.

Modern madeira still goes through a heating/oxidisation process. But that's not unique. Visit any venerable vin doux naturel domaine in the far south of France and there will be demijohns of murky-looking liquid basking in the sun. Don't be put off – the glowing, transparent results (Maury, Rivesaltes) can be delicious.

And, thinking beyond Europe, there are some fine, rich and delicious fortified muscats from

Australia which, similarly, will last happily once opened, provided you can resist their temptations. These three easy-to-find examples are warmly recommended: De Mortoli Show Reserve Liqueur Muscat and Buller's Fine Old Muscat (both Majestic, £13.75 and £12.80 respectively) and Campbells Rutherglen Muscat (Waitrose, £10 a half-bottle).

But to return home: sometimes, a wine is even better a day or so after it's first been opened. Something raw and young will mellow towards its full potential with a bit of contact with the air. That's one reason why some wines are best decanted – decanting is not just for old ones which have thrown a sediment.