

‘VERY good value’. This is a phrase often and approvingly uttered by my lunch companion, the very well known and respected wine writer Malcolm Gluck. For are not both his fame and fortune firmly founded upon the winnowing out on our behalf of so many vinous gems from amid all of the vinegary dross? Scorning ridiculous mark-ups, and pinpointing the bargains? Indeed. So when he says a wine is not just very good, but very good value to boot – don’t mess about, buy the stuff by the cartload. That’s what I did recently with a claret he had spotted in Waitrose: Chateau Bois Pertuis 2009 – a true bargain at just £8.99, he told me, and God he’s right: if they’ve got any left, I urge you to lose no time. Although the wine is uncharacteristically alcoholic for a Bordeaux (14 per cent), here is a true aristocrat at about a third of the price you might expect to pay for such a thing: it is velvet, it is fruit; it is heaven, and it lingers. So yum, then – not to say yum.

And Malcolm is singularly blessed in terms of his surname, wouldn’t you say? Gluck. Comfortingly close to glug. Or maybe an Antipodean farewell, wishing you fine fortune, rather on the lines of G’day ...? Some say that when you are known by your first name alone, then you have really made it: Elvis, Ringo, Kylie, Clint, Delia, Nigella ... who else ...? Sherlock, yes. But it works with surnames as well: Sinatra, Streisand, Hitchcock, Churchill, Olivier, de Niro, Betjeman ... and our very own local wine expert, Gluck. Which is more than you can say about Hugh Johnson, neither part of whose monicker is exactly resounding.

We had arranged to meet at the Horseshoe in Heath Street on one of the coldest days of a bloody cold winter. Although Malcolm is something of a regular here, I hadn’t been since it was a very sticky old pub called The Four Horseshoes. So this poor old mythical Hampstead nag has been hopping about on just the one for quite some time now – and although both the exterior and interior are rather drab and grey and barren (i.e. faint-makingly fashionable) what with the off-white walls, plank tables and weeds in milk bottles – it is at least no longer sticky, they’ve got big linen napkins, and their approach to food and drink is reassuringly grown-up (they even brew their own beer in the basement). And

Horseshoe brings a spot of good Gluck

If you’re going to go out to eat, then an ideal companion would be a wine writer – even better, one as distinguished as Malcolm Gluck, who has a nose for good value, discovers **Joseph Connolly**



Cheers ... Joseph Connolly and Malcolm Gluck at The Horseshoe in Hampstead.

it says on the menu ‘Quality Produce from Farm to Fork’ – so there. There is a daily dish of quite staggering value: when I was there it was twice-cooked Blythburger pork belly, roast new potatoes, salad and a glass of wine ... for £7! Extraordinary. The changing menu offers a mix of 15 starters and mains, depending upon the level of your hunger, and just four puddings. Among the more intriguing dishes was Stinking Bishop and potato Wellington at £11.50. Strong cheese and spuds in pastry ...? I wouldn’t have minded a taster, but maybe not the whole plateful. What about Saxmudham sausage sandwich with melted onions? Good, I imagine, and only £6.50. And then I spotted the Red Poll burger. Now Red Poll is very fine beef – but is £11.50 just slightly on the steep side for a burger ...? But hold – they’ve also got Red Poll sirloin steak with chips at only three pounds more: curious.

So I ordered that, to follow a crayfish Caesar salad. Malcolm was going for octopus, mussel and chorizo stew with butter beans: it was a freezing day, and he was starving. And before that – carrot and ginger soup. “I love ginger”, he said with enthusiasm. “I have it every single morning, loads of it, in liquidised fruit”. And which one of us does not? The wine, but naturally, I was leaving to him. He immediately went for Finca Los Prados, a white from Argentina, to get us going. “Why that one?” I asked him. “Oh I know it well”, he answered breezily. “And it’s very good value. Out of £16, they’re making maybe ten profit, which I think is just about reasonable. I compile the wine lists for several restaurants, but I always turn down those people who want to mark them up by 300 per cent: it’s just immoral. I aim at just 70 per cent, if I can manage it”.

He was enjoying his soup, but

said it could have done with a lot more ginger – and compared with his breakfast tippie, he was probably right. My Caesar salad had good croutons (bafflingly rare, good croutons) a very few crayfish and ten tons of lettuce – well and properly dressed lettuce, this is true, but ten tons nevertheless. By the time I’d had enough, it looked exactly the same as when it was served. To go with the mains, Malcolm had ordered half a litre of Mouvedre – a red from Alicante – which was deep and rather luscious. It was brought to us by a waiter with a bandaged arm. “Ah!” said Malcolm, deadpan: “a heavy red ...”. And then he said “it smells of club armchairs – leathery. And it’s very good value”. He was right – only £10.50. Well of course he was right – it’s 21 years now since his first Guardian wine column, soon after that the blissful coinage ‘Superplonk’ went on to conquer the nation.

FACTFILE

THE HORSESHOE

28 Heath Street, NW3
Tel: 020-7431 7206
Open for lunch Monday to Saturday noon-3.30pm, Sunday noon-4.30pm. Dinner Monday to Thursday 6.30pm- 10pm, Friday to Saturday 6pm-11pm, Sunday 6.30pm-9.30pm
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Cost: As little as £7 for one course with glass of wine. Otherwise mains around £11, wines from £16 the bottle.

Since then he has published more than 40 books on wine, and has just broken into fiction with a book of short stories entitled, um ... ‘Chateau Lafite 1953’. “I’ve always wanted to write fiction”, he said, “and I’ve eight unpublished novels behind me to prove it”. Then he went to pour more wine from the carafe, and very deftly slopped it all over the place. “God Almighty! I’m supposed to be an expert, and I can’t even do this right ...!” His own favourite wine, very unusually, is aged Riesling: “about 30 years old, yes. It becomes very interesting.”

Although his main was supposed to be octopus-led, there was barely any there: piles of mussels, though – and he seemed to enjoy it, but thought the whole dish “a tad overengineered because of the rich sauce”. I’m not quite sure what that means, exactly – but I dutifully pass it on. He is a considerable and very keen cook who always takes charge of the family Christmas dinner: goose, last time, with a Chilean pinot noir. “Screw cap, of course. In 25 years, all wine will be screw cap, including the Bordeaux first growths. You see, the trouble with

a cork is that in one-and-a-half inches there are two million air bubbles – so how can you expect consistency?” I must admit I’ve never thought of it like that. Or at all, actually.

My sirloin, though modestly proportioned on its slab of teak, was excellent. Cooked just so – aged flavour, juicy and tender: just what you want a sirloin to be (and it’s uncommon on menus: the ubiquitous rib-eye rules). The accompanying chips were nothing short of sensational – bronzed and crunchy and cooked in fat. I could tell from a taster that the horseradish sauce was a good one – but I utterly loathe horseradish sauce, so I didn’t actually eat it, or anything. We weren’t having pudding, so I asked the charming waitress to take a picture. I also asked her what was her favourite dish on the menu, and she said “Oh my God I totally love the sea bream, which is fish”. Then I was happy to settle down to lots more nuggets of wisdom from Malcolm. But first – did he want coffee ...? “God no! Caffeine is a natural pesticide. If a spider goes near the plant he becomes deranged! A tablet of concentrated caffeine would be enough to kill me!” Right ... okay ...so no coffee, then.

Why is it, I asked him, that people perceive the taste of wine so very differently? “Unanswerable – but there is a definite divide between the sexes. Men taste with their intellect, women with their senses. I’m very feminine”. Yeh well I have to say you wouldn’t know it by looking at him. One thing he surely is, though: very good value.

□ Joseph Connolly’s novel *WINTER BREAKS* (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is the sequel to *SUMMER THINGS*. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

king for wines – not just chateaux

recognise the Loire as a vineyard area. Castles yes, wine no.

Maybe this hidden image is a reason why the Loire’s wines very often represent excellent value for money. That’s fine for now, but the future is threatened. There is investment and optimism, but more and more small growers are being driven to bankruptcy. How can vignerons who receive well under a euro a bottle for their year’s work survive long term?

So, if you want to continue drinking in five years’ time wines that you love now, be prepared to pay a sensible price.

There are plenty of attractive Loire wines in all the supermarkets and high street wine stores. A tempting introduction to the region is through the La

Grille range developed by Charles and Philippa Sydney, whose intermediary role means a lot of other lovely Loire bottles also reach the UK. Majestic has a good choice – start with La Grille cool-fermented chenin blanc (£7, £6.50 for two-plus), whose gentle touch of sweetness makes it an appealing aperitif.

But I want to focus on two growers whose wines epitomise Loire quality at very sensible prices.

Jerome Billard at Domaine de la Noblaie has one of the prettiest vineyards I’ve ever seen, in a sheltered valley south of Chinon. While in the cellar is a 600-year-old chalk-cut vat, still used to ferment one very special cuvee, Pierre de Tuf. Old vines (cabernet

franc, a little chenin blanc) almost circle his house – he describes them as his “garden” – and the resulting wines are polished and elegant.

Domaine des Rochelles lies to the west, south of Saumur, where Jean-Hubert Lebreton’s grandfather was largely responsible for defining the rules for Anjou’s dry wines. The domaine’s wines span all the Loire styles, with the reds and sweet white Coteaux de l’Aubance especially fine. You’ll need to go to France to find the latter, though.

Buy wines from both growers at Haynes Hanson & Clark in Chelsea (www.hhand.co.uk, 020-7584 7927); juicy but long-lasting La Noblaie rouge 2009



Polished and elegant wines ... the Domaine de la Noblaie vineyard.

£10.60, Domaine des Rochelles Anjou rouge L’Ardoise 2009 (pure-fruited, mineral, mostly cabernet franc) £9.80 and Anjou Villages-Brissac La Croix de la Mission 2008 (mainly cabernet sauvignon, immensely stylish) £16.10.

The Sampler in Islington

(www.thesampler.co.uk, 020-7226 9500) has La Noblaie blanc 2009, £14.75, where flowers, fruit, honey, minerality and more end long and fresh, the even more complex, seductively-oaked La Part des Anges 2007, £23, and classy, concentrated, complex, dark-fruited Pierre de Tuf 2007,

£19.70 (prices after 10 per cent six-bottle discount).

These wines only hint at the depth of the Loire galaxy. Go to other specialists – RSJ (www.rsj.uk.com/rsjretailintro.htm) and Yapp Brothers (www.yapp.co.uk) are two of the best – and find many more stars.