

THE Liquidator will soon be coming around. You won't feel safer until you get out of town'. So growled Shirley Bassey nearly 40 years ago – this title track, delivered with lots of gutsy James Bond style, being by far the best bit of a highly forgettable film entitled, quite as you might expect, *The Liquidator*. Which also just happens to be the jocular nickname of my recent lunch guest, Christopher Morris. Chris, I ought to point out, is not in fact a hit-man – unlike the chap in the film who, Dame Shirley warblingly informs us, is an eraser who'll rub you out in the night (and for a chaser, he'll kiss your woman goodnight). In contrast, Chris is a thoroughly good egg, whose business is the winding up of large and sometimes notorious companies which, having bobbed on the briny for many lucrative years, proud sails billowing, then come a cropper on the rocks of reality, the once mighty galleon now a wrecked and splintered thing, the richness of its cargo ripe for division.

Among the more notable liquidations over which Chris, down the years, has presided are Rolls Razor (John Bloom, of twin-tub washing machine renown), Laker Airways, Polly Peck (Asil Nadar), G-Plan, Banco Ambrosiano (as run by Roberto Calvi, 'God's Banker'), BCCI and Fire Auto Marine. This last, of course, was the insurance company as fraudulently masterminded by Emil Savundra – the 'Indian doctor' cited in the Stephen Ward trial, of which the more diverting episodes concerned cavorting and romps with Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies. Savundra was memorably carved up on live television by David Frost, but also – in a different sense – by Chris Morris too: Liquidator-in-chief at Touche Ross, which later merged with Deloitte (does any of this sound as if I know what I'm talking about? I'd be very sceptical, if I were you).

Chris's original intention in life was to become a barrister, but family funds were unable to run to all that, "and so," he says, "I fell into accountancy. Which can be very boring. Lots of boring people, you know". It is a truism among accountants, I have observed, that they all will acknowledge the dominance of bores within their profession, while taking great care to underline that they are not of their number. Somewhere on earth there must be just one accountant who will dully confess to being very very boring indeed. Well Chris is no bore – or else why on

Dividing of the spoils is a delicate balance

A liquidator knows all about keeping an eye on everything – so it's good to have one with you when there's tricky territory and crockery to negotiate and a delicious pudding to share, writes **Joseph Connolly**



Liquid assets ... Joseph, right, with Christopher Morris at Morgan M.

earth would I be lunching with him in Morgan M? This being the most implausibly situated fine dining establishment I have ever encountered – a converted corner pub in Highbury at the wrong end of Liverpool Road (people tell me there's a right end) and while just a short amble from the coolth and zippiness of Upper Street and Camden Passage, in spirit simply light years distant. This is so way off my beat that I thought I might require a visa and possibly also a sherpa, to guide and protect me.

Everything about Morgan M (the M stands for Meunier, the chef patron) is exceedingly French, though still they have no Michelin star, which rather surprises me. A charming (very French) lady had rung me to confirm my booking ... and when, the following day, I rolled up at ten to one and eager for grub, the door was locked and bolted. Which you don't often

come across. Round the side, a (very French) chef was having a fag – not M.Meunier, who was apparently skiing that week (in France). So then the (very French) maitre d' came and unlocked the door and I was seated at a large and well-furnished table in a completely empty room. And so, alas, it remained for the duration of our lunch. How can these restaurants cope with that? You set the tables, you turn on the lights, you prep the staff, you fire up the range, you open the door (eventually) ... and already you're losing a fortune. So I did wonder – had I failed to confirm my booking the day before – whether all concerned would have been cock-a-hoop, and maybe sloped off to join the governor on the, um – slopes.

It's a smartly panelled room with sophisticated blocks of maroon to offset the comfortable sage upholstered chairs and a

blonde and very shiny floor. On offer is a two course meal for £24.50, three courses for £4 more – although there are quite a few rather maddening 'supplements'. Despite the offer of a £45 six course 'tasting menu', we were sticking to the straight and narrow: ravioli of (very French) snails in Chablis, with a red wine jus, for my starter. This was very fine – nutty and nuggety pasta, pretty in green and primped and frilled at the edges: a true snail flavour, the jus just so. Equally handsome was Chris's crab cannelloni with coriander and dried tomato in a shellfish cappuccino. The generous tube was packed with white meat, and consumed with characteristic gusto; £4.50 supplement, though. These starters were preceded by a freebie soupcon of soup – cream of chestnut with a blob of Stilton chantilly: the anticipated brief explosion of flavour was just

FACTFILE

❑ **MORGAN M**
489 Liverpool Road, N7
Tel: 020-7609 3560
❑ Open for lunch Wednesday to Friday and Sunday from noon. Dinner Tuesday to Saturday from 7pm.
❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆
❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆
❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆ (more if there are any human beings around)
❑ Cost two-course lunch £24.50, three courses £28.50 (some of which attract supplements). Six-course tasting menu £45. Plus booze, of course, so not cheap.

not there, though: no more than pleasant. At which point, rather comically, a young (very French) waiter appeared with a huge wooden slab bearing two small chunks of (very French) bread, and two half slices of another sort. Then, with brandished silver tongs, he took a century to divide the spoils equally between us, before beaming and trotting away with his great big empty plank.

And yet one more supplement (£5.50, this time) was applied to Chris's main of Pyrenean rack roasted milk lamb with shoulder confit and pomme puree, garlic confit, artichoke and a rosemary jus. He very much enjoyed this – and I liked too my oven roasted pheasant with a glazed leg, red cabbage confit, parsnip puree, liver ravioli and braised turnip in a sauce grand veneur (hunter's sauce – blood, currant jelly and trimmings, largely). But listen: we both would have had a lot more fun had it not been for the bowls, and also the frankly demented cutlery. Let me explain: the presentation in both cases was sublime, the food stacked and nestled nicely in what appeared to be the crowns of inverted white sombreros – acres of brim, in other words, which meant you had to stick your neck out like a

damned inquisitive bloody tortoise in order to get over and above all the doings. Anyway – Chris's Hermes tie was the first thing to get slathered in jus, then his shirt, this quickly followed by my shirt (and we'd only had a glass or two, honest). And you place your knife tidily in the bowl, but because the handle is so disproportionately weighted, it performs a rapid somersault – I swear I heard mine whooping out a (very French) hoop-la! – and spatters more mess all over the cloth. The maitre d' arrived with napkins. Chris looked up at him: "Got any shirts ...?"

And then a little pre-dessert: a spoonful of rice pudding and millefeuille – the whole thing gorgeously cold, lemony, both crisp and yielding and tasting of anything but rice pudding, really. Then I ordered a dark chocolate (Valrhona) moelleux with milk sorbet and Armagnac. Chris wanted this too, but decided instead on a glazed pear with a financier, amaretto cream and nougatine ice cream (it is in his nature to want to devour financiers). But when the puddings came, the undeniable lust in his eyes as he gazed at my perfect chocolate fondant was plain for all to see (or would have been anyway, if only there was anyone else in the restaurant) and so we swapped: both of us were very happy. The poached pear was truly exceptional. And the fondant ...? "Splendid. It tastes just like a laxative I used to have as a child: very nice indeed". And no ... I didn't ask. You don't like to.

So there it was: a pretty damn good (very French) lunch, and – ruined clothes notwithstanding – I'd had a whale of a time, in excellent company. For as Shirley Bassey reminds us at the denouement: 'The Liquidator ... is a hell of a guy'.

❑ **JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY** (Faber and Faber, £8.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

sensation high with lower alcohol wines

recent unsolicited sample bottle: Tyrrell's Vat 1 semillon 2003 from Australia's Hunter Valley (£24 to £27, Majestic Fine Wine stores, the Wine Society and independents including Planet of the Grapes, Holborn, and the Wine Library, City). It's a fascinating, complex wine, with a somewhat earthy nose opening into citrusy scents with an edge of mature oak. Start drinking and a faint sensation of spritz calms into an elegant, rewarding mouthful, almost searingly dry – altogether something different, and special.

And the alcohol? Just 10.5 per cent. So this is a prime example of a wine which delivers a lot

– but does it with delicacy.

There are others which are naturally low in alcohol – the great German off-dry rieslings are a classic example, northern Italy's moscato d'asti is a lightly fizzy pleasure, and few English wines exceed 11.5 per cent.

Also, there are more and more wines where a specific effort has been made to reduce the alcohol content naturally by harvesting early or choosing fruit from vines growing in cooler locations. The Grassa family's big Gascon operation, Tariquet, is one going down this road (it produces three 9.5 to 10.5 per cent Cotes de Gascogne whites, £5.50 to £6, for the Wine Society). Go

beyond that and reducing alcohol becomes a whole lot less natural, via various mechanical means in the winery – reverse osmosis or spinning cones are examples.

You can understand the trade's interest in all this, because in 2010 sales of low-alcohol (below 5.5 per cent) or no-alcohol wine rose by three-quarters, albeit from a tiny base – one per cent of the total wine market. Alcohol-careful consumers might just benefit price-wise, because below 5.5 per cent excise duty drops and there's none at all at 1.2 per cent or lower.

But are these very low alcohol drinks "wine" in the pleasurable sense that most wine-drinkers

expect? Sadly, no in most instances. Better by far to dilute a stronger wine with water (make sure it's filtered...) to keep at least some of the proper flavour and structure. If you're looking for a truly virtuous "wine", though, Torres' Natureo (only 0.5 per cent alcohol left, thanks to those spinning cones, £6 at Waitrose) has a pleasant muscat grape scent and tastes of crisp fruit rather than chemicals. Let me leave you with a simple message from Doug Wregg, the voice of the Les Caves de Pyrene (www.lescaves.co.uk) whose list includes some very fine bottles below 11.5 per cent: "It's not how big it is, but what you do with it." How true.



Fascinating wines ... Tyrrell vineyards in the Hunter valley.