

A cocktail of Asian goodness will put a sling in your step

Joseph Connolly visits Singapore Garden but sticks to wine

I once had a thing about the Singapore Sling. That, of course, was back in the days when I had a thing about any sort of experimental drink. The weirder the name and ingredients, the more I was up for it: Moscow Mule – vodka, lime and ginger ale (quite as disgusting as it sounds), Horse's Neck (bourbon, more ginger ale, equally vile) and, of course, The Earthquake. This is attributed to Toulouse-Lautrec and comprises three parts absinthe to one part cognac: it didn't stunt his growth so much as his existence – the first hot touch on your lips of this explosive poison is equal to the kiss of death.

I was also drawn – inexplicably – to Satan's Whiskers. This comes from the 1930 Savoy Cocktail Book and is made up of both sweet and dry vermouth, Grand Marnier, orange juice and Angostura bitters. Sounds nice ...? Well it isn't. None of them are, actually – with the exceptions of the classic Dry Martini, the champagne cocktail and a Rusty Nail (Drambuie cut by a little malt whisky, preferably Glenmorangie) all these creations are horrid but do look very pretty – and few came prettier than the Singapore Sling, invented around a hundred years ago in the legendary Long Bar of the Raffles Hotel, Singapore. This has a base of gin, then Benedictine, Cherry Heering (as the old advertising jingle had it: 'Very cheering, Cherry Heering') plus fresh pineapple juice and soda. It was unashamedly 'one for the ladies', and does look quite spanking in all its frosty reddish and glistening glory.

Enticing menu

I wonder, is that the stress you give to the word 'Singapore'? Sin-gapore? Or do you go with the more recent Singapore? I was rehearsing as I strolled into Singapore Garden in Fairfax Road. But of course the need to say the word did not once arise – and why would it? Well maybe when ordering Singapore noodles – which appear on most Chinese menus, but not actually on this one. God, though – there was just about everything else you could think of: an enormous and enticing menu, and I seem to have chomped my way through a large part of it.

I had caught sight of this restaurant the evening I had a less than triumphant dinner at Chateaubriand, a few doors down. Singapore Garden had been full of happy people, the whole place looking colourful and vibrant. In-



■ Joseph at the exotic Singapore Garden restaurant

We probably had ordered enough for three human beings, maybe even four. And we finished the lot: professional pigs, what can I say?

evitably at lunchtime on a rainy Wednesday it was less so, but still a fair proportion of the tables were taken. My guest was former Ham&High editor Matthew Lewin.

Singapore Garden is an inviting space – broad and light, a half-height divider separating the room from the smart mirror-backed bar made exotic by two large pink orchids in black glass vases. A general air of calm and professionalism is evident, and the waitresses are elegant in their floral cheongsams – very calmly and professionally not catching your eye and ambling over largely when it pleases them to do so. As ever, when scanning a Chinese menu (and this was pretty much straight Cantonese – nothing screamingly Singaporean about it) my eyes swim with the choice, and my greed urges me to order everything. We made a fair attempt: I obviously couldn't resist anything called Kuay Pie Tee Top Hats – four light crispy pastry cases sitting in stainless steel

egg cups, and shaped more like the upper half of an Attic urn than any topper I have ever seen, joyously crammed with shredded bamboo shoots, chicken and prawns.

Childishly exciting

All was enveloped in a warm creamy sauce, and the whole was absolutely terrific. So much so that Matthew – although he had ordered for himself prawn sesame toast, one of the most boring starters ever had swallowed two of them before I was even aware. Oh well – share and share alike. Except that I didn't at all want to share his little toasty triangles. These things always make me think they were the result of some little economy tip on how not to throw out leavings: old bread, a smear of Shippam's paste, and so many seeds that you'll be picking them out of your teeth till kingdom come.

Matthew followed this nonsense with a truly luscious dish – prawns and scallops in a clay pot with glass noo-

FACT FILE

- SINGAPORE GARDEN
83 Fairfax Road, NW6
Tel: 020-7328 5314
- Lunch Mon-Sat 12-3pm, Sun 12-5pm. Dinner Sun-Thurs 6-11pm. Fri-Sat 6-11.30pm.
- FOOD ★★★★★☆☆
- SERVICE ★★★★★☆☆
- THE FEELING ★★★★★☆☆
- COST £100 for a two course meal for two, with drink

dles, lemongrass and ginger: a great big chop suey sort of thing with really fresh and very large prawns, the scallops in slices and the translucent glass noodles – seething and slithering like Indiana Jones's detested snakes – very pleasing on the tongue, if ever you manage to convey them there: they defy all forms of cutlery, and particularly chopsticks and those hopeless ceramic little ladles they pointlessly give you.

I had what was billed as 'sizzling beefsteaks' but were actually smallish slices of fillet served on a hot iron plate in a rich soya and tomato gravy: they really did sizzle when they were presented, though – a thing I always find very childishly exciting. The sauce was a bit sweet-and-sour for me (it wasn't advertised as such) but the beef was tender, and very good. As was the mountain of noodles with bean sprouts and onions. There was also – in addition to fairly humdrum egg fried rice – a further great pile of rice, but this time with roast duck and barbecued pork. It sounds – and looks – rather better than it eats: not a lot of flavour, but quite a lot of bloat.

We probably had ordered enough for three human beings, maybe even four. And we finished the lot: professional pigs, what can I say? I could barely move. The cost of all these dishes does mount up – it's a superior place, this ... but pretty expensive.

We drank only one small glass each of Australian pinot noir (£7 a go) and the bill was close to £90. And now I was being chivvied into paying it pronto – the waitress talked right through Matthew's anecdote in order to tell us quite urgently that they closed the door at 3pm prompt. So to be annoying, I ordered green tea. This is extraordinary in that never in my life have I ordered green tea. Even stranger in one who once had a thing about the Singapore Sling.

Wine with Liz Sagues



Living the dream and bringing a taste of France to the glass

How often can you live the dream: to turn an informed enthusiasm for wine into a way of life? For Andrew Seabright and his wife Cihan that's exactly what happened. With a group of friends, one based in France, they had imported bottles for themselves for some while. But supplies ran out too soon, and demand rose from beyond the immediate group. So 15 months ago Seabright & Seabright was born.

It's a web-based business, run from the Seabrights' Finsbury Park home, principally selling direct to consumers (no minimum order, but given the £8 fixed delivery charge it makes sense to buy at least a case).

I met Andrew last month when the Maison de Languedoc-Roussillon just behind Oxford Street showcased 42 prestige wines from the region, chosen by a panel of respected writers, wine buyers and sommeliers. No wonder he was smiling – four of those 42 came from his list, a total equalled only by another small southern France specialist, Terroir Languedoc, and the rather bigger trade-only supplier Richards Walford.

Achievement

Such results are not necessarily a true expression of who is best at finding and importing great terroir-expressing wines. Who knows which importers put forward what wines, and which others, dismissive of competitions, ignored the exercise completely. There was, for example, only one wine from Les Caves de Pyrene and none from Stone Vine & Sun, both of which source southern French gems.

But it doesn't detract from Seabright & Seabright's achievement. Their wines were great – two stylish mineral-rich reds, Galatée 2008 and Pygmalion 2007 from Domaine Piquemal in Roussillon, which are blends of syrah, grenache and carignan in different proportions and sensibly priced at £17; a very posh merlot, dark and herby, Alma Soror 2008 from Chateau de la Tuilerie close to Nîmes, also £17; and Vin d'Est 2007 from Domaine Cabrol, £15. This last is a wine I've loved ever since I visited



■ Andrew Seabright

the atmospheric Languedoc village of Aragon where Atlantic breezes meet those from the Mediterranean and the appellation, Cabardès, unusually allows a mix of Atlantic and Bordeaux varieties.

Grower Claude Carayol blends according to the vintage conditions: syrah dominates in this example, with a mouth-watering savoury edge to the firm fruit.

www.seabrightand-seabright.co.uk to find out about innovative offers, tastings and events.

What of other wines in the 42? There were some stunning whites, showing a tempting quality/price ratio.

Matassa blanc 2008 (www.lescaves.co.uk, £28) is the epitome of Roussillon – you can almost taste the schist on which the vines grow, in a wine whose initial austerity rapidly explodes with aromatics. La Soula 2006 (Richards Walford, £22.50) is another signature Roussillon white, with fascinatingly complex scents and flavours.

Enough of adjectives: just believe me that these too are very special: Les Murières 2010 Mas Brugères (www.yapp.co.uk, £12.50), Les Aurèges 2009 Domaine de Clovallon (www.terroirlanguedoc.co.uk, £15.75), Clos des Vignes 2009 Domaine Gardiès (www.h2vin.co.uk, £17), Pierre d'Argent 2008 Chateau de Lascaux (www.hgwines.co.uk, £15), Prieuré de Saint Jean de Bèbian 2007 (www.terroirlanguedoc.co.uk, £30). All are blends of southern French varieties, and show the depth of quality now available in an area once largely considered a lake of plonk.

There were other excellent reds, and very fine examples of Roussillon's sweet wines, which deserve a much higher UK profile: Domaine Cazes Rivesaltes ambré 1998 (www.libertywine.co.uk, £14 half-bottle) is a lovely example, with freshness balancing its nutty stickiness.

They all happily transport France's sunniest region into UK glasses.

