

Food&Drink

With seats to the Test at Lord's, Joseph Connolly captains the search of where to eat Back in game after school cricket wilderness years

At last, I'm going to see India. I am. After so many years of waiting, this abiding ambition is finally realised. Even as you read these words, I will actually already be there ...! At Lord's, I mean – for the first and second days of the Test Match. Well what did you think? That I was going abroad? No no – there are loads of restaurants at home I haven't eaten in yet, so why go abroad? All you get abroad is overcharged and dysentery – much better to stick with what you know. And in anticipation of this week's England v India Test Match, I thought I'd investigate a couple of favourite eating places in the area: Lord's Tavern – so very famous, and I'd never been there, while Oslo Court is a good old friend. I reviewed it here a couple of years ago and have been naggingly conscious ever since that I didn't do it true justice.

Today and tomorrow I'll be in the debutante seats, courtesy of a couple of MCC chums. You can spot the senior ones because they don't wear the legendary egg and bacon tie but a rather boring navy number with significant little ciphers scattered across it. My earliest association with Lord's, though, was rather less exalted. During the late 1960s, my old school The Oratory used to play Beaumont (now extinct) at a one day fixture there – the only schools apart from Eton and Harrow, I believe, to be accorded the honour. I was never in the team, perfectly obviously, but I was one of a number of lowly oiks who

had to hump all the gear about. It could have put me off cricket for life, but no. I always love going to Lord's – I still always smile at the signs on the exit and entrance of the gift shop: Out and Not Out. Tee-hee. And a similar little gag is at work in the Tavern: the door of the Ladies reads Ladies, while that of the Gents ...? Why Lords, but of course. Tee-hee again.

It's a curious place – apparently the subject of a recent extensive refurbishment, but honestly you'd never know it. It looks like the bar of a provincial hotel circa 1972 with a few small dining tables set aside for the mad old spinster and the local leper to eat disgustingly their scampi and chicken-in-a-basket. The food though – thank the Lord's – is

a mile away from all that sort of thing. Admittedly the menu doesn't read too inspiringly – fish and chips, steak and chips, bangers and mash (no egg and bacon – they missed a trick there) – but if the dishes my wife and I enjoyed are anything to go by, then all of these ordinary things will be done extraordinarily well – which, let's face it, is actually all you ever want.

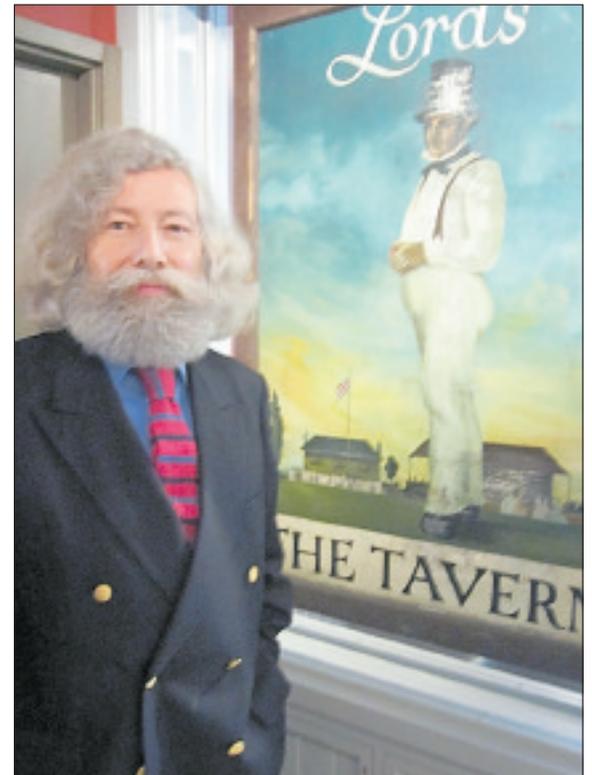
Triumph

There's a flatscreen and noisy horrible music, I'm afraid, so we opted to have lunch on the terrace at the front: spacious, giant umbrellas, box balls and conifers in deep zinc troughs, all very agreeable – but the thunder of traffic, while less offensive, is as loud as the music within. My wife had Lord's Tavern chicken Caesar salad which contained, in addition to all the things you'd expect – cos lettuce, anchovies, chicken, croutons – quite a lot you most certainly would not: avocado, crispy prosciutto and soft boiled eggs. It was a total triumph: a generous rustic bowl full of "heaps of chicken", according to the scoffer, two gooey eggs and all of the rest of the above combining into a surprisingly satisfying whole. I went for the burger, and was so pleased I did. Here was a very chubby patty covered in just-melted Montgomery cheddar (my favourite) in a bun with lettuce, a slice of beef tomato and – the only duff note – three raw red onion rings. Are there people who actually eat raw onion?

Are there really? Are you absolutely sure? Well anyway – the meat was lean and juicy and cooked medium, just as requested, the hand cut chips quite super: chunky, golden, crisp, just the way you like them.

To follow, my wife had Lord's Tavern summer pudding – a lovely looking deep plum coloured cylinder in a pool of glossy coulis: great berry flavour, though the layers of bread were a little bit too bready – could have done with longer infusion. A dollop of crème fraiche was a better accompaniment than expected. My chocolate tart was a slim rectangle of darkness – just bitter (in a good way) and rather like the best and nuggety centre of a Sachertorte. The vanilla ice cream was yellowish, Cornish and moreish – the service throughout prompt and polite, and the value astounding. We had a bottle of fizzy water, a glass of MCC house champagne (biscuity and nutty, just as advertised) and the total bill before service was £37: very pleasing.

And now to a bird of a very different feather – for the whole of Oslo Court does seem to be upholstered in apricot plumage. It lurks invisibly at the base of a block of flats and is an immensely comfortable and reassuring place because everything always stays the same – the décor, yes, but also the menu, the very friendly and brilliantly professional staff (not by any means least the disarmingly likeable pudding waiter in his waistcoat of many colours – always so co-



■ Joseph finds out what the score is at the Lord's Tavern

quettish and cheeky, and that's just with the blokes). The menu is jammed with all the things you really do want to eat, and many old friends that these days are something of a rarity: steak Diane, beef Wellington, duck à l'orange – and there is also a bewilderingly long list of 'specials' that is reeled off to you the moment you settle down. During Test Matches, the place is utterly rammed (the word is that it's booked a year ahead) with a very largely male congregation all very eager to tie on the bib and pay homage at the altar of really good comfort food, and plenty of it. Another thing I love about the place is that everyone will be served at the same time, and

even at a table of twelve, the correct dish will always be set before the person who ordered it – there's none of this calling out "Who's the Dover sole ...?" while everything goes cold, with all the diners pointing and sticking their hands up. Oslo Court really is a treasure.

So: if you want dependable English food at a bargain price, head to Lord's Tavern. For a rather more lavish and cosmopolitan spread in unique surroundings, Oslo Court is your man. Each will knock you for six. Bowl a maiden over. I do declare.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACT FILE

■ **LORD'S TAVERN**
St John's Wood Road, NW8
Tel: 020-7616 8689
■ Open for food Monday to Saturday noon-3pm, 6pm-9pm
■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Cost: Two course meal for two with wine about £50

■ **OSLO COURT**
Prince Albert Road, NW8.
Tel: 020-7722 8795
■ Open Monday to Saturday 12.30am-2.30pm, 7pm-11pm.
■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Cost: About £110 for a three course meal for two with wine

Wine with Liz Sagues



Stylish and affordable Italian blends win me over at cricket ground's annual tasting

Every time I go on my annual Italian Journey, I learn a huge amount. But the process doesn't involve hours in planes or on autostradas: just a stroll through the Nursery Pavilion at Lord's cricket ground in St John's Wood, where the annual Definitive Italian Tasting for trade and press last month celebrated its 13th birthday.

This year, in an hour or so, I tasted grape varieties galore: pignoletto, lambrusco di sorbara, glera, malvasia di candia aromatica, langrein dunkel, schioppettino, rossese, sagrantino, freisa d'asti, canaiolo, sagratino, raboso, nerello calabrese, vespolina, croatina, cesanese, nero buono, cagnulari,

pulcinculo, pignolo, torbato... And that's ignoring the almost familiar grillo, greco di tufo, falanghina, teroldego rotaliano, negro amaro, corvina, rondinella, molinara, agalianico, frappato.

I'm not listing all these simply to fill space. Each and every one appeared in the 76 wines chosen by exhibitors at the tasting to represent a journey through Italy's vineyards. And they serve to show the country's remarkable vine heritage – more than 800 varieties have been identified.

They are not just idiosyncratic oddities. They add style and individuality to blends and can be enjoyable on their own. Perhaps, too,

they contribute to Italy's rapid rise in the UK wine sales tables, recently into second place behind Australia and ahead of the US and France.

Unusual varieties

Many of the wines in that Italian Journey selection were quite pricey. But on one of the exhibitor stands – that of Hallgarten Druitt, where I renewed a long and happy acquaintance with Italian specialist Amanda Menacci – was an example of how these unusual varieties can be experienced at a price to challenge many of the mundane examples of pinot grigio or merlot which have boosted Italian sales fig-

ures. The wines come from Umbria and the name on the label is Masseo. Majestic stocks both the white and red, at £4.50. The red, a very pleasant summer wine with crisp perfumed fruit (serve it lightly chilled) is pretty conventional: sangiovese (the chianti grape) and merlot. In the white, workhorse trebbiano is lifted by 20 per cent grechetto, a grape of Greek origin which adds structure, richness and a nutty character to central Italian wine blends. In Masseo, the result is an unusual and stylish wine for the price, with a depth of fresh green fruit flavours.

Too many of the Journey's most interesting wines from

these unusual varieties can be found only in restaurants. For example, I had high hopes of reviving happy Sardinian memories at home when I found Sella & Mosca's deliciously rich and complex yet fresh Terre Bianche Torbato di Alghero there. But importer Matthew Clark dashed them with the news that it was currently sold only to restaurants.

But there are some which can embellish your own dinner tables. These two, for example, are fine food wines: Mezzacorona Teroldego Rotaliano Riserva 2007 from Trentino in the north (www.slurp.co.uk, £11.20), with deep sour cherry character, and Aglianico del Vulture

Gudarro 2007, from Basilicata in the deep south (www.bibendum-wine.co.uk, £15.75), with black fruit scents and flavours, joined by spice on the palate.

There's no reason, though, not to go on your own Italian journey of discovery. Independent merchants often have lots to offer: Berry Bros (www.bbr.com), Philglas & Swiggot (www.philglas-swiggot.com) and Corney & Barrow (www.corneyandbarrow.com) are all good places to start, as is The Wine Society (www.thewinesociety.com). But there are plenty more – even small Italian delis often have intriguing wines available.