

Restaurant review

Joseph Connolly looks back at the places that shone in 2011 – and those which didn't – and has his own yuletide gift for readers

North London has sparkled amid the gloom

As by now you might quite easily have noticed ... it's that time of year again. MasterChef: The Professionals is over and done with, and therefore no longer do we have to suffer hearing the contestants telling us that cooking is their passion, and that they are in it to win, upping their game, giving it 110 per cent, stepping up to the plate (and out of their comfort zone), cooking their hearts out, living the dream ... and, eventually, over the moon, or else just gutted. 'Tis also the time of year when if you see in the papers just one more time a feature bearing the strapline 'We Have Christmas All Wrapped Up' (crammed with desirabilia that has been given gratis to the style journalists, and which you can't afford), you will put into the oven not the goose or turkey, but simply your head. 'Tis the time too when you are ceaselessly exhorted to 'go glam' for the 'party season' and this also makes you think in terms of head and oven, because you haven't bloody well been invited to any parties because there aren't any around this year (due to – oh God – the 'economic climate').

Well forget all that – because Santa is here ...! Oh

yes – and he's offering you free food and drink: no strings attached. Well – one or two strings, actually: you have to email, see, and tell me why you are so crazy and desperate as to want to have lunch with me, and where (local-ish) you think we might want to go. Now I did this a year ago, and although the response was both large and gratifying (as well as flattering and cheeky in roughly equal parts) quite a few failed to grasp the spirit of the offer. Here is not an invitation to come along for a slap-up feed at one of my fave-ourites, because both venue and whatever unfortunate devil I do eventually select will form the basis of one of these reviews, you see. Just think of it: your picture and foodie opinions in the Ham & High! Time to go glam then, because I've got Christmas all wrapped up – and it's party season! Except by the time we do this thing, the papers will have moved on to telling you you've overdone it during the festive season and instructing you to 'detox' and 'shed those pounds': I shan't, though. I shall urge you to tox up some more, and bloat to the point of explosion.

And in order to remind you of where we won't be going, there follows a round-up of



Joseph with Marcus Wareing, who runs the Gilbert Scott at the St Pancras Hotel, which was awarded eight stars

all the restaurants I have reviewed during 2011 (though please do glance at my website for all the ones I did last year as well, because we can't go there either). I went to eight fine restaurants well off our patch – and all for a sound reason: The Savoy Grill because it had just reopened after many years of darkness, Galvin at Windows at the summit of the Hilton because it was my 100th review and I wanted to feel on top of the world, The Goring Hotel because here was Royal Wedding time, and the place was thick with Middletons. Skylon in the Royal Festival Hall because it was the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain which begat it ... and Dinner, because it was Heston's new gaff: enough said.

Then there was Number One and Kitchin, both in Edinburgh, by way of a trailer to that Festival – and finally, Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir Au Quat' Saisons because ... um ... well because I quite fancied it. And all of these were the highest scorers of the year: for food, I gave eight stars to the Savoy and Skylon, nine to all the others – Galvin and Number One both

receiving the golden 10 for service.

Now to the locals: the highest hit for food was eight stars ... though I awarded this to a rather astonishing 19 restaurants. Here is a fairly good moment to explain that this does not make all of these places equally good: prices vary wildly, and the stars were in proportion to the style of restaurant, and how successful they were in what they set out to achieve.

Excellent

So in addition to some straightforwardly excellent restaurants such as Bradleys in Swiss Cottage, Almeida and Morgan M in Islington (just moved to Barbican), St James in Crouch End, Oslo Court in St John's Wood, Feng Shang Princess (Primrose Hill) and Phoenix Palace (Marylebone)... there were lots of really inexpensive places that were quiet little triumphs. Gourmet Burger Kitchen in Belsize (this year's best burger, by far), the tiny Verru in Marylebone (along with Belsize Kitchen, top value), Primrose Hill's La Collina, Belsize's Tandis, Hampstead's Piccola and Camden's El

Parador. Another 'eight star' was Coast Dining, also in Camden Town – a lovely fish place which, alas, has now closed down. And eight stars too to Marcus Wareing's Gilbert Scott in the St Pancras Hotel: an English brasserie – such a good idea, and so well done (although most other restaurant critics didn't agree).

There was another slew of more than decent places scoring seven stars: Hampstead's Horsehoe, and another two foodie pubs in Primrose Hill: The Engineer and The Princess of Wales. I also liked La Cocotte in Fleet Road, The Summerhouse in Maida Vale (this year for the first time open throughout the winter, which ought to be interesting), Highbury's rather self-conscious Trullo, Singapore Garden in Swiss Cottage-ish, Lord's Tavern, The Formosa Dining Room in Maida Vale, Kentish Canteen (where else?) Kentish Town and the Roundhouse's Made In Camden (...my God ... have I done nothing but eat lunch this year ...? Not really, no).

So with all this riches about, why would people go to anything lesser? Because much below seven stars is hardly worth the bother and expense, is it really? Better off at home. L'Absinthe in Primrose Hill got six stars: it has a lot of fans, though I'm not one of them. On five stars was the ludicrous Ping Pong in Hampstead High Street – recently the subject of a mercy killing, giving way to the very good and welcome Cote (another eight-star place). Also clocking up just five stars were The Union Café in Marylebone, Sofra in St John's Wood and Manna in Primrose Hill (this last not just because it's vegan, but because it's rather dull).

Nowhere scored no stars at all... but Zeen, off Hampstead Road, struggled to four, as did Retsina in Belsize Village. And worse is to come, I'm afraid: I gave just three to

Sardo Canale in Primrose Hill (another very popular spot, though I honestly can't think why) and Chateaubriand – nearly next door to Singapore Garden in Swiss Cottage-ish. Also Walnut in West Hampstead: the area's most expensive restaurant and – going by my dinner – rather poor and dismal. Actually – this was the one place I emerged from hungry: ate nothing at all. And of course twotwentytwo at the Landmark Hotel, quite simply because largely it's wastefoospace.

So okay: where are we two going to go then? Along with a saucepan of wine, you can mull it over (decent burgundy, easy on the cloves, don't let it boil). Have a glance on the website at the full reviews of all the restaurants mentioned here, then set to thinking of somewhere novel and fab, and let me know all about it via the Contact page. Because look: a damn good lunch in the dark raw dawn of 2012 is just what we'll both be needing. In the meantime, though ... don't go crackers, but pull as many as you can – and do have the most gorgeously self-indulgent time: far too much of all things good. It may not make sense, but you know it makes you happy. Merry Christmas!

All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk and you can get in touch via the Contact page.



The Feng Shang Princess in Primrose Hill earned eight stars



fruit-filled vintages – and there are also offers galore to take advantage of

but it's laden with International Wine Challenge awards, so go for it.

And at M&S, there's another fine Crozes-Hermitage – Domaine Collonge from Jaboulet (£13).

If you buy but don't drink now, don't worry. Most of these wines have a long and happy life ahead of them.

There are so many offers around at the moment that it's difficult to keep pace, let alone choose. But Christmas can be a good moment to buy classics – Co-op premium

stores, for example, have £5 discounts on stylish premium wines from France, Australia and New Zealand (premium stores only – which include Camden High Street, Kentish Town Road and Archway).

There is £2 off M&S's excellent and already well-priced Chablis 2008, La Chablisienne (now £9). If there's none left, don't hesitate to spend £15 on the extra complexity and depth of the organic Chablis Jean-Marc Brocard 2008. Another rec-

ommendation to help reach the six-bottle 10 per cent discount is the excellent, versatile and very approachable Macon-Villages Uchizy 2010, £10.

Tempting

At Jeroboams, there are some very good by-the-case reductions on a range of old and new world wines, including – just one tempting example – the fine wines from Moss Wood in Margaret River, Western Australia.

From Waitrose, three di-

verse bottles which I've particularly enjoyed and haven't had the opportunity to fit into earlier columns. There can't be a better party wine than Vignale Valpolicella 2010 (£5) – juicy cherries with spicy notes and at the lower end of the normal alcohol range. For a great new world take on classic dessert wine, try Seifried Sweet Agnes riesling 2010 (half-bottle, £14) from New Zealand – perfumed, intense and fruit-rich yet with riesling's trademark acidity keeping

everything from cloying. It's great too with stilton or foie gras. Or be traditional with Blandy's Alvada five-year-old Madeira (50cl, £13), where again wonderful acidity balances the caramel fruit.

Finally, a wine to sip once all the eating and clearing up is over: Delaforce Quanta da Corte 1991 (Majestic, £18), a single estate port which has aged with wonderfully spicy elegance, astonishingly fresh. Happy festive season!



A great dessert wine, left, and, above, a versatile white