

My tortured sole causes a row with the blinking manager

Was it a happy birthday for our reviewer? Not following his outing to a Marylebone fish restaurant

The publisher of my forthcoming novel (September – can you wait?) is the oh-so-cool and meltingly trendy Quercus, a proper independent literary house which has made millions from Stieg Larsson's books called things like *The Girl With The Stick-On Tattoo* – and out of this largesse they are punctilious in siphoning off for me the very occasional ten shilling postal order. Anyway, I only mention this because they are based in a very spiffy building in Baker Street that is so vast and marble-clad and fronted by beautiful women in black clothes and red lipstick that you quite expect to run into Dr No or somebody, but so far it's only been my editor. And when our minds turn – as mine habitually will – to thoughts of luncheon, I frequently find myself returning to Le Relais de Venise in Marylebone Lane, which I reviewed very favourably a year or so ago. The great joy of the place, if you happen to be an off-duty restaurant critic, is the fact that there is no menu. Oh bliss! They simply serve very tender sliced sirloin with a secret and yummy sauce, perfect fries, dressed salad and very reasonably priced claret – all served efficiently by charming French girls who are constantly smiling.

Well on one of those recent unseasonably warm and sunny days, I found myself with my wife once again in Marylebone and fancied something different. FishWorks prides itself upon being fronted by an actual and very attractive wet fishmonger which receives daily deliveries from Brixham's fleet. So you can buy fresh fish to take home, or you can squeeze past the marble counters gaudily alive with shimmer and gleam, and enter the long and narrow restaurant behind, leaving them to do all the work for you. Appealing idea, no?

We were shown to a table right at the back (this often happens to me – I think they imagine it's somehow safer) and it was pleasant to be next to an open sash window painted the very same kingfisher blue of the vibrant exterior. The décor is deliberately 'seaside simple' – white walls with the occasional picture of a trawler, blackboards with the day's specials, tables made up of oak decking ... and, rather bizarrely for a 100 per cent fish restaurant, displays of old and pricey Bordeaux. Waiters and waitresses are in black waistcoats, white shirts and sea-green ties: terribly neat and sweet. I ordered a bottle of pink Prosecco, and was determined upon having the grilled Dover sole. Well it was my birthday – another bloody year older: but, no, pity me not – it's a relief to finally have put my 20s behind me, to be perfectly frank with you. The Dover sole appeared on the menu without a price, 'priced by weight' it said, which was fairly scary. Anyway, the waiter brought along a fine large example for me to survey and said it would cost "around £31". With no accompaniment. This is £1.50 more than J. Sheekey charges – London's finest fish restaurant, serving London's finest Dover sole. I said okay.

But before all that my wife was having crisp fried calamari with a saffron aioli



■ Still waiting to hear from Head Office – Joseph outside FishWorks

and I – having toyed with whitebait and rejecting that on the grounds that here was simply too much food with the massive sole to come – settled for grilled south coast scallops with garlic butter and breadcrumbs. These came very prettily presented in their shells – just three, rather small, with coral attached (many like this: I don't) and set off well by the crunchy green of the garlic ... which was sick-makingly swimming in butter. The scallops were fine, if a little overdone. My wife's calamari were very good indeed – light, not too chewy and crisply battered, the sauce quite subtle. And the Prosecco was a revelation – on a par with Billecart-Salmon rose champagne, though at £31 instead of maybe £90. So we sipped at that, while shouting at one another – not a row, no, no – simply the acoustics. It's a very loud place – and particularly so if you have three Frenchwomen right next to you, all of whom were speaking French at exactly the same time. The English they had they reserved for the waiter: "Yes, please, thank you" and "No, please, thank you." Alors.

Pitiful mess

My wife's Newlyn brill steak with creamy leek and chervil then arrived, closely followed by my Dover sole ... which looked very much smaller now, and was still on the bone, with head: I hadn't been offered the option, which I have never before known. A waitress looked rather startled when I asked for it to be off the bone, though whisked it away. My wife was greatly enjoying the brill: it was indeed a fine thick tranche, cooked just so (though sick-makingly swimming in butter) and the creamy leek sauce was a perfect accompaniment. Our sides of new potatoes (sick-makingly swimming, etc, etc) wilted spinach and green salad were perfectly all right. I know this because I was disconsolately eating them, in lieu of a fish. And then the sole returned: during its absence it had been set upon by an energetic war party of Red Indians with frenetic tomahawks, and much firewater in their bellies: what a pitiful mess ... oh, what carnage – and this to the prince among fish! And by now it looked tiny, was cold ... and (this was meant to be grilled, remember) sick-makingly swim-

ming in butter ...! I summoned the waiter. "This sole," I said, "is way overcooked. You could spread it on a piece of toast. It is cold. And it is meant to be grilled – this is a la meuniere." He stared. And then he said: "That's the way we do it." Uh-huh. So I requested the manager. Who came, after one hell of a while. And he said: "That's the way we do it." No apology, no offer of a replacement, nothing: I was the only thing here not being sick-makingly buttered up. So I ate the few bits of by now stone cold fish, circumventing the congealed rivulets. Wishing to God I'd ordered the bloody whitebait. Or gone to J. Sheekey.

We were leaving now. I gave the 'manager' my *Ham&High* restaurant critic card (why should I be the only one to suffer?) He blinked. He left. He returned. He offered free pudding ...! I declined. I paid the £120 bill. And now get this: he said he was sending my card along with my comments to Head Office. And then I'm rather afraid I lost my temper – which is a thing, in restaurants, I never do. I said to him quite sharply that it had nothing to do with Head Office. "Head Office is elsewhere, you are here – that's why managers are hired: to deal with things in the restaurant." He blinked. Give him his due – he was a dab hand at blinking, if nothing else.

So there it was. And have I heard so much as a dicky bird from Head Office? Of course I bloody haven't. Because, you see, that's the way they do it. That's how FishWorks works.

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

Factfile

- **FishWorks**
89 Marylebone High Street, W1
Tel: 020 7935 9796
- Open seven days, noon-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★
- Service: ★★★★★
- The Feeling: ★★★★★
- Cost: Far too much. You'd be best off with their fish and chips at £8.99. Or going to J. Sheekey.



We're spoilt for choice with two major events held on the same day

What's in your diary for Sunday, May 20? How about a date with a charmingly modest Englishman or a crazy Frenchwoman? Plus the chance to talk to a host of other intriguing, interesting, motivated people? And opportunities to taste wines so different that you'll remember them long after their deeply-lingering flavours have finally faded?

That day there will be two unusual and rather special events opening their doors to wine-loving Londoners: the Real Wine Fair, masterminded by Doug Wregg, importer of extraordinary organic, biodynamic and natural wines through Les Caves de Pyrene, and the RAW artisan wine fair instigated by Isabelle Legeron, a Master of Wine whose enthusiasm for natural wine explodes through a rainbow of activities from working with Michelin-starred restaurants to presenting a wine programme broadcast to 117 different countries.

Last year the two co-operated to bring the UK's first natural wine fair to the draughty surroundings of Borough Market; this year they have gone their separate ways, offering indoor venues in Holborn and Spitalfields.

The split, both insist, is not acrimonious, simply that their approaches are diverging and a single event with more than 330 winemakers represented would be totally overwhelming. Sharing the same day is less sensible, but it wasn't a random choice: the London International Wine Fair runs from May 22 to 24, and trade days at the two fairs follow the Sunday consumer openings in the hope that professionals will grab wine discovery opportunities totally at odds to the LIWF's big-brand commercial emphasis.

Perhaps it's significant that both events avoid the word "natural" in their titles – that's currently being used more and more in a derogatory sense, which is a shame. After all, wine should be a natural product, and all too often it is not. A little smoothing of the rough edges with technology and chemistry can be a good thing, but manipulation on the scale now possible is surely to be abhorred.

Eloquent

Let Wregg sum up his title choice: "Real wine refers warmly to wine that is made by small, individual growers, wine that smells and tastes of the vintage and the terroir, that isn't afraid to be different, that is made with physical commitment rather than chemical intervention."

Given the opportunity, he'll continue to eloquent length – which you'll find out on the event website or that of Les Caves (see below). But for now let's stick to the facts which should tempt you to Holborn. More than 170 growers and winemakers will be there, with 600-plus wines. Masterclass speakers include Monty Waldin, on the meaning of biodynamic life. Alongside nibbles from Melrose and Morgan and other fine food mongers there will be beer from Camden Town Brewery and spirits from Highgate's Sacred microdistillery.

And the tasting experience itself will be extraordinary, as Wregg tempts: "Fancy being initiated into Georgian drinking rituals? Or trying a Chilean amphora wine? Does the idea of drinking a natural wine poured from a sculpted ceramic egg to the sound of ambient larrikin music grab you?" There's more, much more.

Also, throughout May, the associated Real Wine Month continues at restaurants, pubs and wine retailers – more than 130 addresses in London.

RAW, says Legeron, "is about truth, authenticity and frank wine talking, but most of all it's about showcasing really good wine". It too will have talks – biodynamic guru Nicolas Joly is one speaker – and will have an even broader wine world spread among its 180 participants.

The Real Wine Fair is at Victoria House, off Southampton Row; RAW is at the Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane. Both fairs have pop-up wine shops, are open 10am-6pm, advance tickets £20.

■ See www.therealwinefair.com and www.rawfair.com. More background on www.lescaves.co.uk and www.thatscrazyfrenchwoman.com.