

And now for something completely different

As any fudie fule kno, there is more to a restaurant than merely the menu. I know of quite a few inveterate diners who are constantly amazed at themselves for habitually returning to their 'favourite' restaurant, despite the fact that they really don't very much care for the food. The draw is, they will explain, that it's walkable. They know us there. We always get a good welcome. They give us the table we like. It's very good value. You don't have to dress up (a bit of a laugh, this one, though. Dress up? When did you last see anyone dressed up in a restaurant? Or at the opera, even? Hell, I went to a funeral not that long ago and most of the mourners looked like they had spent the morning lagging the loft and were now intending an energetic afternoon devoted to ridding the scullery of cockroaches). But you see what I mean: the food, it doesn't get a mention. The Holy Grail, of course, is if you can combine all the comfort and familiarity of a well-liked restaurant with food and service that are superlative. It's rare, of course – and once you've tasted it, it's hard to walk away.

Which is why, whenever Michael Palin and myself get together for an occasional dinner, we tend to go to a rather wonderful West End restaurant: Wiltons. As Michael says of the place – and dotingly, as if cooing over a much-loved infant – “Ah – Wiltons. Yes indeed. It is another country.” How true. Or maybe it is this country, actually – but simply the way it used to be and is, alas, no longer. All Wiltons lacks is the convenience of being local. Now not too long ago, I

attended a birthday dinner at Villa Bianca and was mightily impressed. There were maybe 30 of us upstairs and the ground-floor restaurant was packed. Uh-oh, I thought, this is going to severely overtax the kitchen – here looms overload. But the food was truly impressive. The service was slow to the point of abject surrender – but hey, it was a birthday dinner, so no one was in too much of a hurry. I put the idea to Michael, and he was keen. “Great. I can walk up the hill ... and then afterwards, I can fall back down it again.”

There is much to recommend Villa Bianca – its pretty exterior, the soberly suited proprietor and very professional maitre d', both of whom know how to welcome you. The smartly tricked out staff ... and then there are the leather chairs–like bucket seats out of an E-Type – they grip your kidneys so terribly comfortably.

Michael, as usual, has been very busy indeed. He is publishing his second novel this month – entitled *The Truth*, which I can very much recommend – and actually, next week I'm talking to him about it at an event at Foyles (see bottom of this column for details). This year he has also been preparing an autumn treat for all the fans of his television travel series, having spent ages in Brazil – three-and-a-half week chunks and then home again for a bit of R&R before going back to do some more. It's now all in the can, and he has just finished the final section of the accompanying book. The attraction of Brazil was that he had never been there before. “I get asked to do England and France quite a lot ... but then I couldn't capture the wonder of seeing a place for the first time.” And it's that palpable wonder, of course, that all we viewers love so much.



■ Joseph with Michael Palin at Villa Bianca

There were specials on, in addition to the pretty extensive menu. Michael was all set to kick off with the carpaccio of tuna, but then he heard the waitress talking about fritto misto, so he went for that instead. This was a more than generous platter of crisply fried and golden salmon, calamari, prawn, sole ... and one or two others as well, I think. “Too many different fish, really,” he said. “Very good – but all a bit similar.” Well, you get that with frying, of course. My prosciutto was dry and very fine, the rocket was rocket and the baby mozzarella as disconcerting in the mouth as I always find it: I simply don't get mozzarella, to be honest with you. I asked Michael if he'd eaten anywhere wonderful lately. “Well, I was overnight for something trivial in the Edward VII Hospital ... and the food there was absolutely astonishing, best I've had in ages. Then there was Dada,

in Brazil.” Dada, as it turns out, is a red-hot mama who runs a restaurant close to the Copacabana beach. “She told me that every time she cooks, she has an orgasm. I said to her, ‘Goodness, you must be absolutely exhausted’ ...”

Ship's decanter

We had a glass of Orvieto with the starters – quite flinty in a good way – and moved on to Barolo with the mains. We could have had a Chateau Petrus 1987 at £1,900, but my feeling about that was oh God, no, please not again ...! Let's for once have something different. The Barolo was deep, mellow and very lovely – and it came in a ship's decanter with a black napkin draped around its neck, this making it look a damn sight smarter than anyone I saw at that funeral.

Michael had ordered Dutch calf's liver (why Dutch? Dunno) in butter and

sage with sweet potatoes, and I was having veal Milaneese. The zucchini fritti are usually a very good bet here, but these were rather soggy, I'm afraid. Michael enjoyed the puréed sweet potato, but the liver – “Mmm, it's a bit thin. It's a bit bland. It's actually a bit like eating a flannel. I blame the Dutch. It does taste a bit Dutch, you know.” “Dutch?” I queried. “Yes. You know, rather flat. Unflamboyant, I'd call it.” My escalope was tender and perfectly breadcrumbed, although there wasn't a great deal of flavour to it, a small stack of chips adding little. I really ought to have ordered some tagliatelle bolognese to give it oomph, but I didn't.

I asked if there was anything new on the Python front, knowing that there always is. “There's an app,” he said, drawing out his smartphone. “Do you know what an app is?” This is not such an unusual question among people of a certain age – it's

the modern equivalent of asking if you've ever seen colour television. Anyway, for £1.99 you get a Monty Python sketch, see – and when you shake the phone, you get another. And so on into eternity. It took an awful lot of shakes to find a sketch with Michael Palin in it, but we managed eventually.

His ice cream came in a sundae glass on an artfully origami'd black napkin that was dusted with cocaine. Or it might have been icing sugar. On the menu was “chocolate soufflé (Luke Warm)”. And I thought, who's he? But what arrived was a fondant. Quite nicely done, and properly oozing (not Luke Warm but actually Red Hot, in the manner of orgasmic Dada) ... but not a soufflé, you see. And outside, in the cool of Perrin's Court, Michael was struggling with his phone. He couldn't get the bloody app to stop, it was going on into eternity. But he managed – and then he fell back down the hill, as I set to falling up it.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk. Joseph Connolly will be talking to Michael Palin at Foyles, Charing Cross Road, at 6.30pm on Tuesday July 3. Tickets are free from events@foyles.co.uk

FACTFILE

- **VILLA BIANCA**
1 Perrin's Court, NW3
Tel: 020 7435 3131
- Open Mon-Sat noon-2.30pm, 6.30pm-11.30pm. Sun noon-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Yes well, it's always more expensive than you think it's going to be. About £125 for three courses for two with wine.



Wine Liz Sagues



Tasting events offer wine enthusiasts valuable opportunities for trying before buying

I made a mistake the other day. I bought six bottles of a wine I don't like. It's not that this dark, somewhat sweet Spanish red is faulty, it just happens to be of a style which I simply don't enjoy.

Why did I buy it? The home cellar was running low and I was enticed by the wine's description, given on a very reputable website. When I tasted it, I couldn't complain – there was no misdescription, the website's words had simply fuelled my anticipation that the combination of grape variety, location and winemaker would produce something I'd love to drink.

The experience has taught me a lesson (though fortunately not a very expensive one – at £6 a bottle, after a seasonal discount, the wine is a bargain for anyone who

does like the style). In future, I'll try before I'm tempted to key in the credit card details.

But it doesn't always have to be like that. At The Wine Society's last press tasting, I almost gave up writing my own notes on the wines, so very perfect were those the society provided. It's not only wine writers who get the chance to check them out – there are regular tasting events for members round the country. The next one in London on Monday has the summery theme of the Loire and Beaujolais. (check on www.thewinesociety.com to see if any tickets are left).

But also, the society's six buyers do their own tasting of their colleagues' choices, in a highly-competitive blind sampling, to assess the champions in the 1,200-

plus list of bottles offered to members. This year's top 45, from a total of 591 wines tasted, include 11 bottles under £7 and 16 more between £7 and £10.

They range through much of the wine world and just about every wine style from champagne to sherry, aromatic whites to serious reds. I know I'd happily award a gold rosette to the one I've just tried, Cote Roannaise Vieilles Vignes 2011 (£7.95), a perfect summer red from the far southeast of the Loire Valley, made from the gamay grape better known in Beaujolais. “Brimming with bright cherry fruit” is the apt summary.

Mixed cases featuring the champions are on offer until July 15, stocks permitting.

If Monday isn't free, how about

Tuesday, when The Spectator Wine Fair is held at the magazine's base close to St James's Park? Wines from excellent independent merchants (Tanners, Yapp Brothers, Corney & Barrow and more) will be open and the £10 ticket cost is repaid with a £10 voucher against a case of wine bought on the day. There are afternoon and evening sessions; click on Events at www.spectator.co.uk to check ticket availability.

If both of next week's tastings are sold out and you enjoyed the column on English wines two weeks ago, put this date in your diary: September 15. You'll need to travel further, to a pleasant and very well-served part of Surrey, where the Haslemere WineFest is part of the town's food festival.

The WineFest is celebrating wines from England's three main vine-growing counties, Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire, and the very best names will have bottles open. Tickets are a bargain at £10 and profits will go to charity. Register your interest now on www.wine-navigator.com to be first in the long line for tickets.

Some more suggestions for continuing the tasting experience: Majestic branches offer lots of opportunities, ranging up from anytime in-store samplings (bottles from the excellent range of Provence rosés will be open July 22-28), and such local merchants as Jeroboams run regular sessions. And there's always lots going on at the Wine and Spirit Education Trust in Southwark. See www.wsetschool.com for details.