

A heart to heart with an eminent cardiologist

Medical luminary Jullien Gaer regales our reviewer with tales of Princess Diana, the French College of Surgeons and what makes us all tick

I always think that it's a terribly good thing that you don't actually have to remember to breathe, nor to remind your blood to keep on pumping about, because I feel sure that I'd be bound to forget – and then just look at what a mess you're in. But the heart, well – in common with Ol' Man River, it just goes rolling along. Thumpety-thump, ba-boom, ba-boom, day and night, on and on ... until, of course, it doesn't. And if any of you ever suffer problems in that area – though before your bucket is kicked, prior to your cashing in your chips at the great casino in the sky – you would be fortunate indeed to consult my chum and guest for lunch (whom, I might add, I know but socially). Jullien Gaer is an extremely eminent cardiologist ... but more than that: at the famous Harefield Hospital, he has conducted transplants. I was suitably agog, and asked how many. "Oh, a few," he said, in his usual modest manner. Turns out it could be hundreds.

Now cast your mind back to when the Blessed St Diana of Wales was generally on the front pages for some or other reason. Do you remember that she allegedly cherished a passion for Magdi Yacoub, the legendary Egyptian heart specialist? And do you further recall that she broke all the rules by actually appearing in the operating theatre covered in jewellery? Well Jullien remembers it very well indeed – because it was he who was the surgeon operating at the time. "She fronted one of our charities. I had actually wanted Princess Anne – thought she would have been more serious. Harefield is a bit of a schlep



■ Joseph Connolly with Jullien Gaer at Villandry in Great Portland Street

Picture: Polly Hancock

from Kensington Palace, but there she was. At 2am." Further rumours abounded at the time that it was not in fact Yacoub for whom the princess yearned, but his junior. Well who knows? And who could actually care?

Currently, Jullien is "off games", as he puts it, through having taken a terrible tumble when riding his bike: he hit a speed bump – not in Hammersmith, where he lives, but in a sleepy lane in Wiltshire, where he also has a place. He broke a shoulder and a wrist, but he is returning to the theatre in late August. "I'm wondering whether to tell my patient. You know, say that this is the first time I've done this in simply ages. Maybe better not. But I've missed it all, I must say. It'll be good to be

up to my elbows again. And I've missed the bike as well. But then I am just an obese middle-aged man who likes wearing Lycra."

Cavernous

So, my having delved to the very heart of the matter, we set to perusing the menu at Villandry, a bewilderingly cavernous institution in Great Portland Street. There is a deli, a bakery, a café, a larger café, a bar ... and finally the restaurant. White walls, rather grubby – white tablecloths, not grubby at all. There is a tall wall of shelves with a smattering of not much: some old toffee tins, a copper kettle, couple of bottles ... and anything else that the skip had to offer. The floor is stained and pitted concrete and seemingly asphalt, rather as I im-

agine Arthur Daley's car lot to have been: curious, though, in a restaurant. There are beaten copper wall sconces serving to illuminate only themselves. The wine list is decent, though given over to rather silly whimsy: their prosecco is "a jaunty tonic of fruit and ticklish bubbles".

So Jullien was having a shallot tarte tatin – which sounded an interesting idea – topped with goat cheese, and I was going for carpaccio with grana padano. "The pastry is very soggy," he said, "but the onion is nicely sweet and well caramelised. Trouble is, it isn't warm as it should be, and so the cheese is just sitting there. The leaves are very limp ..." My carpaccio was very good, so thin and tender that it softly tore. Too much rocket, not

nearly enough flaked cheese.

Jullien likes to cook (mostly Italian) and eats out quite a bit, favouring either Japanese restaurants or else those featuring the 'nose-to-tail' approach, most notably St John and Mark Hix. "I actually want to go on a charcuterie course – to render a pig into its component parts." And yes, he's heard all the butcher and sawbones gags, but there is a true connection. "In France, the College of Surgeons is allied to the guild of Paris butchers. They meet and swap notes. You say pancreas, we say sweetbreads."

Meat and bone

Next he was having chori-zo-crust hake with spinach, white beans and tomatoes, and I – cleaving to the theme of meat and bone – ordered lamb cutlets with sprouting broccoli, broad beans and confit of tomato. The three thin cutlets were extremely well seasoned, but not at all pink as I had requested, and generally rather mean. The vegetables were pretty good, although the broccoli lacked crunch, and the chips that we were sharing were truly outstanding: the highlight of the meal, actually, which is not ideal. The hake – a thickish tranche, but small – this too was overcooked, though Jullien enjoyed the tangy crusting and the creaminess of the borlotti beans. And then we went back to snaffling the chips.

I wondered whether he had from childhood known that he was destined for the medical profession. "Not really, my father was a Romanian refugee from a concentration camp, and although my mother is English and not Jewish, I think it must have been at the back of my mind: well ... they'll always need doctors! I never fancied being a GP, though. Who I real-

ly wanted to be, of course, was Hawkeye in *M*A*S*H*."

OK, so tell me, I said, hearts – what's good, what's bad? "Well, tobacco is worst. High blood pressure; drink is good – but in moderation, and that's the tricky part." And cholesterol? "Bad. That's bad." And then we ordered two enormous creamy puddings: for him, a summer berry coupe – a great knickerbocker glory of a thing with raspberry sorbet, strawberry and vanilla ice cream, all sorts of berries and crushed meringue. And I, after a single mouthful, abandoned my apricot tart: the pastry not fresh, laughably stodgy and burnt at the edges, the apricot caught, the quenelle of whipped cream sourish. The waiter noticed this, and removed it from the bill: not really the point though, is it?

We had sat there for more than three hours. I sometimes wonder, you know, whether it's right and fitting that I should condemn anyone at all to so prolonged a dose of my company – but at least in this instance I can report that the condemned man ate a hearty meal.

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

FACTFILE

- **VILLANDRY**
170 Great Portland Street, W1
- Tel: 020 7631 3131
- Open seven days a week: you can eat somewhere all the time, though restaurant just for lunch and dinner.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: About £110 for three course meal for two with wine, which, for what it is, is rather too much.

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balancing act and an exceptionally restrained New Zealander

acle d'équilibre." Has all this something to do with the Fouassier family's biodynamic vineyard practices? I don't know, but the result is memorable. Interestingly, they recommend drinking the wine with food at a slightly higher temperature than that suggested for preliminary tasting – flavours do change.

Cape Crest (Majestic, £16 if you buy at least two still New Zealand wines) shows its Kiwi origins, but in an unusual, restrained, almost European way, its initial complex mix of tropical fruit and herbaceous scents expanding elegantly in the mouth. There is also splen-

d did balanced freshness, which broadens its food compatibility. A touch of semillon and sauvignon gris join the sauvignon blanc and while all are three-barrel fermented – separately – the oak is barely discernible.

Zestiness

Actually rather more Kiwi in character is Aconcagua Costa (Wine Rack £9, Waitrose £12), which has a bold but tempting tropical-fruited zestiness – a wine with real character, unlike some dilute and boring cheaper Chilean examples I've experienced recently. It develops a distinct

sweet edge with food, but is still a very pleasant glassful.

We paired the wines with very sauvignon blanc-friendly food: a salad of lettuce with serrano ham, warm olive-oil sweated peas and spring onions and lemon in the dressing, then ratatouille and finally a mature Sussex goat crottin. The favourites sailed through all parts of the test – an arm-in-arm experience. The crottin was the biggest challenge, tangy and sharp. But the partnerships were still friendly.

There should be honorable mentions, too, for two of the other wines we tried, both

from Tesco: Domaine de Bel Air Cuvée des Acoins Pouilly Fumé 2011 (£15) which has appealing gooseberry flavours and a delicate crispness, and Rustenberg sauvignon-char-donnay 2011 (£10), with a pleasant peachy ripeness.

Conclusions after the last waltz indicated the worth of moving up market just a bit when buying sauvignon. There is no lack of choice, so why not go dancing round the world – for example, at Majestic there's 20 per cent off any two Chilean or New Zealand sauvignons, and Waitrose currently has some decent discounts.



■ The Errazuriz Costa vineyard in the Aconcagua Valley