



Tale of two co-ops has happy end

Investing in modern equipment helped one survive, while other has been reborn as a hotel

They are barely five miles apart; they were established within a year of each other, almost nine decades ago; they both have, much more recently, faced huge economic pressures.

This is the story of two wine co-operatives, set deep in the vine-clad and wooded slopes which lead up to the French Pyrénées. But the current situation for each is very different.

Les Vignerons de Caramany survived the crisis. Always forward-thinking, in the 1960s they were among the first in Roussillon to sell their wine in bottles rather than bulk. Emphasis on quality plus investment in modern equipment (most recently a state-of-the-art destemming and grape-cleaning machine which proved its worth immediately in 2012's tricky vintage) has helped them retain and expand their market. Now there's a Caramany red in Marks and Spencer and an order is on its way to the co-operative's latest export destination, Japan.

The 50 Caramany vignerons



■ Vines of the flourishing Caramany co-operative

are delighted that two of their reds were selected for the Top 100 Languedoc-Roussillon wines showcased in London last month, and that one of them, the sunny, herb-laced Caramagnole Prestige 2011 (£10, M&S) also collected a bronze medal in this year's Decanter World Wine Awards.

Caramany is one of four villages whose wines form individual appellations, adding the village name to the broader Côtes du Roussillon Villages

designation. The rules are strict, for Caramany emphasising carignan (alongside always-present syrah and grenache), acknowledgement of centenarian vines which still yield consistent quality grapes in small, concentrated quantity.

At the Caramany cellar, all the carignan – plus more than half the syrah – is vinified by carbonic maceration, a whole-bunch fermentation which emphasises the fruit and flavour and gives a happy, approachable yet serious character to blends reinforced by other varieties, traditionally fermented. There is careful use of oak in the top cuvées, both white and red, but the expression of Caramany's granite-based soils and sun-soaked, windswept vines remains.

The vignerons are a welcoming group, working together to invite consumers to the two annual open-door sessions where food and music as well as wine turn the cellar into a 350-strong party place. They try, as well, to meet customers at events beyond their own home ground, at wine

shows and tastings. If they can convince more UK professionals to import their wines, the parties could move here – an altogether tempting prospect.

Along the road in the village of Bélesta, things didn't turn out so well, and the co-operative closed in 1995, its impressive building largely abandoned. But no longer. What has emerged out of economic catastrophe is a smart 40-bed hotel where the best rooms occupy the old concrete fermentation tanks. Not that dark, alcohol-heavy odours remain. These tanks have been totally transformed in a way no grape would ever recognise: light, spacious and with every human comfort.

Above the tanks, accessed by stairs and galleries, there are more rooms, each tastefully different.

Green theme

Riberach, as it is called from the old name of the village, is a talking-point place to stay, and its conference and event facilities are making the spectacular winding approach roads rather less quiet than they used to be. A feature is a natural pool, its water cleaned by plants rather than chemicals. Geothermal and photovoltaic installations continue the green theme.

There's a restaurant with stellar ambitions, too, with the emphasis on local products and a wine list which encompasses the region and stretches way beyond France. And wine is once more produced, through the co-operation of four friends, including Luc Richard and Karin Pühringer, the architects responsible for the building's renaissance. See more on www.riberach.com.

So, two co-operatives, two ways to survive – two stories with happy endings.

I hope you will have observed from the strapline above that this is not a review of Oslo Court – that unique and extraordinary restaurant nestling discreetly at the foot of a self-effacing block of flats in a leafy St John's Wood side street. Oslo Court, should you not know it, is a comfortingly old-fashioned restaurant which I have reviewed before with a large and well-priced menu full of all the things that sensible people actually want to eat: you won't find any concepts or Heston-style trickery here – this kitchen would as soon prepare something soupy as eat it. But there is every sort of meat and fish, treated traditionally. Generous portions are served at well-dressed tables by a professionally drilled battery of waiters. And just the other week during the second Ashes Test at Lord's, I had the great pleasure of being invited to lunch there again. It has become almost mandatory to be rather sniffy about Oslo Court – because it's pink and flouncy, because they often turn out the lights so that everyone immediately thinks they have been instantly struck blind (but only in order to wheel in a birthday cake, glimmering with candles ... and an hour later, probably do it again for another table). It's not fashionable, you see – not a cool and cutting-edge London happening hot and on-trend place with a vibe you could cut yourself on – and so let us all thank Christ for that.

View of play

I love going to Lord's – but I'm fortunate enough to do it in a rather civilised manner. My great MCC chum John Arthur has debenture seats, you see, so you don't have to queue from early in the morning as many members are compelled to, then to take pot luck in bagging a spot to park yourself. The view of play is unparalleled – and instead of lurching within Lord's itself, John has a table at Oslo Court permanently booked throughout all the Tests. Because although among the pretty dire



■ The natural pool at Riberach

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Joseph Connolly at Richoux in St John's Wood



Caught out near Lord's

It's simply not cricket to present our reviewer with such dismal fare

snacky places there is a restaurant in Lord's that is meant to be the bee's knees ... it isn't. Predictable corporate fare at laughably high prices (as are the drinks). So after a blissful hot and sunny morning of witnessing England pulverising the Australians, what could be nicer than lunch at Oslo Court? A whole lobster as a starter, and then after that I had ... ah but no, I shan't go on: because this isn't a review of Oslo Court, you see. And if you imagine it is, well then you're quite wrong. Because the truth is I was actually in St John's Wood twice that week, and on the first occasion I hadn't booked in anywhere, and was hungry

and frankly becoming rather desperate. Because NW8 – despite the pretty high glamour quotient of much of the residency – is, in complete contrast to Marylebone, by no means a gastronomic hot bed. Or, to put it another way, there's virtually nowhere decent to eat ... except for Oslo Court, which I'm not actually mentioning again. There's the New Inn, which is fine. The Rotisserie ... which is a rotisserie, though I have yet to visit. Harry Morgan – all right, but hardly a destination restaurant. The dreaded Café Rouge. That's about it. So in the end, I plumped for Richoux. Which, yes I know, is a rather chichi chainlet of

coffee and pastry houses, but it is also – I was gathering from the surprisingly large menu – targeted at ladies who lunch. Or are anyway reputed to, in between shopping.

So the lady who is my wife (and she lunches, all right – oh my Lord, does she like her lunches) and I – the token gent – sloped in there as a waitress was excitedly telling the couple before us that today they had on the menu chicken soup...! She broke off to excitedly to turn round and tell us that today on the menu they had chicken soup...! Which I know is something not much short of totemic around here, but still the news didn't rock

me to my core. The walls are pale, except where they are broken by panelling which is unpale. The floor is parquet. Pale. And the tables and chairs are even more unmemorable. On the wall there is a large black-and-white picture of The Beatles in their glorious 1964 heyday, which had been recently signed by Paul McCartney. Does that mean he comes here...? I mean, I know he lives very near Lord's, but still ... he surely doesn't come here...? Because, you see, I'm just about to tell you that it's really not at all good. So if Paul is reading this, please let me make it clear to him that in future he would be a great deal better off going to Oslo Court ... a restaurant, however, that I am not actually writing about.

Poor value

My wife's starter was avocado, tomato and buffalo mozzarella. Allegedly. In that the avocado was so hard you could have bounced it off the wall, the tomato was a sliced tomato and the mozzarella could well have passed muster as a Polycell product much esteemed by the DIY enthusiast and guaranteed to prevent any trace whatever of bathroom seepage. I had smoked Scottish salmon (therefore not Scotch, which is what you should always be looking for) which was all right in a disagreeably pale, wet and flabby sort of a way, served with thick plain bread and a vile little foil-wrapped squidge of salted butter – and very poor value at £12.50. Wine was a pleasant Veronese rose at a very reasonable £17.50: that was glugged down while we waited to see whether the mains might be an improvement. And guess what, ladies and gentlemen who lunch...? The mains were not an improvement. Chicken Siciliana for my wife: a breast, grilled to the point where although it might well have served admirably to cope with any pencil erasures in your exercise book, still was nothing you might actually consider putting in your mouth. I'm not even sure it was actually a breast, you know: might easily have been an implant. With this came a wetness of surrendered spinach, mushrooms that had just come off

the phone to the Samaritans ... and gratin potato that was virtually an indictable offence: microwaved yellow gloop overlaid by an ochre gunge concealing a few shreds of potato too beaten down and cowering to even dare to make their presence known.

I had the Richoux club sandwich. No – I don't know why either. And it was the very worst club sandwich I have ever had in my life by some considerable margin (as well as costing £11.95). More crust than toast (cold, of course) the same desiccated latex chicken (cold, of course), more of the pneumatic avocado, a suspicion of bacon (cold, of course) and the intrusion of a bit of hard-boiled egg. And – by way of rounding off such bounty – a scattering of industrial crisps that were thoroughly stale. Oh joy. My wife then trudged through baked apple pie whose consistency was as cake, the pastry practically melted by its zapping ... and after that finally we were free to scamper back out to the sunshine. And I said to my wife, "Next time, we'll ring up Paul McCartney and we all can go to Oslo Court." Which I'm not going to talk about any more for the simple reason – as I hope after all this time I have managed to make clear – that this isn't a review of Oslo Court.

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *England's Lane*, is published by Quercus as a hardback and ebook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

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