



# Southern tour from afar

Trade event plugged Argentinan, Chilean and South African wines

Two weeks ago I went on a whistle-stop tour of three of the southern hemisphere's major wine-producing countries – Argentina, Chile and South Africa. But I actually travelled no further out of central London than the Olympia exhibition centre.

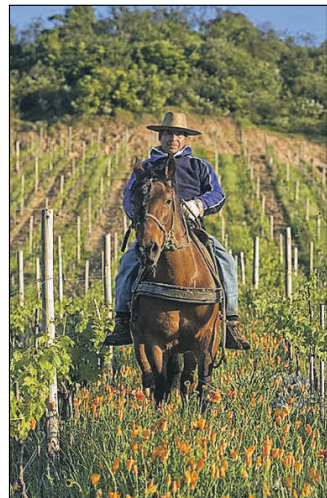
The three “beautiful south” nations combined their annual trade and press wine tastings into a single event. Huge, certainly, and somewhat intimidating in its scale, but a fascinating overview of what's happening there.

I can't begin to give you a comprehensive picture – 300-plus exhibitors, something over 3,000 wines, plus themed line-ups of everything from regional cabernet to fair trade wines and the bottled fruit of old vines. No one could cover that lot, even being there for all 16 hours (over two days) that the tasting was open.

But let me share just a few impressions the event left with me. First, the dichotomy that is South Africa.

If there's one country that divides my opinion of its wine, it has to be South Africa. There are many great whites; there are far too many – to my palate at least – undrinkable reds. But exceptions to the latter do exist. So thank you, Gordon (one of the small team responsible for the very well-selected Stone, Vine and Sun list), for pointing me in the direction of Nitada.

SVS is importing five of the excellent wines from this Cape farm whose vineyards, high above the Atlantic, overlook Robben Island. There's happy fizz The Matriarch (£14.50), neatly described as “breakfast



■ The flower-filled organic and biodynamic vineyards of Casa Lapostolle

champagne” by Nitada's Jacus Marais, two lovely whites – the semillon (£10.95) is particularly splendid and should get even better if you can resist drinking it immediately, and two reds. Of those, the fragrant, clean, pure-fruited bordeaux blend Calligraphy (£14.75) beguiles even my difficult tastebuds.

One of the themed tables I focused on displayed chardonnays over £10. Those I tasted from Argentina didn't tempt me particularly, while the South African star was Lourensford Winemaker's Selection 2012 (about £72 for a case of six, [www.finewineservices.co.uk](http://www.finewineservices.co.uk)). Chile's choice was generally enjoyable, especially Errazuriz Wild Ferment 2012 (£13.50-£15, [www.winedirect.co.uk](http://www.winedirect.co.uk), [www.robersonwine.com](http://www.robersonwine.com) – both still offer 2011 vintage).

And that brings me to a calmer, much more in-depth experience

earlier the same week, when Andrea León Iriate showed the wines of Casa Lapostolle to members of the Circle of Wine Writers, with the emphasis on how they age gracefully – back 14 years in the case of Cuvée Alexandre cabernet.

Happily, Andrea emphasised that the wines weren't made for American palates – despite the US being by far Lapostolle's largest export market. And the elegance, freshness and restrained oak of them all, from the long-lingering Cuvée Alexandre chardonnay to the top wine, perfumed and very stylish Clos Apalta, confirmed that. The reason is the French connection: Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle, of the Grand Marnier family, founded the estate in 1994, tempted by the old, dry-farmed vines of Apalta, and she still directs what goes on.

## Geese roam

The vineyards are farmed organically and biodynamically. “That's good for the earth, good for the people who work in the vineyard, and that's without considering the philosophy,” says Andrea. Two thousand geese roam through as part of the pest control, though they have to be limited to a few poorer rows as the grapes develop – they have a taste for the ripening fruit – and flowers blossom everywhere.

I've never before tasted such a range of older Chilean wines. It was an unexpectedly impressive experience.

Lots of Lapostolle wines go into restaurants here, but retailers include Majestic, M&S, [www.quaffwine.com](http://www.quaffwine.com), Handford Wines, Hailsham Cellars. Prices range from about £10 for the Casa range through to £55 for Clos Apalta, with Cuvée Alexandre good value at £12-£20.

## restaurant of the week

# In the country of the sombrero the roasted pepper is king

Joseph is underwhelmed by a new Mexican restaurant whose apparently extensive menu offers only variations on a very few themes

And so to Belsize Park: because it occurred to me, I haven't eaten here for quite a while. I rather like the wide-openness of the area – those unusually broad pavements that are such a godsend to the considerable number of eating places around here, and particularly during a summer such as we have just enjoyed: the outside tables are generally jammed. But the life of a restaurant critic is decidedly odd ... well, the life of any writer is pretty odd, actually, because when you are at home you are working, and when you're out, you're not. Except if you are a restaurant critic, of course, because then you go out in order to work, if you see what I mean. But I actually meant odd in that if you hit upon a place you really like, unlike a sane human being you are rarely afforded the pleasure of returning, because what with all of your absolutely favourite places and the endless necessity to keep on venturing into the new and

untried, there just aren't the eating hours in the day.

And I thought I'd done everywhere in Belsize Park: Chez Bob, a better-than-average all-rounder ... Chez Nous, an all-day so-so set-up, but extraordinary value. Then there is the Gourmet Burger, which is great, should you find yourself in a burger frame of mind. Weng Wah, a quality Chinese ... and then there is Thyme, merely the latest incarnation of the accursed space at the foot of the Premier Inn – that aggressively unpicturesque hotel atop a petrol station. Thyme I named last year as Hampstead's worst restaurant by quite some considerable distance, in that every single thing that I was very badly served proved to be quite literally uneatable. I must confess that I was mildly (very mildly) tempted to return in order to find out whether the quality of service had risen from quite laughably inept to maybe just about halfway competent, and if possibly one or two things dotted about the

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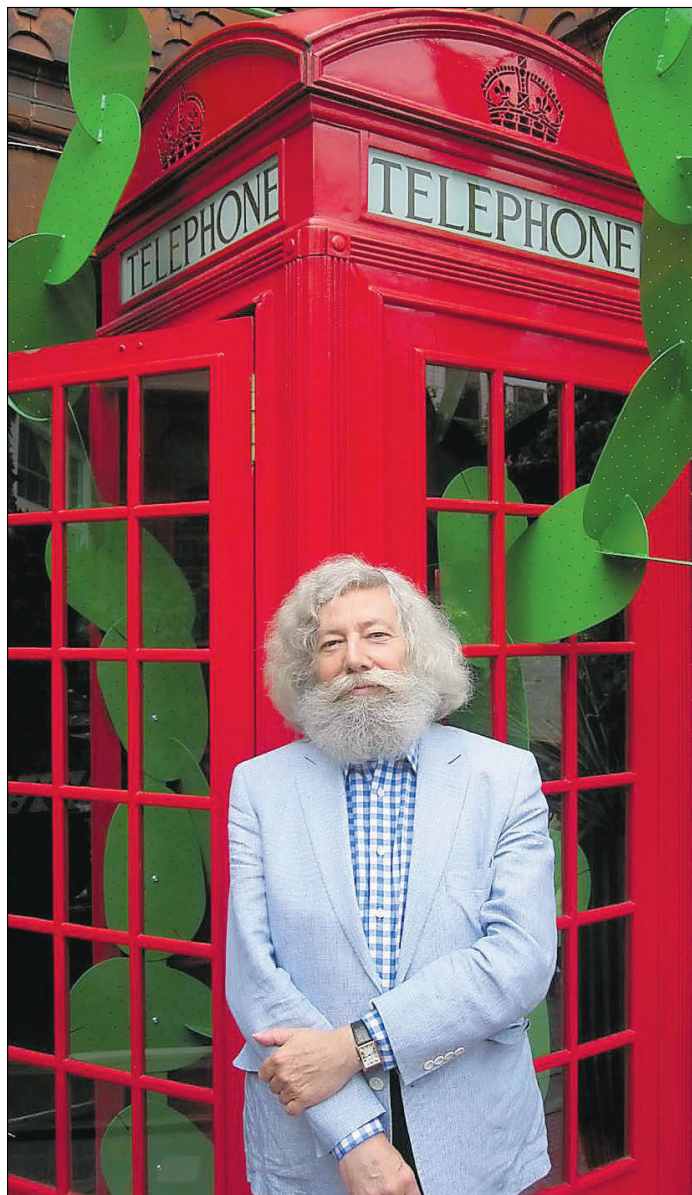
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## Joseph Connolly at Chimichanga



■ Joseph Connolly in the front of the restaurant's telephone box – with the addition of a metal cactus to tie in with the Mexican theme

menu could these days actually be consumed.

But if life is too short for anything, it is surely the return to a dreadful restaurant. So where,

then? Well, there's a new one in town: Chimichanga. I say new, but it is on the site of the old Ask, which had taken over from something else which not long

before had been something else again. I never went to Ask – very largely because it was called bloody "Ask" – but one of the last things they did was to plonk a beautifully restored old red telephone box bang next to the entrance. I remember when Belsize Park had several of these ... actually on the pavements, with telephones inside: how very quaintly literal we were, in the old days. Now Chimichanga is Mexican ... and so the designers who dickied up the place must have been fairly perplexed as to how to incorporate this ultimate symbol of Englishness into the general Sancho Panza theming of the thing. Answer? Commission a metal sort of pop art cactus to seemingly grow wild through the windowpanes, and hey presto! Red and green – colours of the Mexican flag: job done.

#### Red-and-green schtick

The terrace to the front is pleasing, in a raucous sort of way, and the interior is as surprisingly deep as Belsize premises often can be: 1950s décor – sub-Eames chairs, split plywood lampshades, a wall constructed seemingly out of Jenga blocks and a bit more of the red-and-green schtick with murals that didn't look especially Mexican to me ... but then what do I know about Mexico? Next to nothing. I once heard that the popular ballad *Feelings* was written by a Mexican dentist, obsessive about his work. Clint Eastwood as The Man With No Name would sometimes turn up in El Paso or somewhere and the villains would sneer at the gringo, shortly prior to their summary annihilation. Bank robbers in American films always seem desperate to escape to Mexico, while Mexicans remain eternally desperate to get out of the place. What else...? They have a very little dog called a Chihuahua, favoured by Paris Hilton and other noted sages. There once existed a very famous moustache called Zapata, with a man attached to it. Who wore a sombrero ... and there was a fair smattering of these in Chimichanga: bright red and blue velvet, heavily embroidered in gold. I would have tried one on, but

they all seemed to have been made for someone with a head the size of a Mexican jumping bean.

My wife and I sat at the rear in a kind of glass-roofed conservatory, sharing the space with largish ceramic Mexican donkeys and goats, together with a gorilla which somewhere along the line had taken a wrong turning. It was rather empty. It says: "Every day is Fiesta Day at Chimichanga!" ... but you could have fooled me. It also says that here is the "best Mexican food outside of Mexico" – not just an echoing hollow boast if ever there was one but also one of the funniest things I think I have ever read. The menu is gruesomely colourful and littered with pictures of deeply dubious men,

“It says that here is the 'best Mexican food outside of Mexico' – not just an echoing hollow boast if ever there was one but also one of the funniest things I think I have ever read

all affecting aforesaid moustaches and sombreros. Also there is food: a set lunch at £6.95 ... or an extensive carte which, on inspection, turns out to be not very divergent versions of the same damn few things. So I kicked off with piri piri prawns with the much less spicy sauce option, which was pretty bloody spicy: OK, though. And my wife had Mexican spring rolls: fried tortilla with chicken, salsa, roasted peppers and Jack cheese with guacamole. The tortilla was as pastry, and all right – but very, very dry. As was the chimichanga I followed with. I was going to have a burrito (which means little donkey – did you know?) but I thought I'd try the signature dish. Another fried tortilla, with more roasted peppers and Jack cheese (except

there wasn't any of that, when it came), this perked up by one of the filling options: pulled pork, which was sweet and pretty good. The black beans tasted of broad beans but were black, the rice sort of all right ... but God, it was stodgy, and dry, dry, dry.

#### Very gooeey sundae

My wife did a bit better with a small sea bass marinated in lime, coriander and garlic, with more, yet more, roasted bleeding peppers. Acceptable: no better. And then she went nuts with a very gooeey sundae in a knickerbocker glory vase comprising cinnamon ice cream (very good) with some very industrial caramel, chocolate and aerated cream. I had no pudding, though was tempted by the cheesecake that contained, according to the menu, "beanut putter". And that was it: that's what I got for having ventured south of the Hampstead border, down Mexico way. You come here, you start off hungry, you end up full. What can I say? And so – bloated – I staggered out. The Man With No Hope. And what I was thinking is this: in Mexico, you're rather stuck with it all, aren't you...? But in Belsize Park, you could do rather better.

■ Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *England's Lane*, is now available in paperback, hardback, ebook and unabridged audiobook. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## FACTFILE

- **CHIMICHANGA**  
216 Haverstock Hill, NW3  
Tel: 020 7433 0831
- Open Sunday-Thursdays, noon-11pm; Friday-Saturday noon-11.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
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- Cost: Set lunch from £6.95. Otherwise, about £50 for two with a drink apiece.

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