

## restaurant of the week

The Salt House is in Abbey Road, though no relation to *Sergeant Pepper*. There, you see: a restaurant in Abbey Road, and I get in a reference to The Beatles in the very first sentence. And talking of old music, do tell me please what all the following artistes have in common: George Gershwin, John Mayall, Culture Club, Status Quo, Cole Porter, Marty Wilde, the Manfreds, Michael Jackson, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jnr, the Moody Blues, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Tony Bennett, PJ Proby, the Searchers, UB40 and Neil Sedaka. Give up? Well I'll tell you: they are all, over the coming autumn and winter, performing "live" in London. And quite a few of them are still even breathing. But back, for now, to the St John's Wood eatery.

Here is another, yet one more, reclaimed corner boozer – though this one is particularly smart, sporting fluted Corinthian columns – even if they are painted in the grey that is mandatory for all reclaimed boozers – banks of happy flowers, generous outdoor space and seemingly their very own red telephone box. Out here would most certainly have been the spot to eat ... but alas, the rain was ceaseless (the meteorological office having warned us that "the risk of an isolated shower cannot be entirely ruled out", and it teemed all day). Inside we have

# Birds of a feather lunch together

Our reviewer is joined by fellow novelist Amy Bird for some literary chat and comfort food

old and scrubbed oak planks on the floor, the original Victorian bar with big brass beer pumps, a large circular medievalish pendant lantern alive with stunted church candles (battery driven). There are prints of fish and fowl, granny's mismatched dining chairs (nicely padded in Rexine, but still very cruelly upright, no doubt in order to encourage a decent deportment). Paintwork is distressed to the point of absolute mental breakdown – rather as if one weekend you had thought "I know! I'll strip it all back to the bare and beautiful golden pine!" ... and then after an hour or so of half-hearted scraping, you thought "Oh sod it, I'll have a beer." There is an unusually long wine list ranging from £16.75 to £87.50, and about 20 by the glass. A welcome jug of water is placed on the table, containing vertically sliced slivers of cucumber – perfectly fine if you actively prefer cucumber juice over water.

My guest was Amy Bird, whom I met soon after she was kind enough to post online a flattering review of a recent novel of mine: very obviously a woman of taste, and so very refined discernment. She is now a novelist in her own

right, having published online three psychological thrillers, the most recent of which – *Hide and Seek* – she started writing in April, having discovered that she was pregnant with her first child, and had it complete by August. Oh yes – and she is also a practising lawyer: Good Lord: how she had time for lunching, I'll never know. She has been married for 10 years to a lieutenant-commander in the Royal Navy, and although born in Hampstead, now is a resident of Finchley.

### Conservative mood

There is no set lunch, which is unusual these days, but a generous selection of eight starters and nine mains, to include a few oddities such as brawn,

salchichon (Spanish salami) and merguez (African sausage). Both of us, however, were in more conservative mood: it was a rainy Monday, and comfort food was required. Amy ordered courgette pithivier (puff pastry pie) with creamed leek, and I was having scallops with fennel and lemon. The little pie was nicely browned and glazed and really very pretty, as well as quite evidently enjoyed. My three large scallops were absolutely exemplary. To follow, Amy was having coriander chicken with baby gem and pink grapefruit, and I was drooling at the prospect of a sirloin steak with chimmichurri (a sort of garlic and parsley sauce) and a confit tomato (which is basically a tomato, grilled: or, as it turned

out, half of one). The steak came with chips, and Amy wanted some of her own: wise move – they were truly excellent, just exactly as you want them. And Amy, due to being preppers (her current cravings including cheese and nectarines, often on the same plate) was drinking "home-made lemonade". At £3 a glass. There is a moral here: if life hands you lemons, then make a bleeding fortune. Also on offer was "Harry Brompton's iced tea" – get this – £4.20...! I can only think that Harry Brompton, whoever he may be, must now enjoy tax exile status, somewhere lush. The chicken came covered in a froth of cream with a grapefruit undertone – which, on balance, Amy was all for ... "although the grapefruit can get a bit tangy". The chicken was yielding and tender – while the lettuce actually managed to be chewy. My steak was much closer to medium than the medium rare I had requested, but a good thick cut, juicy, and criss-crossed with charring.

The waitress came over at this point and asked whether I would like her to refill the water glasses – and I told her that I didn't think it necessary, as both were actually brimming. I asked Amy whether

“Paintwork is distressed to the point of mental breakdown – rather as if you had thought, 'I know! I'll strip it all back to the bare and beautiful pine!' and then after an hour or so of half-hearted scraping, you thought, 'Oh sod it, I'll have a beer'”

wine Liz Sagues



## Two books confirming that small is beautiful

Pair of mini guides are full to the brim with useful information

Even though this is a normal-length column, it's a minimalist one. You'll soon see why, as we start with *The World's Shortest Wine Book*. Author Simon Woods does qualify his title with an asterisk and a "maybe", but there can't be many challengers to this 60-page, smaller-than-A5 paperback.

Despite its brevity, it is a proper wine book, brim full of useful advice shared with the same informal cheerfulness that Simon spreads in face-to-face tastings or via his online videos.

I've known him for a long time. Our first encounter was when I was a rookie judge at the International Wine Challenge and a young but well-informed – and just a little hairier – enthusiast chaired

one of the panels I was on. Our first conversation (strange how you remember such things) was about how best to protect tasters' teeth from damage by acidity overload. We both have ours still, so the discussion must have been valuable.

Dental advice doesn't feature in *The World's Shortest Wine Book* – after all, it's directed at recreational drinkers, not wine professionals. But instead you should heed Simon's sensible suggestions on everything from buying decent glasses (no doubt whatsoever, they do make wine taste much better)

to seeking out a good, friendly wine merchant: "No half-price gimmicks, no vintages of the century, no bullshit, just decent wine and decent service."

He has a happy turn of phrase – warning, for example, against too-enthusiastic of swishing of wine in your mouth on a first date: "You might look a bit like a ruminating hamster." Even better, on food and wine mismatching, after a list of perfectly reasonable suggestions, is: "Ignore all of the above."

I hope I've given you a feeling of a great little book, useful

“He warns against too enthusiastically swishing wine in your mouth on a first date: 'You might look like a ruminating hamster'”

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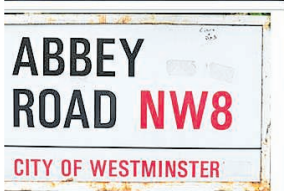
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## Joseph Connolly at The Salt House



■ Joseph Connolly and Amy Bird dined at The Salt House

Pictures: Polly Hancock

she had always known she had wanted to write... "Since I was about five. I started a novel when I was 13 – sent in part of it to HarperCollins, who were rather encouraging ... but I never finished it." Much later on, she endured the usual run-ins with agents and publishers that a novice must come to expect. "One said of my first novel, 'Change it all from the third person to the first person'. That took me three months. Then he said, 'Try it in the present tense'. Then he said he wasn't interested." Shades of a Beatle lyric there: "I can make it longer if you like the style, I can change it round and I wanna be a paperback writer." No folks: you can't escape the Fab Four, not this week you can't. The waitress came over at this point to look at our empty plates, and – leaving empty-handed – promised to return immediately to collect them: which, bizarrely, she promptly did. She then recommended "elderflower and gooseberry trifle" which sounded just too weird – and so we both had chocolate marquise with cherry. This would have been a very fine and unctuous ganache, had it not been fridge-cold ... while

the cherry sauce, though thick, glossy and dark, bore no discernible flavour whatever. Amy then told me how she had first discovered my novels. "We were living in the north at the time, and I picked up *This Is It* in South Shields library." Mm, I thought: *This Is It* – my second – is really very ripe in places. "How old were you...?" I asked her. "Oh – about 14. Maybe a bit younger." Cripes...

■ Joseph Connolly's *The A-Z of Eating Out* is published by Thames & Hudson. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [josephconnolly.co.uk](http://josephconnolly.co.uk)

## FACTFILE

- THE SALT HOUSE  
63 Abbey Road, NW8  
Tel: 020 7328 6626
- Open Monday-Thursday, 11am-11pm; Friday-Saturday, 11am-midnight. Sun 11am-10.30pm.
- Food:  
★★★★★☆☆
- Service:  
★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling:  
★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: About £90 for three-course meal for two, with modest drink.



■ Wine guide author Simon Woods

Courtesy: Decanter

– and fun – even if you know quite a lot about wine. Buy it at [simonwoods.com](http://simonwoods.com), £5 plus £1 postage and packing (p&p free on two copies or more). It's on Amazon as well, but buying direct is so much kinder.

Now for something even smaller, certainly the smallest wine list I've ever seen. Ben and Emma Robson, specialist importers of Italian wines,

don't make any sizeist claims for it, simply calling the 10cm by 15cm 20-page booklet the *Bat and Bottle Mini List 2014*.

It focuses on seven individual growers spread from the heel to the hip of Italy, with details of their wines, plus information on the three-level Bat and Bottle Wine Club which offers everyday drinking wines, bottles "rare and wonderful"

and underground offerings intended to be stashed away for future pleasure.

Ben, when he's not selling wine from the smallest county in England, can sometimes be found judging in the Decanter World Wine Awards or lecturing for the Wine & Spirit Education Trust. He has always been in the wine business, and Bat and Bottle owes its creation to an introduction to a remarkable Italian emigré to Britain who was importing Super Tuscans when straw-wrapped bottles of Chianti were Italy's main contribution to the UK wine market.

He, too, has a neat way with words: "We have always been a pared-down business, as all the frills are found in the stock."

There's a tempting choice on the website, [batwine.co.uk](http://batwine.co.uk), where Ben has kindly offered *Ham&High* readers a 10 per cent discount – use the code HHWine10. To try before buying, go to the London tasting on November 27. It's free, but sign up in advance – details are on the website. Three producers will be there, including Ferrante di Somma, whose wines with a 367-year history are written up in the mini list.

The "bat" of the name? There was to be a cricket equipment business too, but wine bowled that out.

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