The Sunday Times 'Style' Mag - 12/6/11

disdain. For God's sake, these are people who get dressed up to go to the pub on Sunday. Oh, the risible absurdity of the English demirural commuting class! Rising to look raffish, like the photos in property supplements; the 50-plus men in their faded denim with baggy arses. Why don't men know how to choose or wear trousers? Or, indeed, what size their waists or inside legs are? Someone ought to set up a self-help website: trousers for beginners, and Englishmen.

The women are even more absurd: in register-office frocks, with cardigans, or Daylesford casual, studied layers of thrown-together ethnicity and minimalism over skinny leggings with ballet shoes and pony club hair. There is a miasma of drunken wife-swap, sticky car keys. This is the Crufts of dogging. By the time our table was ready, I was quite jolly. I hadn't had such a sustained and invigorating hour's hate for ages.

The menu is perfectly matched to the customers: a mixture of summer-holiday European and stalwart English rural cliché. There's foie gras and lobster, and asparagus with pheasant eggs for starters, and all the ritual meaty varieties of Sunday lunch, but with the option of bouillabaisse, or veal cutlet with polenta. I started with a risotto and Camilla had a Swiss soufflé, and here, I'm afraid, I caught the first chill, the first inkling that all was not as I'd hoped. It was going to be gallingly disappointing. The food was rather good. No, dammit. Really quite good indeed. My risotto was well made and silky, though the mushroom reduction had that faintly Bovril, stewed taste that comes from too intense a stock made from dried fungi. But it was far better than you'd expect from a pub. The smoked haddock and cheddar soufflé was generous and accomplished, each of its three ingredients — fish, cheese and egg — rising to the occasion.

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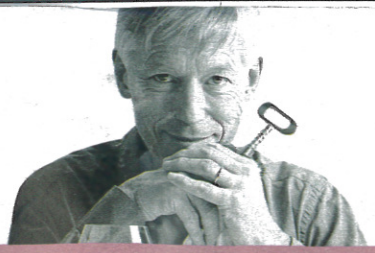
For the main course, Camilla had the pork, which was from two cuts, loin and leg, and of course from a named breed: middle white. What could be more Animal Farmishly appropriate for this place? It was as good as a commercial Sunday roast can expect to be. My ballantine of chicken, with spring vegetable broth, had been chosen particularly because it was the most likely to disappoint, but turned up as an elegant triumph, perfectly cooked and prettily presented, with each of its subtle and fugitive flavours tripping across the palate like a preschool ballet class.

The pudding was sticky toffee brioche, which was okay, but it really is time to retire sticky toffee. The addition of brioche is a culinary factidote. Vanilla, honey and lemon yoghurt with honeycomb was better. The bill, with Camilla's £17 bar tab, came to £114, which would be ruinously, impossibly, jaw-droppingly exorbitant for a pub lunch anywhere else in the nation, but here in Oxfordshire probably counts as damn good value, and for the quality of the food, the cooking, if not the company, it's not unreasonable. The service was young and smiley and charming; the manageress couldn't help herself from saying that I really would have chosen this day of all days to turn up.

"Normally we eat on the terrace under the vines and wisteria." Oh, no, I replied minkily, I loved lounging in the snug, people-watching. "You must have a look at the sculpture in the garden," she added foolishly.

So we took a turn round the herbaceous border, where lurked various stone and metal dryads of garden-centre porn, adolescent totty pretending to be more Delphi than St Trinian's. Thrown on the lawn was a bronze lass with polished, pert nipples and lovingly rendered shorts with dromedary metatarsal. It was a deeply disturbing thing to find in the grass, a crime scene against both nature and art. Unbidden, it reminded me yet again that Alan Titchmarsh doesn't need Viagra. ●



JOHN LAWRENCE

BOB TYRER
ON THE BOTTLE

Right, it's time for a geography test. Where is Chile? Top marks for saying it's the improbably narrow country that stretches down the lower left-hand side of South America. None for putting it next to Panama, which is the squiggly bit coming out of the top of the continent. What is the capital? Santiago. Easy. Next, what are Elqui, Limari, Choapa, Aconcagua, Casablanca, Leyda, Maipo, Cachapoel, Colchagua, Curico, Maule, Itata, Bio Bio and Malleco? Scattered over 600 miles, north to south, they're the valleys most of Chile's wine comes from. Now the difficult bit: Where am I? Which way is up? What day is it?

I'm on a trip organised by Wines of Chile, bumping happily around in the back of a minibus that canters from winery to winery — roughly three a day for five days. My fellow guests, Andrew and Gina, have got the hang of the geography, but I'm still flummoxed. Once you've learnt the valleys, and skirted the mountains that divide them, you have to get down to the small print. Is this Lolol or Llolleo?

It was so much easier 25 years ago when I used to saunter over the Andes in a Varig 707, report on the latest anti-Pinochet unrest, visit a suburban vineyard and fly home to Rio with a dozen cheap but tasty reds tucked in my M&S smuggler's bag. Now the vineyard is a housing estate, and Chileans pay more for their premium wines than we do in Britain.

Anyway, I'd better get used to it because the keyword at every winery is "diversity". Winemakers are working all out to demonstrate that Chile is not a large tank of cheap cabernet parked by the Pacific. Constantly experimenting within the astonishing geography and topography of Chile — cool sites here, warm there, glacial limestone here, decayed granite there — they are tweaking more elegance and distinctive character into their wines. That's not just pride but business: better wine means higher prices.

To me, the only problem is that diversity also means more confusing names on the label. But when I point out that, despite buying French wine for centuries, the British still struggle to tell Chablis from Chiroubles, the response is just a determined glint in the eye.

LIQUID HUNCHES

- **Tabali Reserva Especial Syrah Limari Valley 2008 (£9.75)** Black olives, mulberry and spice — good value (The Wine Society).
- **Leyda Garuma Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc 2010 (£10.99)** Concentrated, minerally and seafood friendly (Waitrose).
- **Casa Silva Viognier Lolol 2010 (£11.99)** Dry peaches with a (nice) hint of kerosene — for fish (Wine Rack).

What are you drinking? Tell me at wine@sunday-times.co.uk