



Hadrian's Wall gin-cured trout with apple and fennel.

THE BEST OF TWO SUPERB WORLDS

WINE FROM THE SUN-DRENCHED FOOTHILLS OF THE PYRENEES MARRIED WITH THE MOST DELICATE OF DISHES SERVED UP IN A NORTHUMBERLAND VALLEY RESTAURANT PROVES A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN,

BY HELEN COMPSON
helen.compson@newsquest.co.uk

Mackerel pate and chicken liver parfait crostini.

Take a family-owned company of wine merchants that first began trading in 1780, marry it up with an olde-worlde country pub owned by a chef with the finest of credentials, and you know the evening is going to be a good one.

Ten minutes in through the door of the Barrasford Arms, as the first of the wines we were there to sample – in this case, a salmon-pink coloured glass of La Brouette Rose – washed down perfect little bites of mackerel pate and chicken liver parfait crostini, I was already replacing “good” with “superb”.

But then chef Michael Eames has form. Great form! His CV reflects a journey through the Fisherman’s Lodge in Newcastle and Bouchon French restaurant in Hexham to the post of executive head chef at Slaley Hall Hotel and, most recently, Malmaison Hotel in Dundee.

June 2017 was a turning point when he and wife Victoria decided to do it for themselves and took over the 200 year old pub and restaurant from renowned chef Tony Binks.

A food and wine pairing evening, hosted by Corney and Barrow wine merchants account manager Piers Mortimer, showed Michael is going to do it with style too.

Celine Dabadie, who represents Plaimont, the wine producing co-operative in south-west France that supplies Corney and Barrow with some of its best wines, flew in from Toulouse especially for the occasion.

“We have 800 families of wine growers bringing

their grapes to the salon,” she said.

“The grapes we work with are local grapes grown in an area between the Atlantic and the foothills of the Pyrenees – some of them are grapes that most people have never heard of before.”

Seven of their grape varieties are unique and so old, nobody actually knows what they are. They grow quietly and anonymously in the Saint Mont vineyard anointed by the French government as a Historic Monument.

Thought to have been established in 1822, a year after Napoleon died, the historic plot is just twice the size of the Barrasford Arms room we are dining in, yet it sports 21 different grape varieties, including the magnificent seven.

Collectively they are the only plot of prephyloxeric vines in France, which means they pre-date the vine louse phylloxera, the sap-sucking aphids that laid waste to most of Europe’s vineyards in the late 19th century.

Celine said: “In England, you list buildings, but in France we have listed the vines.”

“We are lucky to have these old vines that date back to before the phylloxera era. We think the bug could not get through the sandiness of the soil they are planted in.”

The Plaimont co-operative covers three geographic areas – Gascogne, Madiran and Saint-Mont – and represents four of their wine appellations: Cotes de Gascogne, Madiran, Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh and Saint Mont.

And as we were about to discover, the big flavours



TOP LEFT: Hostess Victoria Eames ensured the evening ran smoothly. BOTTOM LEFT: Piers Mortimer and Celine Dabadie.



Head chef and owner Michael Eames plates up the starters and main course.

produced in the foothills of the Pyrenees paired perfectly with those being produced in this Northumberland valley.

A white, crisp and lively Domaine Les Escasses accompanied the first course of Hadrian's Wall Gin-cured trout with apple and fennel.

Celine said: "It is made 100 per cent from columbard grape from a single estate of just nine hectares, on clay soil."

"The average yield is only around 100 hectolitres (each hectolitre comprises 100 litres) per hectare. We regulate the yields, because to have good wines we need good grapes and to get that, sometimes we need to produce less rather than more."

"The fruity notes in this wine go very well with the trout."

By way of contrast, a deep, dark Le Faite Rouge – a blend of three of those Saint Mont grapes – is poured next.

Oh so rich and smooth, it is the tannat grape that gives it its structure, the pinenc its freshness and the cabernet sauvignon that well-rounded finish.

The tannat grape is credited with lowering blood pressure and so too are the monounsaturated fats in duck, so it's a win-win, as far as I'm concerned, as we tuck into duck, partridge and pheasant terrine.

An equally silky red, bursting with a blackcurrant juiciness tempered by a hint of black pepper, accompanies the lamb rump that comes out of Michael's kitchen next.

The Seigneurie de Crouseilles, from the clay slopes

Lamb rump, pomme puree, cherry tomatoes, pea, broad bean and mint.



Honey panna cotta, honey tuille and plum puree.



French wines, some of them unique, accompanied an exquisite menu

of Madiran, is the result of a late harvest, said Celine. "If you harvest too early, it will be too full of acidity, so you need to wait, to bide your time."

"When you harvest late, you get maturity."

In a menu in which every last morsel sang for its supper, Michael yet had a surprise in store. Blagdon Blue with pickled walnut? Out of this world! And I don't like walnut... not usually anyway.

Bijou and delicate, their individual flavours lingered in my mouth as I sipped a glass of Saint Albert, produced under the Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh label.

"This sweet (white) wine pairs beautifully with the saltiness of the blue cheese," said Celine. "The sweetness cleans your palette."

"The grapes, which are small with really thick skins, like raisins, are harvested on St Albert's Day on November 15."

We were doing it the French way, Piers pointed out – having the cheese before the dessert. "Always the cheese first," he said. "It allows greedy people like me to slow the meal down before getting to the pudding."

I wanted to have that course all over again. But then, there was honey panna cotta with plum puree ahead of us. I thought I should...