

Great new London wine bar/restaurant

16 Nov 2008 by Jancis Robinson

While Nick was in Boston speaking to a group of leading hoteliers, our son suggested we console ourselves at Terroirs, a brand new very wine-minded establishment just opposite Charing Cross, on a site puzzlingly vacated by a Davys wine bar, The Tappit Hen. I say puzzling because this is surely an excellent location, just south of Covent Garden within easy reach of a high proportion of London theatres and opera houses, not to mention a host of workers and commuters.

The lease has been acquired by the Guildford-based wine importers Caves de Pyrène, Vincent Wallard (who has run similar wine bars in Paris), Richard Martinez (who worked with London restaurateur Claudio Pulze) and chef Ed Wilson (ex Sonny's and [Galvin](#)).

The much-trumpeted theme of this new establishment is that it serves 'natural' wines, wines that are not only made using either organic or biodynamic methods in the vineyard, but use minimal treatments in the cellar: no added sugar or acid; only ambient rather than selected, cultured yeasts; minimal sulphur additions and so on – all very woolly but certainly appealing on an emotional level.

We were assured that our bodies would react quite differently to such wines "so long as you drink water with them" than to conventional wines. I drank a lot of water and just over half a bottle of wine in total. I can't say that I felt totally unscathed the next morning but quite honestly Terroirs is distinctive enough in London without this USP of 'natural' wines. How many other places in central London serve genuinely interesting wine so inexpensively and with such delicious food? I can think only of Vinoteca in Smithfield as a serious contender, and Terroirs is much more spacious than the delightful, but usually extremely crowded, [Vinoteca](#).

At the moment only the ground level and lower ground level wine bar is open, with its curved bar and hard-working chefs, who are just a brick wall away from the headquarters of Coutts bank. Eventually they will open an equally attractive restaurant space in the basement and serve rather more substantial dishes, but we had to give away a large proportion of the most expensive item on the menu at £20, 'potted foie gras *mi-cuit* for 2/3', to my wine writer colleague Natasha Hughes and her husband who were at another table. A generous portion of squid, chick peas and my beloved romesco sauce was £7. We returned at least half of the salty Cantabrian anchovies matched with raw shallots and – genius stroke – unsalted butter with toasted Poilane, also £7. (We should have ordered vegetanbles and bagna cauda at £3 instead – cheaper and healthier.) The generous slice of Brie de Montereau was £3, and the £5 desserts – Sicilian lemon posset and crepes & salted butter caramel - were reason enough to return.

Ah yes, we also had some wine. A glass of Luneau's 'proper' Muscadet wasn't as distinguished as I remembered it. Perhaps these lower-sulphur wines do not survive in an opened bottle as well as conventional ones? Will's glass of Colle Stefano 2007 Verdicchio was in better nick, although I for one would welcome servings of 125ml rather than their obligatory 175cl for all but the sweet wines. I had a 100ml glass of Lapeyre's La Magendia 2005 Jurançon with the foie gras, which was a great match. Will chose another Basque wine: Arretxea's 2006 red Irouléguay, which was respectably and typically tart. We shared a glass of the most delicious Montlouis demi-sec, justifiably called Minérale+ and made by Frantz Saumon, an ex-forester in both Canada and France, with the brie and it went superbly. Glasses are agreeably long stemmed and wide-bowled and designed to be extremely durable apparently.

Because we were so greedy, and ordered wines without a thought for cost, the bill for service reached £90 (the usual tapas phenomenon) but it would be very easy to eat and drink well for much less than this. The foie gras was our financial undoing. My only criticism of what we ate was that the regular baguette was not as exciting as the rest of the food.

The aim is to provide somewhere central that is not expensive by London standards, and where people can drop in for a glass of wine without necessarily having to eat, but I can imagine that as word gets out, this place could become uncomfortably crowded. Doug Wregg of Caves de Pyrène told me after our visit that he had spotted the general managers of L'Atelier du Robuchon, J Sheekeys and Lindsay House grabbing a bite there recently.

Wregg also reports, "We're starting a training programme next week focusing on wine service and quality control. Some of the wines inhabit the outer limits of weirdness and have to be explained and served in a particular way. I would like us to expand (and constantly change) our selection by the glass but we are very happy, if asked, to open any bottle within reason and allow customers to buy a glass - and then sell the rest of the bottle by word of mouth." I'd recommend you try Terroirs soon, before their accountants urge them to increase the prices.

Terroirs, 5 William IV Street, London WC2N www.terroirswinebar.com tel 020 7036 0660

Paris wine bars specialising in 'natural' wines include **Racines** and **Que du Bon**. Any other suggestions or comments, on either London or Paris, welcome via the box below.

Download the current [Terroirs wine list](#) here.