

Pubs & Beer



With more than 1,000 home-grown breweries and a large range of exports available Britain is awash with good beer.
Good Beer Guide editor and St Albans local Roger tracks down the finest available.

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Roger Protz seeks out the best beers, breweries and pubs

Putting beer back on the dining table

When the late Inspector Morse was chastised for having liquid lunches he would reply "Beer is food". But while beer is nourishing and full of protein and vitamins, having some solids alongside is recommended as part of a balanced diet.

Just as important, beer is a fine companion at the dining table and is the equal of wine when it comes to matching food with alcohol.

The revival of interest in good beer has brought with it a greater appreciation of its deserved place at the table.

Many pubs now stage beer-and-food matching events and the habit has spread to some upmarket restaurants. I have conducted such events at the Park Lane Hilton in London and Raymond Blanc's renowned Manoir aux Quat' Saisons in Oxfordshire.

In St Albans I helped devise a beer list for Lussmanns restaurant. It's run - with two other branches in Harpenden and Hertford - by Andrei Lussmann who has won many awards for his cooking and his insistence on using the finest food sourced wherever possible from local suppliers.

He has just won, for the second year running, the top award in the small restaurant category of the Sustainable Restaurant Association's awards.

When I first sat down with Andrei and his team of chefs and waiters, many of them were sceptical about

offering beer to their customers. But the penny has dropped. We held a successful beer-and-cheese evening in St Albans and I was impressed to see how many diners were choosing beer with their meals when I visited the Harpenden restaurant.

I was keen to see if fellow beer writers shared my belief that beer should not play second fiddle to wine. I was pushing at an open door when I invited Melissa Cole to have lunch at Lussmanns.

As well as writing extensively about beer, including her book and blog Let Me Tell You About Beer, she has studied food and cooking and knows as much about soups and sauces as she does malts and hops.

We started with an aperitif beer; in Melissa's case a British-brewed Freedom Pilsner while I chose 3 Brewers' Classic English Ale from a two-year-old and highly successful local brewery.

Taste buds tingling, we turned our attention to the food. For starters, Melissa picked sprats while I went for a Stilton, poached pear and walnut salad. Her beer companion was Grain Brewery's Wheat Beer, which she said was based more on the Belgian than the German style and offered citrus fruit and spice notes that blended well with the sprats.

My choice was another Pilsner beer; in this case Meantime's Greenwich Pilsner with creamy malt and peppery hops meeting the chal-



■ Andrei Lussmann (right) with Raymond Blanc and other SRA winners

lenge of tangy cheese, sweet fruit and nuts in my starter.

Our main courses were, for Melissa, venison casserole with cabbage while I chose a spiced tomato and chick pea hotpot with cumin and seasonal vegetables. I plumped for another Meantime brew, Porter, while Melissa also chose a dark beer, Grain's Blackwood Stout.

I found the porter, with its rich malt, espresso coffee and peppery hops, cut through the spici-

ness of the hotpot while Melissa judged the acidity of the roasted malts in the stout to perfectly balance the richness and juiciness of the meat.

While we were tempted by the desserts on the menu we decided to share the English cheese board, aware from long experience that beer and cheese are perfect companions. The cheeses were a superb offering of Lincolnshire Poacher, Bosworth Ash, Cotswold White, Shropshire Blue and Coastal

Cheddar.

While I was pondering the beer list to see which brew to choose, Melissa pulled a rabbit from her hat or, to be more precise, an imperial stout from her bag. The beer in question is Fuller's Imperial Stout, a 10.7 per cent bottle-fermented beer, based on the London stouts brewed in the 18th and 19th century for export to Russia and the Baltic States.

It's a beer of extraordinary complexity that Melissa had brewed in collaboration with Fuller's brewster Georgina Young. Pale malt is augmented by imperial, brown and chocolate malts, brewing sugar and treacle, and hopped with Centennial, Sovereign and Goldings varieties. The finished beer is then aged for three months with the addition of rosebuds.

This joyous mouthful, with roasted grain, earthy rosebuds, marshmallow, chocolate, coffee, liquorice and peppery hops, created a symphony of delight as it blended with and cut the richness of tangy, creamy and acidic cheeses.

We sank back in our seats, replete, and convinced as never before that beer and food were a marriage made in heaven.

We were treading a long path. The Ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles, asked to recommend the perfect diet, replied: "bread, meat, vegetables and beer". We were in good company, Melissa and me.

Wine

Website: www.flagshipwines.co.uk



Independent wine merchant Julia Jenkins offers a fun and informative look at the vintages and varieties of wine

Breaking down the mystique surrounding wine

Think pink for Mother's Day

Rosé wines are no longer just for summer as there are so many good ones available that will match most foods and occasions as well as being a delicious aperitif. (Bear this in mind if planning a Mothers' Day meal...)

This is a result of a change in mind set of producers and consumers. Gone are the bland soft wines that followed cheap Anjou Rosé and Spanish wines, and there is a resurgence of interest in Provençal rosés et al that are serious wines with distinct flavours and obvious quality.

Still rosé wines are made worldwide. France has a reputation for producing a range of styles including those from Provence with a delicate light salmon pink colour such as Rimauresq Rosé Cru Classe Cotes de Provence, elegant Loire rosés from Sancerre and the easy drinking

appealing fruity wines from Nîmes, now part of the Rhone appellation and offering great value. They are great with mezé starters and fish dishes.

Spanish rosés made from the Garnacha grape have a delicious creamy yet refreshing vibrant strawberry fruit flavour that also encompasses lovely savoury notes that can match tapas or paella.

Southern Hemisphere rosé wines are often full of richer riper fruit flavours than their Northern counterparts as the grapes are riper with softer tannins. Colour and flavour are extracted more quickly and they are more robust without tannins.

Look out for Chilean Merlots such as Los Tres Curas, Rogers & Rufus, from Australia made from Shiraz and Cabernet, and South African



Pinotage based wines such as Rosalind from Jeremy Borg's Painted Wolf range.

There is only one region where the wine is permitted to be made by what some would be the obvious method of blending red and white wine to achieve the desired amount of colour, tannin and fruit flavour and that is Champagne.

Rosé Champagnes are made from the permitted grape varieties: Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay with a higher proportion of the two Pinots to achieve the lovely onion

skin colour of many rosé Champagnes and they are often drier and leaner with a delicious elegant taste. A lovely Mothers' Day gift, often in their own gift boxes!

Tasmanian producers such as Jansz and Taltarni show that the high quality rosé sparkling wines are worth every penny. They too, are made using the Champagne grapes in the traditional way.

These wines are produced using the saignée method where some of the fermenting must is drained from the tanks or barrels of fermenting red grapes during the early days of fermentation. The wine maker can then achieve a more concentrated rosé wine by drawing off some of the wine.

Look out for some lower alcohol roses to fulfil the demand for lighter wines. As the fermenting grape juice is separated from the skins once the right colour level is achieved the potential alcohol is lower making naturally fruity wines, often semi-sparkling.

Two deliciously fruity Australian examples from the aromatic Moscato grape spring to mind - Mrs Wigley from Wirra Wirra and Innocent Bystander. Great with desserts or as a base for a 'Ginscato' cocktail!

