

Town hall tipping

Determined as ever to experience first hand the latest fashions in what we must learn to call the out-of-home leisure industry, *The Leisure Review* went on trend at a cultural experience in central Manchester.

Readers of a certain age with an average awareness of popular culture will know television's Jilly Goolden as a rather annoying and faux jolly woman who came on to our screens alongside a chubby chap and one or more of the early celebrity chefs to talk about wine. She slooshed it, she gargled it, she spat it out and then she talked the most unmitigated rot about how the stuff tasted. Damsons, raw tobacco and burning tyres were all roped in to give an impression of how a particular wine was "on the palate". Goolden and her colleagues were very keen on the technical jargon of wine buffery with "nose" and "body" being bandied along with her catch phrase "I'm getting..." followed by whichever fanciful taste reference she was employing that day. It is safe to say that her efforts to popularise wine erudition probably had the opposite effect, with the vast majority of wine drinkers retreating into the "I don't know much about wine but I know what I like" camp, their ears stopped to Ms Goolden's blandishments.

It is into this camp that the good people at Laithwaites Wine have driven their caravan, off-loaded its contents and begun to sell their produce; by the case. With over 700,000 customers around the UK, it is clear that their offer of affordable quality purveyed by knowledgeable but down-to-earth people has struck a chord. Since Tony Laithwaite brought some cases of Bordeaux back from a grape picking adventure in 1970 the firm has grown to employ over 88 people with print brochures being sent through the post, a call centre in Gloucester, the option to buy through the internet and a growing number of events from Glasgow to Plymouth where wine-positive people can taste up to 50 different wines at a leisurely pace with expert advice on hand. On a chill November Saturday *The Leisure Review* made its way to the Manchester Town Hall to join a lunchtime tasting and try to discern quite where the phenomenon that is mass wine tasting fits into the sport, leisure and culture continuum.

The building of Manchester Town Hall took place between 1868 and 1877 on an irregular triangle of land a stone's throw from the site of the Peterloo Massacre. Designed in the thirteenth-century Gothic style, it was, in the words of its designer, Alfred Waterhouse, a building "essentially of the nineteenth century". Nowadays it nestles amidst sleek modern edifices, every inch a gnarled and blackened veteran of the Industrial Revolution which spawned it. It is not pretty. The exterior of what is now a Grade One listed building is a curlicued, over-ornate northern Montmartre decorated with some notable sculptures, such as the Roman general Agricola, who founded Mamucium in 79 AD, Henry III, Elizabeth I and, at the apex of the main door gable, St George. However, whether the tourist or townspeople can enjoy playing spot the statue depends largely on the season. With Christmas imminent the corporation of Manchester – or more prosaically Manchester City Council – were preparing to strap inflatable Santas and goodness knows what other seasonal delights to the front of the building and its 280-foot clock tower. Someone really should explain to their marketing department the nature of wit and the dangers of dead horse flogging.

Inside the building and out of the wind the visitor is struck by the dark splendour of the infinitely decorated, arched-ceilinged interior and the vaunting hubris of the men who built Manchester. Mayors are recorded, not on wall panels but in a stained glass ceiling; stairways are circular, never simply straight, and the long walk to the cloakroom is lined by sculptures of men of the quality of Sir John Barbirolli, a conductor so famous they named a shopping mall after him.

Despite the décor and demeanour of the uniformed staff, which make it feel like a public lending library when the staff still hissed for respectful silence, the building is febrile with activity. The guidebook will tell you that the city's motif is

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the industrious bee and with public spending under pressure the income generation possibilities of a big posh building in the middle of a major city has not been missed by Manchester City Council. Would-be wine tasters find themselves cheek by jowl with wedding guests, party-goers and, in the sculpture hall, surrounded by busts of long-forgotten burghers, tea and coffee drinkers enjoying the cloistered calm redolent of a Victorian gentleman's club. Despite being a recent development, the café has been positioned – in marketing terms – some time in the city's past with hot Vimto available and not a barista in sight.

The centrepiece of the building is the Great Hall, a baroque curiosity with a sprung wooden floor, organ pipes, various pieces of statuary and the most remarkable series of murals that record in pre-Raphaelite gaudiness the history of the city. It is here that Laithwaites have circled their wagons, or at least their trestle tables laden with wine, and here that upwards of 200 expectant north west denizens gather to tipple. Tastings at the Goolden end involve a great deal of swilling and spitting; at these events people drink. It is not binge drinking but with 40 reds, whites and rosés to be sampled, including one from Russia, some from Hungary and a mix of traditional and new world producers, even tasting measures start to have their effect. The volume of conversation rises, the air of scholarly enquiry gives way to one of serendipitous discovery and the carefully marshalled notes intended to rank the English white against the French artisan cider become opaque to the point of pointlessness. The event is a genteel session for polite people who are happy to queue, keen to catechise the extremely knowledgeable staff and intent on discovering a wine that knocks their personal socks off. Couples compare notes while groups of tipplers exchange opinions and all around the hall good-natured disagreement is accompanied by laughter.

It is a fun way to spend two hours and, according to Laithwaites' head of events, John Kemp, an increasingly popular one. "We hold wine events all over the UK and our Manchester festivals are definitely one of the most popular tastings of the year. The last two years have been a complete sell out, with many previous attendees coming again, often bringing along their friends. Word seems to be spreading more and more; it becomes increasingly popular every time and people are booking their tickets earlier each year so as not to miss a spot. It would seem that the people of Manchester thoroughly enjoy an afternoon of relaxed and informal wine tasting and we will certainly be back to see them next year."

For the record, *The Leisure Review* team favoured a New Zealand sauvignon blanc that defined the word 'smooth', some Argentinean Torrentes which begged to be drunk on summer evenings and the aforementioned artisan cider. Having determined to put a mixed case down against expenses, the TLR team went out into the chill hustle of a pre-Christmas shopping centre Manchester buoyed by the Hogwartian town hall interiors, the bonhomie engendered by the entire experience and the unfailing, patient inclusivity of the people pulling out the corks and pouring out the wine.

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