

It's good to see The Savoy

THE Savoy! Oh yes, I remember it well. For was it not here that I took tea with the Queen, got wild with Marilyn, duetted with Sinatra in the American Bar, devoured Peche Melba with Escoffier, glugged down Dom Perignon with Olivier (while still he was with Vivien) and then compared Burberrys with Bogie and Bacall ...? Well no, actually – but plenty of people seem to share or imagine memories just such as these, so very strong is the allure, you see – so indomitable the legends surrounding this fabulous London landmark.

Until very recently the Savoy has been closed for three years – twice as long as the initially anticipated time it would take to complete a virtual internal rebuild, and God knows how many zillions over budget. The owner is Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal of Saudi Arabia, and rumours already abound that he might be wanting to get shot of the place. Well look, you know how it is – a quarter of a billion here, a quarter of a billion there: before you know where you are it all begins to add up to real money. Anyway – I was very eager to find out what had become of the famous Grill. I've always rather loved it – never was a fan of the River Restaurant (all a bit dinner-dance and Bar Mitzvah for me) and I thought the American Bar upstairs inexplicably overrated. But the understated opulence of the Grill, the smell of roast beef, claret and power from the best of the booths: that was quite a cocktail.

All this, though, was before Gordon Ramsay got his hands on it, six or so years ago: God, what a pig's ear he made of the place. Out went the much-loved silver trolley, up went the lighting – and then the legendary booths were reupholstered in great big black and beige horizontal stripes, like a bleached-out Dennis the Menace jersey. Oh dear oh dear. So I was rather surprised to learn, when the Grill reopened last month, that the now rather discredited, if brand-newly folliculated, Ramsay was still in the kitchen. Yes – but

The Grill at the reopened landmark is back to its glorious best – with chromy art deco, black velvet booths and flavoursome food. It's just the casually dressed diners who let down the glamour, writes **Joseph Connolly**



Happy return ... Joseph with agent Jonathan Lloyd at the refurbished Savoy Grill.

he's not really, of course. The head chef is the estimable Stuart Gillies, though I was told when I went in on day three of the reopening that "Gordon is here! You never know – he might well put in an appearance!" Well possibly. Had I been Posh, Becks, Elton, Cheryl or Prince Harry, I daresay he would've been out of those doors like piping cream through a syringe, pausing only to change into whites, and maybe bedaub his cheek with gravy. But as it was, he wasn't.

You may have seen a television documentary on the hotel, screened in December. It did the place no favours – but what

was curious was that during the course of two hours, the Grill was not once so much as mentioned. Given the general downbeat and mocking tone of the programme, however, this was maybe just as well. But God it was strange, though – strolling in there again: anticipation, yes – but a pretty hefty dollop of dread as well. Anyway – the welcome is superb, courtesy of the long and curly-haired maitre d' (romantically called Byron) whom I know from The Wolseley and a later short stint at Dean Street Townhouse. I was shown to an excellent booth (black velvet now, thank God, but as sheer as a cliff and too

FACTFILE

- **SAVOY GRILL**
91-92 Strand, WC2
Tel: 020-7592 1373
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: About £150 for a three-course meal for two with wine. Though the sky's the limit.

low down) which may have been Churchill's favourite, or else Doris Day's: no one seemed perfectly sure. While awaiting my agent Jonathan Lloyd – CEO of Curtis Brown – I looked about me. The room is good: red and black Lucite walls resembling precious stone, large cylindrical Swarovski crystal chandeliers, lots of fabulous chromy art deco and the same old mottled mirror columns and panels. We were asked whether we had "any allergies or bad reactions", to which Jonathan replied "only to each other". And we both agreed that we just had to kick off with their signature dish, Omelette Arnold Bennett – created in the Savoy in honour of the writer, who might have been miffed to know that the omelette was to become rather better known than his books. It always used to be served loose and gorgeously runny, mindful of the fact that it went on cooking in the little copper ramekins – but this was set, and on the verge of scrambled. Jonathan's grilled Dover Sole he said was superb – and so, at £35, it should be. The accompanying Bearnaise was sloppy, though. I had T-bone pork 'Dingley Dell' – nothing to do with Pickwick, but the name of a highly respected pig farm in Suffolk. The meat was fine, large and lean, but oh so very overdone – dry, chewy, not good. Hmm ... this was not going too well – and at that very moment I made a decision: to come back and

try the place again. The staff – so polite, if over attentive – were badly afflicted by first night nerves; the back cushions to the banquettes had yet to arrive, and so too had some lampshades. It was clear that although the Grill had opened six weeks later than everything else in the hotel, it wasn't yet up to muster. And so, unprecedentedly, on the back of a wave of nostalgia and affection, I decided to give them another chance.

Which came just four weeks later when my wife and I rolled up, having looked in on the skating rink at Somerset House (open until Sunday). It's a fine and Bruegelly scene, quite wonderfully diverting when people fall over and whack their heads quite badly and the spectators all laugh good-humouredly and the show-offy 'Ice Marshal' expertly glides over and asks them if they're all right and the injured party rubs their head and glares and spits out No I'm Bloody Not, and everyone laughs a bit more. Again I had the Omelette Arnold Bennett: much, much better. Still not utterly gooey and giving, but one hell of an improvement. My wife adored her warm beetroot tart with toasted pine nuts and fresh goat's curd: "beetroot very jammy", she said. "Superb thin flaky pastry – it's like a savoury dessert". And she also adored the veal mixed grill, with thyme roasted root vegetables. The liver was perfect, the veal itself fine, if a little small, and the large sausage made up of all the bits slightly too dominant: otherwise excellent. I had been wondering whether to have the sole – to see if was as good as my agent had insisted – and was also tempted by the roasted leg of lamb on the trolley (which is back!). But then the overseeing chef Stuart Gillies came over to the table, and I got talking to him about the way they grill: a steel sort of box, apparently, fired by wood charcoal. Okay, then – fillet

of beef, in that case. Which proved to be an eye-opener: a vast chunk, and served on the bone (which was a new one on me). Nicely charred on the outside, with increasingly good layers of flavours as you delved into the thing. Hand-cut chips were first rate – full of potatoey taste and as orangey-golden as a seriously misguided American heiress. And this time the Bearnaise – in terms of both flavour and consistency – was spot-on. A custard millefeuille with cubes of mango was also wonderfully light and assured.

So ... the cooking indeed is back on form. The cushions have arrived. The service has calmed down into something much more properly attentive (as opposed to insistently fussy). So although I think the Savoy Grill will again become an important part of the London dining scene ... will the punters of old be tempted to return? They long ago secured new billets in places such as the Connaught, Scott's and Wiltons – one of the few places, incidentally, still to insist upon a jacket and tie. Which brings me to the distinct and woeful lack of glamour in the Grill: it's not the Savoy's fault – décor and staff are impeccably presented. But the number of men in open shirts, no jackets and – get this – v-necks (and women with not just cardigans but babies) was as depressing as it was surprising. This was between Christmas and New Year, it's true ... but still.

There are complimentary little hand-made chocolates, and I was delighted to dissuade my wife from eating them, if only because it's not often you get to issue a warning such as this: 'You'll have to have them all pulled out after the Savoy truffle!'. (If you're not a Beatles fan, you won't get this. And she ate them anyway).

□ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

Savour armagnac – with a toast to Francois

THIS is a story as heart-warming as the spirit whose survival it ensured. To begin, the clock turns back to the end of the 19th century when a tiny pest – the phylloxera louse – became the scourge of Europe's vineyards, destroying vines and, with them, the livelihood of thousands of families.

Our hero is Francois Baco, a schoolteacher on the edge of the broad grape-growing region of south-western France, which is home to the spirit of the Gascons, armagnac. Though his father was a policeman, the family had long worked the land and farming was in Francois' blood. So it came as little surprise that the science classes he taught had considerable agricultural content. Alongside the teaching, he experimented.

His particular interest was in hybridisation, which he saw as a defence against both the widely-prevalent fungal diseases and, crucially, the invading phylloxera.

Hybridisation, he realised, was the only way of saving his region's vinous heritage, as the favoured alternative solution, grafting native varieties on to phylloxera-resistant American rootstocks, wouldn't work. The local iron-rich sandy soils were a diet too challenging for the simple palate of the incomers.

Baco's work was painstaking and detailed and resulted in some 7,000 plants. Root number 22 in row A, a hybrid of the native French folle blanche and an American variety, was the one which was to make the world remember his name – or, more precisely, that of his son Maurice who had died aged only 17, after whom he named it. It was immune to the pest and allowed the vineyards to be safely replanted.

Today, baco is the only European/American hybrid allowed under French appellation rules. You won't see its name on any table wine label but,

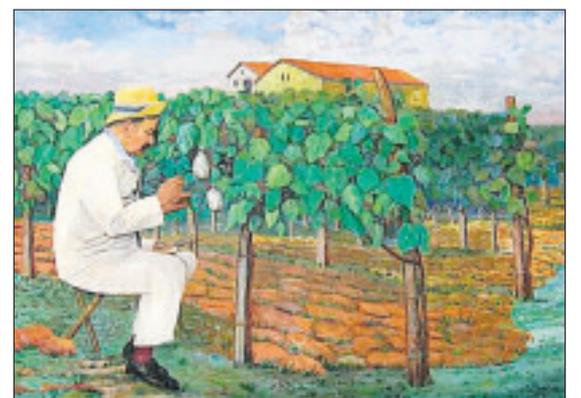
thanks to Monsieur Baco, you can pour amber-coloured, aromatic armagnac as a post-dinner digestif. Without his work, armagnac would most likely be history. It was not until 1945, however, 18 months before his death and half a century after his pioneering discovery, that the powers-that-be rewarded him, with the Legion D'honneur.

For decades, baco grapes were crucial in armagnac production, sturdy companions of other more aromatic but fragile varieties. In the 1980s, however, the climate changed, as the French authorities moved to eliminate all hybrid vines. In 1989, baco was given a death sentence, a ban on its use by the turn of the century. The scientific and bureaucratic argument was that baco-based armagnac contained too much ethyl carbamate (CE), a carcinogen found in all fermented products (bread and yoghurt as well as alcoholic drinks).

Exports plummeted, even though research showed that, to reach toxic levels, drinkers would need to consume several litres of armagnac every day for two years.

Determined to save their spirit, armagnac producers modified vinification, distillation and ageing practices and CE levels were shown to be lower. Their arguments were listened to and baco was reprieved. Again, the vineyards are being replanted and there's revived pride in Monsieur Baco's achievement.

Fortunately, it's increasingly easy here to enjoy armagnac, in a gamut of styles and prices. On the high street, **Waitrose** has three, including Janneau eight-year-old and **Chateau du Tariquet XO**, from around £20; **Nicolas** offers two from **Tariquet**, £25 to £29; and **Wine Rack** has **Comte de Lauvia VSOP** and **Marquis de Montesquiou VSOP**, £21 to £38. Specialists with a splendid



Saviour .. Francois Baco at work. Picture courtesy of Mairle de Belus

choice back to 19th century vintages (£1,000-plus), are www.thewhiskyexchange.com (with several from Darrouze, a particular enthusiast for baco) and Gerry's of Old Compton

Street, 020-7734 2053. Try sowhine.co.uk, www.drinkon.com, **Selfridges** and **Fortnum & Mason** too.