

this june

girl, travelling

discovers the joy of *sommeliers*

A proponent of long-term singlehood and low-maintenance dating, **Helen Croydon** shares her monthly exploits; this month she takes a taxi to L'Oranger in Mayfair to meet up with Older Guy. Now read on...

I write this month's column in shame, aghast at my fickle and lustful behaviour of the last month. But I also write it with enlightenment to the rewards of a little mischief, and - as a secondary bi-product - an awakening to the aphrodisiac qualities of fine wine.

One recent Tuesday I was having dinner with a gentleman at L'Oranger, a Laurent Michel restaurant in Mayfair. It was a first date - nothing serious - dating's like a hobby to me - entertainment to escape the tedium of day-to-day chores. He was an older guy; I prefer them like that. I like to wine and dine and absorb their seasoned experiences of the world, admire a full jaw line of facial stubble and be free from the romantic tanglings of the more available younger man.

As Older Guy and I were selecting our *foie gras confits* and our *filet de bœufs*, the sommelier approached, purring with recitations from the wine list. I looked up, curious to what sort of delightful creature could possibly possess such an intoxicating accent and an orgasmically authoritative knowledge of his working implements. I froze on my velvet seat. He was the most beautiful looking man I have ever cast eyes on. He was wearing a tight fitting suit. (I think the tawdry pay of the restaurant trade steers them to ill-fitting charity shop seconds, but still, he'd selected well.) A suit, I find, gives a man blast of sexual allure equivalent to a



million pheromones. He stood tall and straight above us, telling us how zee Bouzeron-Aligoté and zee Francois Cotat Sancerre eez very, very good.

Mmmm, I bet you eez very good too. I don't think I said that out loud, but you never know. He disappeared and reappeared with various quarter-filled tasting glasses. I remember thinking he looked nothing less than spectacular as he poured, one hand behind his back and one thumb inserted expertly in the base of the Burgundy *bouteille*.

Older Guy thought the Aligote was too dry. He called over the sommelier and asked for another recommendation. Sorry he said, to disturb the main course. Oh, I said, not at all. I drooled over the sommelier as he brought us another white Burgundy – a Puligny - and enchanted us with a medley of words, something about pineapple tastes. Older Guy thought it was too oaked and called the sommelier over again. Sorry he said, to change wines again. Not at all, I said and watched in groin-gurning wonder once more as the sommelier filled a third glass with a Montrachet.

Had Older Guy known me better, he never would have ordered so much wine. It gave me an unnatural sense of boldness so that when I excused myself to the oak-panelled ladies, half way through dinner, I got out a business card and in my inebriated scrawl I penned: "You are the most striking looking sommelier I have ever seen. Call me? x"

Disastrously, when we came to leave, the god-like sommelier was nowhere to be seen. It was the waitress who saw us out of the door. She'd do. I fished for the business card, which I had strategically placed in the zip compartment of my bag, (if only I remembered to do that with my travel card – instead of holding up half of London as I rummage at the ticket barriers), plucked it out discretely, pressed it into the waitress's hand and whispered, "Would you give this to the sommelier?"

He emailed. I emailed back, sheepishly insisting I don't usually make passes with business cards at strangers whilst dining with other men. We had lunch in his sister restaurant, Zafferano. In the cold light of the Knightsbridge day, however, he was not *quite* the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on. He wasn't bad. It's just that... I think the most effective way to describe my misjudgement would be

expecting a Mouton-Rothschild and being served an Oyster Bay.

He was dark, slim, 35-years-old – a bit young for my usual tastes but moderately attractive. With him being the respected head sommelier of the restaurant group, we were well looked after. My sommelier and the Zafferano sommelier had a grave-looking tête-à-tête over the wine list. Sorry, he said to discuss business before the main course. It's quite OK,

I insisted. I found the new sommelier also remarkably pleasurable to gaze at. And the headwaiter, come to think of it. No, I scolded myself, pushing all thoughts of exchanging business cards firmly out of my mind. That would be most inappropriate. It is the tight suits talking again. I must give my

attention to the original sommelier in question – the one purring away before me, inviting me for a second date.

That was more interesting. One of his rich regular customers had apparently, while under the influence of a Pape Clement, invited the sommelier to join him for a drink at the end of his six-party meal. Rich Regular Customer took the sommelier under his wing as his new best friend and invited him to 'come and have lunch' the following Sunday and give him recommendations on the contents of his wine cellar. Did I, asked Sommelier, care to accompany him?

Rich Regular Customer, a lawyer, lives in an expensive Islington three-storey. I got there late. I had come from a gathering of speakers from The Erotic Awards in Regents Park, of which I was a judge. I was very apologetic. Sorry I am late, I said, but I had to go and listen to a professor talk about society's right to access extreme pornography and a Welsh GP relate his concerns over the rise of ritual genital mutilations. But I'm here

now, and my goodness, you've already got through two Petit Chablis's without me.

Sommelier didn't raise an eyebrow – he's French isn't he. They talk about pro-sex-lib all the time. Rich Regular Customer wanted to know more. So over a glass of Gevrey Chambertin - which Sommelier chided Rich Regular Customer over, for leaving his case on his wooden floor with under-floor heating - we discussed our tastes in porn. He was strikingly handsome, in that older guy kind of way. Reassuring fine lines and weathered, tanned skin, just the right amount of stubble and a splattering of salt in his pepper hair. He exuded a magnanimous sense of knowledge about the world, in a way that made me want him to fling me on his heated cellar floor and relate it all to me.

'Lunch' ended at 11pm. We – that is Rich Regular Customer's party of six lunch guests -

had managed to oil ourselves with 17 bottles from corners of his cellar he didn't even know he had. Sommelier and I got up leave, staggered, then got up again. Rich Regular Customer stood by his glass cabinet, a shiny black cordless phone held against his ear, calling all of his greedy guests cabs. His fair flopped down in front of his eye on one side, and his stone coloured shirt was half hanging out of his manly trousers.

No, I told myself. Put. The. Business. Card. Down. Down, I slur. That would be most inappropriate. I have a drunk sommelier to get home for heaven's sake. But I could not get Rich Regular Customer on his heated cellar floor out of my mind's eye. Not that getting the drunk sommelier home was a bad ending to the evening either. But it's just that... I think the most accurate way of describing it would be dreaming about a seismic asteroid landing and being given a pleasant tickle.



Jonathon Green

COUNTRY MATTERS

'Her valleys are like Eden, her hills like Lebanon, she is a paradise of pleasure and a garden of delight.'

'Roger Pheuequell' A New Description of Merryland (1740)

All very *Song of Songs* to be sure. But I blame Strephon. The Fotherington-Thomas of fucking. Hello clouds, hello sky, hello Chloe's little lady-garden. All that literary euphemism. All that bloody nature. Not the red in tooth and claw stuff. No. The wretched rurality. Nor are we talking sheep-shagger, which is neither euphemistic nor literary but a spot-on description of those beyond the M25. No. We're in the world of gardens. Of flowers.

Of the garden of pleasure (hence the garden padlock, known less coyly elsewhere as the bloodclaat), the garden of Eden or the front garden. The trope appears in the 16th century and continues at least through to the late 19th: typically as offered by the anonymous author of *More Eveline*, 'What a lovely white belly you have! What a plump treasure between your thighs! Your little garden there needs much watering, does it not?' And porn being what it has to be it is duly irrigated, even if the word hosing would