

BEACHCOMBER

93 YEARS OLD AND STILL ENJOYING HIS FOOD...

FISTICUFFS between wine experts is, in my experience, something best avoided whenever possible. An escalation into bottle-swinging mayhem is all too possible, and if a decent vintage is involved, that could easily lead to the loss of a good deal of decent plonk. It was fortunate, therefore, that I was present at the Cinnamon Club, not far from the Houses of Parliament, earlier this week, when thanks to my timely intervention, a potentially unwelcome incident was averted.

The occasion was a dinner designed to match the extraordinarily good modern Indian food at the Cinnamon Club with a highly esteemed brand of Californian wines that go by the odd name of Bonny Doon. Odder still, however, is the chap behind Bonny Doon, the wine-maker Randall Grahm, who was on hand to explain his vinicultural philosophy and read to us from his book of short stories (which I feel bound to say were considerably less inspired than his wine).

It was the philosophy, however, that led to the delicate situation, as shortly after Mr Grahm began to speak, another wine expert in the assembly began to question the fundamentals of what he was saying. Like many Californians, Grahm's beliefs, unlike his grapes, seemed to be rooted in rather dodgy ground. Referring to his wines with such adjectives as 'biodynamic' and 'acoustic', it all had a flavour of new age gibberish, as his tormentor in the crowd repeatedly pointed out.

Sensing that things could become nasty, I decided the time had come to intervene. Putting my hand firmly on the shoulder of the critic, I ended the dispute with a few well-chosen words. "Gentlemen," I said, "I think it is quite clear that our Californian cousin is spouting mystical nonsense, but if it results in producing some great wines, he surely deserves our forgiveness. So let us suspend judgment until we have eaten and drunk our fill."

A round of applause indicated that my intervention had been much appreciated, as we were all getting rather hungry, so

we trooped off to the dining room for a five-course meal created by executive chef Vivek Singh and the Cinnamon Club's head chef Hari Nagaraj to be a perfect match with Bonny Doon wines. These two can always be relied upon to beguile us with an intriguing blend of spices and textures, but on this occasion they added an element of teasing by making each course more superb than the previous one.

I have four classifications for good restaurant food: at the lowest end is food I feel I could have created myself; next comes food I could not make, but I feel I could do something just as tasty; then food I feel I hope to equal one day; and at the top end is food of an excellence I feel I shall never reach. At the Cinnamon Club, we ran through the full spectrum.

The Norwegian King crab was delicious; the roast loin of rabbit was subtle and sublimely tasty; the Tandoori breast of Anjou squab pigeon was pure joy; and the smoked loin of Welsh lamb with Chettinadu curry was the most tender and tasty piece of sheep I have ever eaten. The meal was rounded off with a perfect mango fondant. And the wines? Well, they kept up the high standard, especially Le Cigare Volant 2004, a deep and fruity red that had an aroma of Indian spices highly unusual in a wine. For all your new age philosophy and short stories, Mr Grahm, I raise my glass to you.

