

The Other Side with Craig Robinson

Getting in a flap about camping

IT'S fair to say I'm a bit of a fan of my creature comforts – a decent bed, a hot shower and somewhere that doesn't leak to shelter from torrential downpours. However this year a group of friends and I (possibly against our better judgement) decided to have a camping holiday. While the idea seemed a good one – days lazing on the beach and nights spent sitting under the stars with a few beers – the reality proved a little different. For starters the campsite was an absolute dump but it also became quickly apparent that there weren't many of us cut out for this outdoor life. Things got off to a pretty bad start when my mate and I struggled to put up our "easy to erect" two-man tent. After well over an hour – and about three attempts of trying to work out what to do – we were still left scratching our heads.

The clouds were starting to look threatening and we were on the verge of going to buy a new tent (because obviously this one must have had some vital poles missing) when we were handed a lifeline. "Would you boys like some help," she said. "It's just me and my friend have been watching you try and put up that tent for ages and it's kind of painful." I'd like to pretend that our problems were just a ploy to get chatting to these girls but I'd be lying.

And, so it was, that we abandoned all pretence of masculinity and admitted defeat, "yes please," we said meekly. Within five minutes we were put firmly in our place and the girls (known by now as Mandy and Ellen) had got the tent up. "Surely this is the sort of thing you should be doing for us," they quipped as they hammered in another peg. "Not in this age of equality," we replied – fully ready to defend any dying embers of male pride we had left as we opened another beer. We did invite them to dinner – promoting our great line in campfire burgers – but they declined and, as it turned out, they were quite right. As soon as we lit the stove it erupted in flames and the hissing gas canister looked in danger of exploding. "Flip it over, flip it over," came the panicked cry from next-door – once again Mandy and Ellen came to our rescue. Fortunately we were able to

avoid setting fire to the campsite and we eventually managed to cook ourselves some food, much to the amusement of our neighbours. Just as we finished our delicious feast the heavens opened and we sought sanctuary in our tent – which of course developed a steady leak. Somehow amid the growing damp we managed to get ourselves off to sleep, hoping that the new day would bring a change in fortune. However at 5am I was rudely awoken – aching back and stiff neck included – by what I can only describe as the most horrible sound in the world.

When I peered out of the tent to find the source of this terrible screeching I was confronted by a scene that wouldn't be out of place in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. About 30 massive seagulls – easily the size of cats – had descended and were happily pecking away at the worms the wet weather had drawn to the surface. Unable to get back to sleep I made my way to the toilet block and had possibly the coldest shower I've ever experienced. Turning blue and with teeth chattering I went back to the tent – fully intending to pack up my stuff and head to the nearest B&B. However, somehow we did manage to survive the week and overall we had a very good time (although I think we've decided the outdoor life isn't really for us). Next year we're going to look at our options a bit more carefully and possibly choose somewhere that offers a few more of those creature comforts.



A life of wine

JANE said she got into wine purely by accident after getting a job as a PA at Lay & Wheeler in Colchester about 22 years ago. They prided themselves in training all their staff, whether they were selling wine or working in the kitchen. "Suddenly I had just found my niche; I was passing all the exams with flying colours while at school I scraped through exams. I thought, whoa, this must be what I am good at and I couldn't stop. Over the years I have worked for almost all the main wine merchants in Essex and Suffolk."

Having been employed as a PA she ended up working on the trade side, selling wine on the phone and putting wine lists together.

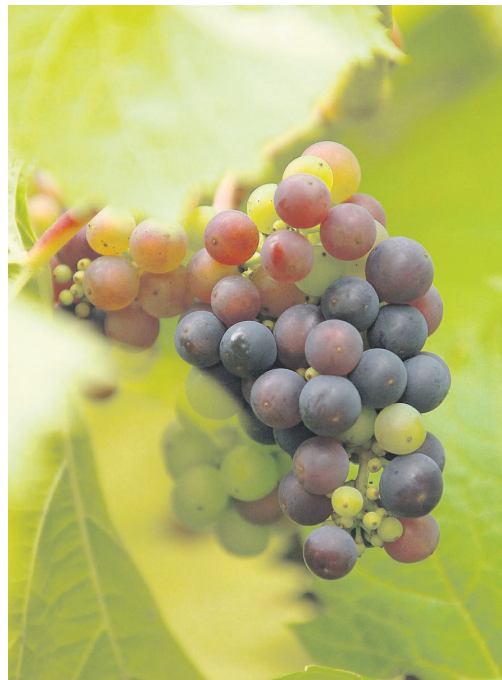
After that she did a contract for a company in Maldon writing their wine list for them. "Then, when I had a little gap when I wasn't working in wine, I found I missed it like crazy. I'd gone to a classical record company in Colchester, who wanted somebody to run their mail order side, which was useful grounding and very interesting, so I learned that side of it from the ground up but the lure of the wine business called and I went back to Lay & Wheeler again for three years in the buying department, which was completely different from what I had done before in trade sales. I was buying the wine in and getting involved in the shipping, confirming prices and getting the wines into the country and into bond.

"Then I got asked by Seckford Wines in Melton to come and work with them. They are a big company, though there were only about six or seven people in the office, but they have a bonded warehouse actually on site and there I was doing sales to places like Japan. They only deal in really fine wine though they are actually wasted on me. It is lovely to be able to say I've tasted the 1982 Petrus, which costs hundreds of pounds a bottle, but it was right over my head.

"At that point I was living in Colchester but seeing Tom and my ultimate aim was to work at Adnams and then I got a job there."

Now her own business is established Jane is becoming known as something of an expert in her field. "I got asked to do a TV show with Monty Waldin who is a biodynamic wine writer and a fantastic, dynamic chap who has got a vineyard in France. He wanted to turn it biodynamic and do this TV show about but they then discovered I knew too much about biodynamics and wouldn't let me do it! "I think the six-part series on C4 is called Monty's

Vineyard and it should be going out at the end of September to tie up with Biodynamic Fortnight which is coming up in October. So I was nearly there for a year to see the whole thing happen however I will still be on the show – unless I have landed up on the cutting room floor, or course! "He interviewed me when I went to the first Biodynamic Food Fortnight last year. I went up to Borough Market for the launch and did a wine tasting and he was filming it and came up and tasted my wines and interviewed me. It was fantastic day because we were really getting to people who had no idea about biodynamics at all." Funnily enough her brother Spencer, who farms in Goldhanger in Essex, is also about to appear on TV. "BBC2 wanted to do something on biodynamic food and they have followed one of his beetroot, which is quite an entertaining thing to do. They started literally as he planted the seed and filmed it at stages since. Then last week he cooked it and ate it and they filmed that too, so the beetroot has gone. Oh the stress on this one little beetroot!"



What are organic and biodynamic wines?

JANE explains: "In a vineyard, vines are the most sprayed crop, being sprayed with pesticides, herbicides all that kind of thing to kill all the little bugs but in an organic vineyard nothing chemical is used.

"The spray they use is effectively herbal tea type things. It is even more so with biodynamics where they'll use nettle tea, which does the same job as the chemicals but stops the grapes from having any chemical residue in them. They use natural fertilisers and dig in things like horse manure into the ground and they plant cover crops to help make a really good soil. If you have good soil you get really good plants, so it all stems from there. Organic wine growers are trying to put all the nutrients back into the soil and do everything naturally, so no sprays, no chemicals, nothing. "In theory is shouldn't cost more to be organic but in practise at the beginning it does. You need more manpower and they may have originally invested in tractors and

sprayers that they don't need any more. You also have to go through a certification process, which in most countries takes about three years and that costs too

"There are certain regions, for instance in Spain, where about 60% of the vines are effectively organic having been handed down through families and grown in a traditional way but they don't use it as a selling tool.

"Biodynamics is effectively what they did hundreds of years ago. You do things depending on where the moon and the planets are in relation to the earth, so you are actually getting that energy into the soil. Think of a farmer centuries ago up in the hills of, say, Chile – they wouldn't know any different. That was just what they did. It's about natural flow, think about tides and the force of the moon and you can get so much goodness into the earth if you don't then break up the soil components with chemicals. It's a fascinating subject."

