

Wine

FOR affordable South African wines, Boschendal is a steady performer (they have been making wine since 1685!). Majestic stock their 2006 Rose, at £6.99, a salmon pink, summerfruit treat.

I also recently enjoyed their Boschendal Shiraz 2004 (Sainsbury's £7.99). Its dark berry fruit obviously gained from its 14 months in French oak. Waitrose carry Boschendal's Shiraz/Cabernet blend from the same vintage. It is spicier, almost smoky (£7.99).

Somerfield's South African Limited Release Shiraz also shows the country's shiraz potential. For £5.99, it is a bargain with lingering spicy blackberry fruit and a hint of bitter chocolate.

Glen Carlou Syrah 2004 (£12.99) is even more spice-laden, almost curranty in taste with blackberry on nose and palate and, with toasty oak in evidence, is another red for the long haul.

From grapes grown on gravel-clay soils, it is fascinatingly somewhere between Aussie Shiraz and Rhone syrah in style. Sawinesonline.co.uk stock it at £12.99, while Oddbins have it at 50p dearer.

Neil Sowerby

Gemma's all made up to be a soapstar

FROM Harvey Nichols make-up artist to prime-time soap star – 2006 has seen Gemma Merna take quite a journey.

The Worsley-born actress joined Hollyoaks as the airy, sweet-natured Carmel McQueen, just six months ago.

And since then she has hit the front pages of the national tabloids when she appeared at the National Television awards in her stunning turquoise CoCu Designed dress with Swarovski Crystal, styled by celebrity stylist Sian Lloyd Jones.

This is one girl who knows what she wants. We're in Numero restaurant in Casino 235, and Gemma has just sent the waitress (admittedly encouraged by myself) half-way around the place looking for some cranberry sauce to go with our very festive plate of turkey and all the trimmings: "Christmas dinner just isn't the same without cranberry sauce, is it," she jokes.

Not being satisfied with life as a make-up artist Gemma had acting aspirations. She says: "It was so frustrating."

Time to put the blusher brushes aside for soapstar glamour soon arrived. "I'd been to Mersey TV four times before for auditions and never got the part. This time I arrived in fishnet tights and a little skirt. The casting director commented on my outfit and I said: 'Well, I knew she

Table talk WITH STEPHANIE ELMORE

was meant to be a bit of a slapper!"

But this brash yet honest approach is what helped land her the part and all the trappings of fame. "Some people corner me when I'm out and will say, 'Speak to me, speak.' I'll say, 'Hello,' only to hear back, 'you're not as daft as you appear'. They say I'm a great actress, but I just think, no, that really is just me."

Gemma trained as a performer at the Sheena Simon College in Manchester but never considered TV work until she started training with coach Mark Hudson, at the Manchester School of Acting.

Hudson has trained some of the top actors in the U.K. (Others in Gemma's class to make it in the soap world were Rob James-Collier, loveable Liam Connor (the new part owner of Underworld in Coronation Street, Steven Farebrother), the hard-nosed hack John McNally in Emmerdale, and Jamie Lomas, the lothario Warren Fox, in Hollyoaks.)

Gemma's first day on the Hollyoaks set was nerve-racking. "I had to walk out in just my underwear," she says.



➤ **PASS THE CRANBERRY** Hollyoaks star Gemma Merna, left, enjoys festive fare at Numero in Casino 235 with Stephanie Elmore

So how has being a soapstar changed her life from the days behind the make up counter? "Aside from seeing Dr Karl Kennedy in the flesh at the NTAs (at which Gemma admits to being

very starstruck). I just spend more time in the beauty salons, but I don't get a discount in Harvey Nicks any more and I don't get many freebies. Anyone who wants to send me any beauty

goodies would be great – I love clothes as well." She laughs.

» **Numero, Casino 235, Great Northern Warehouse, Deansgate, Manchester.**

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Bars & Pubs

Cocktails to kickstart your big evening of fun

NEW Year's Eve. It's a mixed bag, isn't it? All too often you're in one bar and your boyfriend and best mates are several miles away, unable to get a cab into town, or just being rubbish at home.

This year, then, we've come up with the perfect solution. Invite all your friends around for a cocktail before you go out. That way you'll get to see them at the start of the night, at least, even if you end up spread across the city like manure by dawn.

To make your invite irresistible, we've consulted Manchester's cocktail expert, Stuart Baillie.

The 27-year-old Mojo barman won the Food and Drink Awards cocktail competition back in October with his bourbon and orange-based 'Lovell Serve All' and he's come up with a couple of equally charming numbers for New Year's Eve, too.

1. The Poinsettia Cocktail

What you need: Champagne flute, strawberry vodka (or just vodka), rose champagne, cranberry juice.

"This drink is based on rose champagne with a little bit of strawberry vodka" Stuart explains. "You can put fresh straw-

berries in too if you like, plus a dash of cranberry juice. The name gives it a yuletide theme, but it's just a really gorgeous, refreshing drink at any time of year."

2. The Champagne Cocktail

What you need: Champagne flute, brown sugar cubes, angostura bitters, cognac (or brandy), champagne.

"This is a timeless cocktail," Stuart enthuses. "You start off by mixing all the ingredients together without the champagne. So: put a dash of cognac, one brown sugar cube crumbled up and a dash of angostura bitters into a glass. Dissolve the sugar with the cognac using a spoon and then top up with champagne really slowly, because the sugar will make it fizz up even more than normal."

If you like making cocktails at home, Stuart suggests investing in a proper shaker to really get into the swing of things in 2007: "You see the classic, all-metal cocktail shaker everywhere now," he says,

"They've even got them in places like Habitat. The more professional ones are called Boston shakers. You'll see these in



CHAMPAGNE LIFESTYLE
Cocktails at Mojo

any bar that does a lot of cocktails and they come as a two-piece set.

"The bottom part is glass and the other part is tin. You make the drink in the glass part so you can see how much you are putting in and then when you place the tin over the top it creates a vacuum for shaking. They're invaluable."

Ruth Allan