

Win a free, personally dedicated Oxford Companion

2 Nov 2006 by JR

There is no doubt that the world of wine on the internet is an exciting one, as witness [yesterday's news](#) of a new British element to [erobertparker.com](#) and heavy advertising of 'the world's most popular wine website' ([winespectator.com](#)).

The current, eminently sensible online trend is to maximise all means available of discovering what users themselves want. I would of course like to keep developing and improving this site and would very much like to hear from you about what you like and, particularly, dislike about jancisrobinson.com. In the old days I might have asked you to send suggestions via email but now we have the delightfully simple and open method of your posting comments in the box below. Using a similar co-operative system of sharing views and information we have already made quite a number of refinements to the members' forum on purple pages.

We would be particularly grateful for any constructive suggestions for how to make this site better. Not all of them may be technically possible to achieve but I promise to address all of them positively.

I would also like to send a personally dedicated copy of the new, 3rd edn of *The Oxford Companion to Wine* to the person who sends in the most useful suggestion(s).

As you may remember, we moved to a [new platform](#) in September and there are still some aspects that Subhub know need attention including:

- refining the general search function
- improving the print function (printer icon top right)
- reinstating the 'send to a friend' function (envelope icon top right)
- reinstating the tag function whereby you can easily be directed to a list of other articles on a similar topic
- moving the 'add a new topic' box to the top of the list of topics in the members' forum

Please bear in mind that we are already all too aware of the shortcomings listed above.

We would be extremely grateful if you could answer the following questions:

1. If you are *not* a purple pager and would like to win the signed *Oxford Companion*, could you please supply your email address and your location as the system will describe you simply as 'Anonymous'.
3. What do you like least about the site?
4. What do you like most about the site?
5. How do you suggest we should improve it?

With very many thanks for getting this far and hopes that together we can continue to improve jancisrobinson.com.

Anonymous

fcurtis@stclair.college.com

I wish the site were more interactive; the site is very down to earth, which is excellent in its non-snob appeal.

I would like some course from Jancis. I recently watched her series and it was outstanding.

Regards,

Floyd Curtis

Windsor, Canada

Anonymous

dccrossley@btinternet.com - Two ideas, but they may be hard to bring to fruition. First, we have "wine of the week". How about a guest contributor's "comment of the week", perhaps a fellow scribe, grower, MW student, merchant etc with a pithy take on some current issue/ debate. They may be prepared to do it (for free). Second, photos once in a while. I know we have you Jancis, but I mean viticultural in nature. Might just brighten things up. However, whilst other sites look more flashy, this is the best for up-to-date content. Thanks, David.

Joff Day (Penzance)

Hello Jancis

Thanks so much for asking the questions! I was just discussing these very issues with a good friend over lunch with a glass of Catena Malbec (Wine of the week for Sep 26th)! What I like least has formed my suggestions for improving the site so I'll answer that in a bit.

What I like about the site is 1. its simplicity of navigation 2. your (and your team's) passion for wine - that's contagious 3. the easy to read style with which you and your team write.

What I feel could be improved and developed (and this isn't really a criticism) is the Members Forum. As a relative newbie, reading some of the contributions from some of the very experienced aficionados can be quite intimidating. I sometimes feel that a question or comment I would like to contribute might seem too simplistic or naive. I would like to suggest that the Members Forum has several boards (like many forums) - certainly somewhere that feels 'safe' for people like me to start with - and at the opposite end a Board for those long in the tooth in this fascinating world whose contributions would be appreciated more by those like them.

In the same way you encouraged those of us who spend £5 - £7 on a bottle to venture up (Trade up (or down?), but not too far) there must be plenty of Members in the 'mid' bracket who would also contribute to boards in the forum aimed more at them.

Having said that, I do read some of the longer contributions but find some don't particularly help or inspire me to contribute.

Keep up the great work!

Joff Day

Anonymous

gmothershed@msn.com

Your site should add an audio and video feature, Real Player, MSN audio and video, Ipod and Ipod casts, etc.. The topics that should be shown and heard would be of your activities, i.e., wine tasting en primeur, speeches and the various wine events which you attend.

George L. Mothershed

Phoenix, Arizona

Stefaan De Belder (Antwerpen)

First of all, the power of your website comes from its informative power! Your direct and transparent style, your down-to-earth analysis and your personal touch in each article, is very attractive. This, combined with the lightweight webdesign, is a relief in this world of commercial, overloaded websites on wine. I think this has to stay, while it seems to me a part of the success.

The login procedure can be better (why I jump always back to the home-page when I forgot to log in willing to read an article?). Perhaps the name of the member user can be displayed on the webpage (who am I? have I signed in?). To make the website still more informative, you can improve the classification of your articles (key words) and the member forum (subforums). This can improve also the search facilities.

Thanks for your outstanding work!

Stefaan De Belder

Antwerpen, Belgium.

Christian Pillsbury (California/ France)

I agree that the navigation could be somewhat improved. I use the RSS feed in my browser, but can't link into an article directly. I must login and be directed to the general menu before re-navigating to where I wanted to go.

I'd also request that the Oxford Companion be searchable by keyword instead of scrolling through page after page (there's a lot of it!). Either that, or make the

UC load one whole letter- category at a time. I then one could use the search function within a browser to facilitate a search. I have a copy of the UC, which is perfect for light reading, but I like to use your online version when I'm working.

Thanks for asking!

Anonymous

Dahling, Unfortunately not all of us wine lovers can afford \$20.00 a bottle wine very often, neither can we afford to join your fancy club. Please don't leave us out. Thanks for the free section, would appreciate your suggestions on under \$20.00 a bottle wines. Will be happy to do the research for you...Aloha

Anonymous

MauiWowie@gmail.com Volcano, Hawaii to be added to the request for your insights and suggestions for those of us whose diets are restricted by our pocketbooks. Believe me, we are none less enthusiastic. Aloha again.

Jancis Robinson (Mission Control)

Great comments so far - Thanks to everyone above. Seems as though I may be flying at too high an altitude in terms of the wines I write about?

The more practical suggestions are also particularly welcome - not least because I am seeing one of the technomasters tomorrow evening. Please keep those comments flowing in...

Anonymous

1) What do you like least about the site?

Not all content is free of charge.

2) What do you like most about the site?

No one can beat Jancis Robinson at her game: authoritative without priggishness; opinionated as all wine writers are, yet exuding wit.

3) How do you suggest we should improve it?

Oh, more photos perhaps.

.....
Morry Jaffe (mjnyc@hotmail.com)

Raf Maes (Hoboken)

Starting these few suggestions with the observation that this is already a very fine website (with a 'mission control' manager who seems to find like 27 hours in a day ;-).

On the 'Like Least' part:

As already mentioned by others: Landing back on the Main page, coming from an RSS link to an article or after logging- in as a member, i.o. staying with the article page. (I believe the previous edition of this site did just that)

On the 'Like Most' part: The quality of the content and of the contributions by members. The many 'mission control' interludes in the forum. The general 'atmosphere' of the interactions (is it the wine ?). The lean, sober design, sticking to WWW standards.

Improvement tip:

- A 'preview' function for comments. Bringing the possibility of previewing any special formatting and/ or URL links before submitting a comment.

- This is probably already considered in the 'Search' improvements: More relaxed criteria for diacritic characters such as accents and umlaut (e.g. currently 'Künstler' returns different results from 'Kunstler').

Raf Maes

Jancis Robinson (Mission Control)

Very useful. I'm only showing off because this is the first evening I have spent totally at my desk (with the exception of a 30- minute supper with our younger daughter) for as long as I can remember and someone mentioned 27- hour days.

I definitely need a slave to unpack, log, collate and serve wine samples. And a new wing in which all this can take place. And, yes, 27 hours in a day would be most useful.

How about making this box a bit deeper? I'd vote for that.

Maureen Downey (San Francisco)

It would be useful if people in their personal details could give a little blurb about themselves. That way we could look and see if they are doctors, wine industry professionals or happy & knowledgeable consumers. Also, if people opted to include, perhaps their email if you wanted to ask someone from the forum a question without posting it. Just a few details from other forums I appreciate.

For the future - it would be the coolest thing EVER - if there was an audio button so that when you were studying/ reading through the Oxford Companion you could get proper pronunciation of certain words or terms. All the languages make it tough to conquer the info, being able to pronounce something correctly would be a great start. It might be a bit complicated, but it sure would be an invaluable tool.

Anonymous

I agree about the use of streaming video with sound...very much like what the NYTimes does on wine. One more suggestion: the wines you recommend very often are not available to the ordinary person ...in an ordinary wine shop. Suggestions?

Anonymous

I just commented on the streaming video and recommending wines that are accessible. Forgot my e- mail address- epuglisi@aol.com

Thanks for all the information in a thoughtful and friendly presentation.

David Graves (Napa)

Photos (or at least images) would liven things up-- label reproductions of wines, the odd map, a picture of Mel Knox (maybe not, on second thought).

Bandwidth could be an issue for some, but I am sure the IT boffins (notice use of cross- the- pond term by Yank) can figure this out. And I love the audio button idea of Ms. Downey. Same for streaming video.

wavey@saintsbury.com

Andrzej Daszkiewicz (Torun)

I think I've already mentioned this, but I will write it again: a printer- friendly format of the threads in the members' forum would help. And this gives an answer to question 3: apart from the highest quality of what both of you, Jancis and Julia, write I really enjoy the forum so much, that I print some of the discussions to have them in my archives.

Jancis Robinson (Mission Control)

What great ideas. Keep 'em coming.

Tim Hall (London)

The quality and clarity of your analysis is what makes the site. As well the simplicity of its navigational mechanics and its even- handed commercial independence. I love the tombola style of the members'forum and think sub- forums would threaten its fun, lack of polemical axe- grinding and its way of sparking people off on interesting tangents and anecdotes. On the techy side, anything that continues to make navigation simple and intuitive - for instance, breaking up the site guide (FAQs) into each content section, with a button on 'How to get the Most from this Section...' within each area, would help stop newcomers forgetting the instructions presently in one dollop or having to print them out. On the content side, some suggestions - based on a feeling there is an often self- conscious or inhibited straight hunger for knowledge and wine appreciation skills out there, which people can be shy to ask for - the intimidation thing wine can suffer from so much. I suggest people want to know more about wine in general, what to buy, where to get it and how to appreciate and enjoy it even more.

1 A section of reviews and profiles, up to date, of the increasingly important small high- quality merchants - so vital to wine lovers now, but given how mail/ web order has revolutionised their potential 'reach', not enough people know about them.

2 More 'educational' content, that it fun and up to date and at various levels based on requests from your audience.

3 Agree on the pleas for more pics and graphics.

4 More from members / visitors on visiting regions and specific producers - the hot news and anecdotal insights from those with the vineyard mud fresh on their shoes is something versatile websites can really convey in a note- comparing way.

5 More systematic and long- term perhaps, profiles of producers and domaines - solid, but also more on the people behind the bottles.

6 Merge 'Don't Quote Me' and 'Inside Info' into something like 'Jancis Says...'. Most of what you do has a good feel of inside track I think and I can't always see why one article is in one section or the other.

7 How to appreciate more - a section something like Jancis Robinson's Winetasting Workbook online, but really up to date with its comments on styles and

specific bottlings to try, with question and comments slots for members to come back on. I he first online tasting course and a never- ending freshened- up web adventure rather than a finite set of chapters which will date from day 1.

Ben Williams (bath)

Like the least:

Please add a check box by the log to persist my login via a cookie- this will save me having to login when I arrive from your RSS feed and then find the article I was looking for

Site design could do with a little bit of polish- its a bit stark.

Like the Most:

The split between free and paid

That you removed the images as text from the main menu.

The great content- keep flying high!

Things to change/ Add:

I would add 3-5 minute video shorts- Zero cost, low production values point and shoot, warts and all type of stuff. Tastings, rants, basic info re winetasting, informal chats with interesting people- Either in front or behind the camera. These should be watermarked with JR.com and hosted on a 3rd party site so you incur no bandwidth bills (www.blip.tv lets you retain all copyright). These would be free to view with the idea that they are the hook to build your community further and increase subscriptions.

I would *gasp* experiment with google adsense (in a simple single unobtrusive line) on all free content. Adsense is good as its obvious that you are not endorsing any of these individual companies but as you increase readership through the vids you can also generate extra revenue which I think all subscribers and site visitors would like as it will help to ensure the continuation of a great site.

I would get your tech peeps to change the order of the title tag around so that you have the heading followed by Fine Wine Writing by JR. This should give you a slightly better search engine placement and also aid accessibility as screen readers read the title tag as the Title of the page and it would be bloomin annoying to have every page start with Fine Wine Writing by JR rather than what the content of the page is.

Can you add some rollover effects to the menus- good aesthetics also reinforces that they are links.

Michael Alberty (Oregon)

Hire an American At- Large Wine Critic. California is a big state and Linda Murphy is going to have her hands full. So you should hire someone who can cover the Pacific NW, Missouri and New York. To avoid controversy it should be someone who hasn't published before. A blank slate as it were. You don't want Purple Pagets dredging up old quotes about Pavie or microoxygenation (two completely unrelated examples). And to avoid driving Purple Pages subscription rates up it should be someone willing to work for free. Or for wine. I have a short list of names if you need it.

Jancis Robinson (Mission Control)

Now how short would that be?

Anonymous

Homer Dalbey (California)

Your site is interesting and helpful, and the comments clear and well thought out. Your observations about specific wines are enough to make me head out the door to my local wine shop!

A suggestion: why not review and compare several wines of a single variety -- Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, etc. -- from different wineries. That way I can look for a particular variety of red or white and see how you rate the bottles from different producers.

Homer Dalbey - hdalbey@sfsu.edu

Andras Salamon (Oxford)

The reason I subscribe is the editorial voice. It's coherent, even with multiple members of the team. It's also precise but not jargon- laden, and deals with the upper- medium to higher end wines which are not well covered elsewhere. I dislike the blind panel tasting verdicts beloved of auditors, and the subjectivity of a single commentator for each wine is a big positive for me (whether I agree or not with the actual assessment). Idiosyncratic choice of wines covered is fine: this site does not necessarily have to cover all wines available at any given point. Not a single Beaujolais in the tasting database? That's perfectly OK. It's also perfectly OK if not every tasting reported is a vertical of twenty post- WWII vintages of a first growth.

In terms of dislikes, the login system definitely could move to an optional cookie based approach (as suggested by Ben Williams). This would probably smooth the user experience for the majority, and seems to have become the standard for sites requiring a login.

A second suggestion would be a preview feature for posting. A preview would help improve the general layout and formatting of member contributions, and is now standard on many (if not most) forum sites. If this is not possible, a reminder of the most important markup tags used would be welcome, perhaps just above each feedback box, as part of the "Add a comment" text.

A third suggestion would be to apply additional automated sanity checking to the tastings database. An alternative would be to allow user preference to show and change the order or presentation of fields describing wines returned in tasting notes. This can help to diagnose why (for instance) some 2001's that are in the database fail to be returned unless one types the vintage into the "search text" field. With clearer delineation of the fields, one can see that the producer and year have somehow been interchanged. Another example: red Loire returns an alarming number of gooseberry- laden tasting notes, perhaps the colour field has been set incorrectly in some cases (or maybe there is a stylistic shift in vinifying Cabernet Franc that we should be told about)... The reason this is even an issue is that the tasting notes database is one of the few such databases that is reasonably comprehensive while retaining a coherent palate and moderate levels of detail, so it has become a rather valuable tool to plan tastings.

Finally, I disagree with those clamouring for coverage of the lower end. Most newspaper wine columns cover that aspect of the market well, as do print magazines like Wine & Spirit. Online, sites like <http://www.superplonk.com/> and many wine forum sites have extensive discussion of good value wines at lower price points. I do like the editorial comments singling out specifically good value wines, but would prefer coverage to continue focusing on wines that are objectively good, rather than everyday wines that happen to impress above their price point. However, this is not meant as a call for tasting notes of antique rarities -- being able to buy the wines discussed is a big plus, even if some of them require a frank discussion with one's bank manager first!

Jancis Robinson (Mission Control)

Since the rate of response to this seems to have slowed down, I will now award the free, signed Oxford Companion (pause for drumroll).

I feel very spoilt by the thoughtfulness of all this useful input and thank you all. My shortlist for winners includes Maureen Downey, Tim Hall, Ben Williams and Andras Salamon but I think in the end that the winner is.....Ben Williams as he has suggested things I would never have thought about myself. I will be asking him how he would like his Oxford Companion dedicated if at all before mailing a copy of the UK edition to him.

Thank you all. I am very keen on adding audio and video clips to the site. I do have great 'access' as tv producers call it, after all. Now all I have to do is buy the hardware and master the software. Don't expect immediate results please. My record re adding images is dismal, I must confess, but I really will try harder. I have drawn the attention of the techies at Subhub to the cookies question and other related matters beyond my personal control.

Anonymous

IMHO, the most original book in several centuries of learned wine writing was your 1989 "Vintage Timecharts", which (for readers of these pages who are not familiar) graphically depicted your assessment of and expectations for the evolution over more than two decades of a representative collection of the world's finest wines in important vintages ranging from the early 1970's up to the mid/ late-1980's.

Whether or not one agreed with your methodology or the "mechanistic" representation of your conclusions, it was a monumental and pathbreaking effort that every student and expert alike would want to consult (especially in the late 1980's and early 1990's), whether to learn more about great wines in great and not-so- great vintages, or to make informed decisions when purchasing wines in the secondary markets. Each wine's timechart was so much more informative and useful than the snapshot views to which wine reviews and ratings are largely confined, and represented an appropriately bold statement by oenology's most independent authority. The wine world has seen nothing comparable in print since then.

Alas, you have not updated "Vintage Timecharts", and I thought: Wow! What if Jancis could thrill us by putting all of that information online and updating it? The technology is readily available, and the online medium is almost ideal for a project of this kind today. Whether or not you can sort through the copyright issues is no doubt an important variable, but we all await the updated Timecharts with bated breath.

Rayner Cheung, Hong Kong, rayner.cheung@gmail.com