

The 1982 vintage - of MWs

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The year 1982 is of huge significance in the world of wine. It was the vintage that marked the beginning of the modern era in Bordeaux, when ripe fruit was first accepted as fine bordeaux's most desirable feature. Red bordeaux 1982s, at hundreds of pounds a bottle, are some of the most self-indulgent wines to which wine lovers can treat themselves today.

When the three people who qualified as Masters of Wine in 1982 invited me to a lunch featuring 1982s to celebrate their quarter-century as MWs I accepted immediately. Without even asking why they were a year late (because Liz Morcom MW had been ill and was moving house apparently), I suggested they held the lunch chez nous rather than in a restaurant as I thought it would be more relaxed. In the event it was just as well for the group was the noisiest ever gathered round my table. Most restaurateurs would have thrown us out.

The idea was that Liz, Richard Harvey MW and Mark Lynton MW would invite people who had either helped them in their careers, or had passed the demanding MW exams soon afterwards (which is why I was invited). All eight of us round the table were Masters of Wine. In 1984 I had been the first person outside the wine trade to be allowed in to this now-international crack corps which still numbers only 264 worldwide, about a quarter of them female. Mark Bingley MW, who now runs Louis Roederer's British import company, passed in 1983. Liz Robertson MW, who once ran Safeway's wine department, also passed in 1984, while Jasper Morris of Berry Bros was a 1985 MW. The granddaddy at the table was Julian Brind, who qualified as an MW in 1970 when the first female MW Sarah Morphew also passed, and who has now retired from running Waitrose's wine department. To our impressed amazement, he went off to play real tennis after our extended lunch, to which we had all been instructed to bring at least one bottle of a 1982 or thereabouts. Once everyone had arrived, our entry hall was littered with wine carriers.

Mark Bingley set the tone of over-supply by bringing two chilled bottles of Louis Roederer 1983 on the basis that one of them might have run out of steam, or rather carbon dioxide. Neither was aggressively fizzy but the first at least was impressively fresh and suggested that you really don't have to worry about cellaring top quality champagne. We then moved to the table to try the least ambitious wine of the day, a 1982 Bouzy Rouge from Georges Vesselle, a still, very pale tawny Pinot Noir from Champagne grapes that Mark Lynton had brought. Alive, but only just - unlike its donor who has most profitably sailed the wine trade sea. He went from an IDV (Diageo precursor) graduate traineeship to working for Julian at Waitrose while doing his MW exams. In his career since he could be said to have moved steadily downmarket until building a hugely successful business in the Languedoc sourcing the likes of Winter Hill and Majestic's Cuvée de Richard, some of the best-value wines then available in the UK, before selling out.

Lynton lives in Suffolk and now has properties in Norfolk and the Minervois (bought from another MW). He is rather disillusioned with the supermarkets' current obsession with promotions above all else. (Ex-supermarket buyers Brind and Robertson agreed wholeheartedly.) By the end of lunch when we had enjoyed a dazzling array of great wines, Lynton admitted he was sorry he had turned his professional back on "the good stuff". In the event however he brought what was possibly the single most exciting wine of the lunch, a gloriously wild, rich, sensual bottle of port, the 1982 vintage of Quinta do Noval's famous Nacional bottling. He couldn't remember how he came to own it.

Richard Harvey is the fine wine specialist of the 1982 MWs. He is now European Head of Wine for auctioneers Bonhams and brought along a three-pack of top 1982s for us to choose from: Sassicaia from the Tuscan coast and, from Bordeaux, super second Léoville Las Cases and first growth Haut-Brion. We chose the superbly subtle Haut-Brion, which for a time was rather overwhelmed by the luscious opulence of a magnum of Lynch Bages 1982 from Liz Morcom's cellar. We savoured these two with wood pigeon and foie gras on sautéed broccoli and radishes so sweet several of us took them for baby turnips. (I had asked St John chefs Matt Cranston and Adriana Rosati to cook for us - perish the thought we MWs had to do anything more demanding than decant.)

We had reached these heights via Jasper's very respectable La Lagune 1982 and my rich Terte Roteboeuf 1982, both of which went beautifully with fat, beetroot-stuffed ravioli with poppy seeds and parmesan. By the end of the main course we ensured we had an empty glass for the only non-European wine of the lunch, the 1982 vintage of Australia's most famous wine, Penfolds Grange (back then called Grange Hermitage because this was long before the Australians agreed to toe the line in their use of European place names). It was a quite different beast - almost more like a caramel syrup than a wine - a good bridge to our trio of sweet wines to be served with Lancashire cheese and St John's popular Eccles cakes. Julian's unusually light 1986 vintage of Ch Rieussec and a 1982 Ambré Rivesaltes from the co-op paved the way for the stunning port and sobering coffee. I later calculated that we consumed about £2,000 worth of wine in total but, as my predecessor here Edmund Penning-Rowse always said, you must never think of the value when pulling a cork.

Liz Morcom also donated the Rivesaltes, made in Roussillon, not far from one of her two new homes. Indeed if any generalisation could be made about Masters of Wine it is that they are much more likely than average to own property in France. Jasper Morris even lives fulltime in Burgundy now. When Liz took her Master of Wine exams she had just left the Malmaison Wine Club, one of the most high-profile wine merchants of the time, owned - it seems almost incredible now - by British Transport Hotels, the group of old railway hotels headquartered at St Pancras in a turret high above what is now the new Eurostar terminal. Soon after winning top prize in the MW exams she went with her lawyer husband to Hong Kong where for three years she was effectively the colony's sole wine writer and educator (how things have changed). Since returning to Britain she has continued to run wine courses, is House & Garden magazine's wine correspondent and has been wine consultant for the Café Rouge chain and the Archduke wine bar at Waterloo. Now that she has moved from Hertfordshire to Edinburgh she is on the look-out for work in Scotland, and nowadays there should be no shortage.

The current winescape is unrecognisably different from what it was in 1982 when British wine drinkers, then far less numerous than they are today, were in the middle of a love affair with the wines of California. Australian wine was virtually unknown outside its homeland. And Liebfraumilch was hugely popular around the world. I wonder which wines the 2008 crop of MWs might choose to celebrate with in 2033?