

## A taste for public humiliation

12 Nov 2005 by JR

Andrew Stalker, the head of investment risk at Insight Investment in London, has reason to be grateful for his penchant for big, bold burgundies. It was materially responsible for his team's decisive triumph in last week's seventh annual Pol Roger Business School Alumni Blind Wine Tasting Challenge held in the auditorium of Linklaters' smart London offices. The most puzzling of the eight wines served blind to three teams of ex-students from each of Harvard, London Business School and INSEAD was undoubtedly a red Champy 2003 Pernand Vergelesses which I for one would have taken for a particularly exuberant rioja.

Most other teams pressed the Tempranillo button on their keypads when presented with three possible grape varieties for this atypical heatwave wine but Andrew, captain of the London Business School 3 team, was sure it was Pinot Noir because he had a case of it in his garage. His two trips to Bordeaux and one to Burgundy so far this year presumably did no harm to his wine knowledge either and his team went on to gain a total of 27 points out of a possible 40 – firmly ahead of their nearest rivals INSEAD 1 who managed 22. One Harvard team managed only 10 correct answers which one of the observers of this public humiliation unkindly calculated was rather fewer than "a blind monkey would have got".

So why do 40 of the financial and managerial world's finest, and certainly finest-trained, submit themselves to this very public test of expertise every year?

As a Master of Wine and supposed wine expert, I hate tasting wine blind in public. When I was a newcomer to wine I was perfectly happy to do it because everyone expected me to get it all wrong and remembered only when I got it right. Nowadays precisely the reverse is the case.

I hear of more and more wine tasting competitions however – Insight have even had their own in-house version between different departments. Presumably the growing band of amateurs keen to devote an evening to having their blind tasting skills tested in public has a little less to lose professionally than me. Nevertheless they usually have to perform surrounded by their peers and I should imagine are not allowed to forget real gaffes.

In the case of last week's contestants, I suppose that by going to business school in the first place they have demonstrated they are gluttons for punishment, but according to Andrew Stalker, who had sat in the audience four times before finally taking the plunge and competing this year, "it's good fun".

These competitors, all already benefitting from what is generally regarded as a champagne lifestyle, are certainly not doing it for material gain. Apart from a rather handsome, but returnable, silver bowl, the so-called Pol pot, each of the four or five members of the winning team is presented with a bottle of vintage Pol Roger. The runners up have to make do with a bottle of non vintage.

But they clearly all care deeply about winning – perhaps because they work in such a competitive environment. Claudia Pendred, assistant director investment banking at N M Rothschild, has from the very beginning captained the INSEAD 1 team which waltzed off with the Pol pot in the first three years of the competition and is usually within a whisker of the top score. This year she questioned her particular glass of JosMeyer Alsace Riesling. "I know the producer. This wine isn't right." Standards are high in this taste-off – at least four competitors had already taken the highest level of professional wine courses run by the Wine and Spirit Education Trust – and many of the teams meet beforehand to practise, even if these sessions tend to deteriorate in to "more of a piss-up really" according to one competitor.

Harvard is yet to field a winning team, but came within one point of winning last year. And since this year their tasters included no fewer than three vineyard owners (in England and South Africa) it is surely only a matter of time. The Harvard teams were however, streets ahead of the others in the factual quiz held halfway through the contest while the red wines were poured. You want to know how many bottles of Pol Roger Winston Churchill is reputed to have had opened for him between 1908 and 1965? Harvard 2 knew, or at least could rapidly calculate, that at the rate of two bottles a day it had to be in the region of 42,000.

You can hardly blame sponsors Pol Roger, a smallish, low-tech family company, for doing their best to brand this annual event which eats up considerable management time, as does the annual Oxbridge wine tasting competition which they have also sponsored since taking it over from Harveys of Bristol in 1992.

A bottle of Pol means a great deal more to an undergraduate than someone with their own private equity company so the payback for Pol Roger is rather more obvious from the varsity match each spring (pre Boat Race) than the alumni one each autumn. "I've absolutely no doubt that over the years the Oxbridge sponsorship has been a wonderful investment," says Pol Roger's UK managing director Bill Gunn, a Master of Wine himself so no stranger to the rigours of blind tasting. "Fourteen people every year compete and they subsequently pop up all over the world and become international ambassadors for Pol. The business school competition began as simply a networking exercise but it's made us a huge number of friends."

Spurred on by this, Pol Roger are now branching out and clearly hoping to establish themselves as leaders in the field of blind wine tasting sponsorship. This year they ran a competition similar to the Oxbridge one between Edinburgh and St Andrew's universities. They're also on their third tasting contest between the wine divisions of Britain's regional brewers and their fourth between teams from universities in France, the winner playing that year's Oxbridge winner. Oxford for long enjoyed dominance of the varsity tasting match but Cambridge won last year and are rumoured to be training intensively for 2006.

Claudia Pendred is effectively three times a wine tasting 'blue' in that she also tasted for Oxford throughout her university career. Other former Oxbridge tasters since the competition was established in 1953 include the late historian Sir John Plumb, Sir Ewen Fergusson (who went on to become ambassador to France), wine writers Oz Clarke, Charles Metcalfe and Julian Jeffs QC, no fewer than 11 Masters of Wine, and Harry Eyres who graces the back page of the Weekend FT. There was no contest in the year of my own matriculation 1968 – presumably because the revolting students could not countenance something as decadently frivolous as wine tasting.