

Drinking in history, from a bottle

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One of the things that defines wine is its ability to age, far longer than anything else we buy to eat or drink.

Unfortunately only a tiny proportion of all wine made has the constitution for a long life but too many wine drinkers seem to think that almost any bottle will be improved by being kept a year or two under the stairs. (I am always being asked to value Blue Nun laid down in the 1950s.) In fact with most inexpensive wine the reverse is the case; it is designed to be drunk as young as possible when the fruit is fresh. And because by far the greatest volume of wine consumed is cheap rather than expensive, I have evolved my own theory that overall, vastly more wine is drunk too old than too young.

But one of wine's greatest pleasures is drinking a fully mature wine, one that is not just a quick hit of super-ripe fruit and obvious vitality, but a complex amalgam of flavours and nuances that are beautifully intertwined and counterbalanced, the whole given a sort of intellectual sheen by the patina of age. For your wine drinking over the holidays I strongly urge you to try at least one older wine as a centrepiece, something to stir the senses and even discussion.

I rarely think that wine makes a good topic for sustained discussion round the dinner table but if it comes with history attached, that is another matter. The older a wine, the more satisfying it is if it has survived gracefully. And if it were made not just in a reasonably distant vintage but in another era entirely, then it adds immeasurably to the thrill of drinking it.

At the end of last month I found myself in Beaune enjoying a white and a red burgundy made in 1865, definitely two of the more notable perks of this job. When these wines were made Lincoln had just been assassinated, the American Civil War was just drawing to a close and Bismarck was merely in training for the Franco-Prussian war. So ancient do the wines' origins sound, you would expect them to taste like faded fragments, more like vinegar or water than wine, but this was very far from the case.

The bottles of Le Montrachet 1865 and Clos Vougeot 1865, each from a vineyard that would not be officially classified as one of Burgundy's precious Grands Crus until the wines were already 70 years old, had come from the cellars of Bouchard Père et Fils, one of Beaune's most famous wine merchants.

The fame of Bouchard Père et Fils (no connection with Bouchard Aîné) has long rested with its exceptionally rich vineyard holdings (many Beaune merchants own remarkably few vines but buy in grapes and wine instead) and with its handsome base in the 15th century Château de Beaune.

When Champenois Joseph Henriot took over the company from the Bouchard family in 1995 he found the cellars beneath the château stuffed with bottles of all ages (not unlike the current situation at near-neighbour Camille Giroud which was recently acquired by an American investment syndicate). Henriot set about recruiting tasters to help sort the sheep from the goats. Unfortunately I was never able to join in but I do know that these 1865s were some of the most treasured finds.

Michael Broadbent's *Vintage Wine* (Little Brown/ Websters 2002), ever the bible of great old wine, cites 1865 as one of the four outstanding Burgundy vintages of the 19th century. Even he with his 50 years of tasting relics from the most venerable cellars in the world can produce only one white and two red burgundy tasting notes prior to 1865, two from 1864 and one rather dismissive one on a faded 1858 Corton.

So this was quite an occasion – a dinner given by Joseph Henriot for about 20 of us, a single bottle yielding about 20 generous tasting portions. A France 2 TV crew were to film us enjoying what turned out to be an exceptionally good dinner too (you will be relieved to know) although I am not convinced that wine tasting is really a spectator sport.

Of course with a wine this old, it is wise to approach it gradually. It was only seemly then that we kicked off with Henriot 1955 in quite miraculously lively magnums – a really stunningly fresh and savoury champagne that had apparently been disgorged 10 years previously so was by no means straight off the lees.

A Chevalier Montrachet 1964, also from the Bouchard cellars like all the subsequent wines, was actually a bit of a baby in this company but an extremely powerful one with notes of butterscotch and marzipan.

Local chef Jean- Paul Thibert followed his cauliflower cream on smoked herring eggs (much more delicious than it reads) with the most stunning wild mushroom and local truffle terrine, warm and moist with a whole baby cep in the middle of each slice, but this sensory bullseye was completely swamped by the wine served with it, the 139 year-old Montrachet.

I suppose technically this could be described as a glass of Chardonnay, but only in the same way that Nelson Mandela could be described as 90 per cent water. All the bottles had been opened that lunchtime, checked by Yann Eon (once Bocuse's sommelier and now, conveniently, part of the Bouchard sales force) and re-stoppered with their original corks. This white burgundy looked more like tawny port, but it smelt wonderfully vigorous and fresh with an extraordinarily intense, sweet perfume.

The violet and red-fruit fragrance made it smell almost like a Pinot Noir, the red burgundy grape, to me, but then we have recently learnt through DNA typing that Chardonnay is the progeny of Pinot. This was liquid richness in a glass but the overall impression was dry not sweet. Usually with wines as old as this the expectation is that they will fade rapidly in the glass, but this one continued to stun us all. I noted that it began to lose its perfume and fruit a whole hour after it was poured.

I have run out of space and you have probably run out of patience for the Beaune Greves 1964 (mushroomy and ready) and the Corton 1934 (thick and velvety) served next but I must report on the Clos Vougeot 1865. I can honestly say that had I been given it blind I would have been out by at least a century. Far from pale tawny or even slightly brick-coloured, as old red wines are wont to be, this was the most marvellously vigorous deep ruby to look at and even tasted quite young. Meaty, gamey and velvety at the same time, it had the most extraordinary freshness. This full-blooded red was perfumed like the Montrachet but still extremely lively, almost kittenish.

Bottles in the Bouchard cellar have generally been re-corked every 30 to 40 years, and occasionally topped up. The Montrachet 1865 had apparently been re-corked in 1942 and then in December 1991 when it didn't need to be topped up. Nor did the Clos Vougeot 1865 when it was re-corked in 1943 and again in December 1991. Both were considerably more vigorous than the 18th century Yquem I have been lucky enough to taste (though the 1811 Yquem was a marvel...).

With apologies for this exhibitionism, I would again urge you to experience the pleasures of mature wine. An 1865 is certainly outside the range of possibilities for most of us but I have suggested some much more realistic combinations that can still be tracked down in the distribution chain using www.winesearcher.com, and which in many cases cost less than much younger, more fashionable vintages.

Retailers who specialise in single bottles of older wine which have a reputation for decent storage (poor storage can ruin many a venerable bottle) include the Rare Wine Company of Sonoma (707 996 4484 and www.rarewineco.com) in the US, Paulson Rare Wine (www.rare-wine.com) in Germany, and Reid Wines (01761 452645) and Peter Wylie (01884 277555 and www.wyliefinewines.co.uk) in the UK.

Some mature vintages to drink now

Red bordeaux 1997, 1990, 1989, 1988, 1985, 1983-1979

Red burgundy 1998, 1997, 1993-1988

White burgundy 1997, 1995, 1992

Red Rhône 1999-1997, 1994, 1991, 1990

Italian reds 1997, 1993, 1990