wines of the week archive index | 2000

25 Nov 2004 by JR

Mission Hill Pinot Blanc 1999 Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, Canada

Yes, it's a googly one. Very outré, indeed. Unbeknown to the rest of the world this western corner of Canada has been planting vinifera vines like crazy so that it now has about 4,000 acres (almost half as much as Oregon, for example, and two-thirds as many as Ontario, Canada's much better-known wine producer). Most of them are grown on the slopes of the long, narrow Okanagan Lake and, in the right hands, the resulting wines can have beautifully crystalline flavours. Mission Hill have a New Zealand winemaker and this crisp, dry, smokily aromatic white is vaguely reminiscent of a Marlborough Sauvignon with its racy green fruit flavours, but it also has Pinot plumpness on the mid-palate.

In Britain it is sold by Waitrose at £6.99.
For stockists elsewhere, see WineSearcher

Château Haut Brion 1989 Pessac-Léognan, Bordeaux

Every time I taste this great wine it gets better. Tasted alongside the gorgeous 1990 (and several other vintages of this first growth) recently, it was clear that while the 1990 is a completely irresistible charmer at the moment, the 1989 is likely to have a much longer life. It has more stuffing, a deeper colour and a grainy texture rather than the glossy satin of the 1990. There are prunes and something almost burnt on the nose, for this was a quite exceptionally hot year. Yet the wine dances on the palate because it is so beautifully balanced.

30/10/00

Domaine Capion Le Juge 1997 Vin de Pays de l'Herault

This Languedoc property is in a state of dramatic upgrade. Nothing new in that - the Languedoc is full of vinous ambition and improvement - but Domaine Capion has exceptional funds behind it, in the form of Swiss real estate tycoon Adrian Buhrer who bought it in 1996. He has not only poured money into the vineyards and cellars, but imports the winemaker of his South African estate Saxenberg to make the wine each vintage. Nico van de Merwe is a gentle giant who has made great Shiraz in Stellenbosch and is now making some extraordinary wine in the Languedoc too.

Not that this blend of Syrah and some Grenache is typical of the Languedoc. It's a strange transhemispherical style with more rich lushness than is usual for this corner of the Herault - neighbours include Mas de Daumas Gassac, Grange des Peres and, soon, Robert Mondavi of California, much to the disgust of Daumas Gassac's owner - but it packs an enormous amount of pleasure (and 14 per cent alcohol) into this ready-to-gulp but seriously well-structured red for drinking with hearty food. It's a bit of a casserole itself.

Berry Bros of London and Dublin list it at £12.95. Try WineSearcher for stockists elsewhere.

10/11/00

Chateau Tour des Gendres Blanc Cuvée des Conti 1999 Bergerac

Producers in Bergerac must be having rather a laugh now. For years they tagged along on Bordeaux's coat-tails, trying to sell themselves as almost-Bordeaux but just the wrong side of the Gironde-Dordogne departement boundary. Now, however, with Bordeaux agonising about its poor image and basic AC Bordeaux prices languishing, Bergerac has a much more positive image, helped enormously by Luc de Conti who made this wine and has spearheaded a renaissance of quality in Bergerac. His red Moulin des Dames can give many a classed growth claret a run for its money and this blend

of Semillon with Sauvignon Blanc is beautifully made and, unlike so many white wines, genuinely interesting. Gentle, pear-flavoured Semillon aged on lees is the dominant flavour with the Sauvignon adding refreshment rather than reek. This could be drunk on its own and would go well with a dish flavoured chiefly by Mediterranean vegetables.

Justerini & Brooks of London and Edinburgh sell it at £6.45 but Lea & Sandeman of London SW10 list it at £5.95 which is much more like it. See WineSearcher for more stockists.

18/11/00

Domaine Mercouri Red 1998 Greece

Greece has been exporting thrilling wines for at least three years now but many merchants and retailers have been slow to catch on the great value and exciting flavours available from this ancient wine producer, in whites just as much as reds if not more so. The growing band of ambitious Greek wine producers is being careful not to succumb to Chardonnay and Cabernet mania and has many exciting indigenous varieties to play with. (The best and most up-to-date book on modern Greek wine is *The Illustrated Greek Wine Guide* by Nico Manessis, see www.greekwineguide.gr.)

Behind an appallingly amateurish-looking label is a dense, complex wine with real character that should ideally be cellared for two or three years. The main grape in this case is the stern Refosco, more common in Italy's Friuli, fleshed out with some local Mavrodaphne. There is a real will at this beautifully decrepit-looking estate near Olympia, birthplace of the Games, to make top-quality wine and prices are still very reasonable.

Oddbins (www.oddbins.com) sell it at £6.99. Check out WineSearcher for more stockists.

24/11/00

Henriques & Henriques 10 year old Bual Madeira

If you live in the northern hemisphere, this is absolutely the moment to invest in a bottle of fine, cockle-warming madeira - just the thing to reach for after coming in out of the rain or snow. This is one of the great fortified wines that always gets rather overlooked in favour of port, but is awfully useful as

> an opened bottle keeps almost for ever (and madeira is so concentrated you don't need an enormous amount)
> it has invariably been aged for many years in wood so is much less likely to induce a headache
> a little glass is delicious at any time of day (Michael Broadbent of Christie's used to swear by it mid morning) so would be very useful for entertaining the people who tend to drop in at odd hours at this time of year, and
> it warms you up but, unlike the other famous fortifieds, has sufficient acidity to refresh you too (so maybe it would not be such a bad idea to buy a bottle even if you live in the southern hemisphere).

Henriques & Henriques is the biggest of those few independent producers left on the Atlantic island of Madeira and the only one to have their own vineyards. This is very fine wine indeed - rich yet tangy, with a decidedly Christmassy flavour. Start a bottle now and just go at it slowly over the next few weeks.

In the UK Laithwaites (www.laithwaites.com) sell it at £17.99 a bottle. Check out WineSearcher for stockists elsewhere.

Chateau Cluzan 1998 Bordeaux

This is a very clever claret - not least because it is on offer at Booths supermarkets in the north of England for just £3.99 until the end of December. It comes from the admirably tenacious family firm of Sichel and combines both fruitiness and classically understated claret structure. It is very much a wine for drinking with food. At just 12.5% alcohol it is extremely appetising. The label looks worth far more. It is, in short, a steal - so long as you live in the north of England.

04/12/00

Valpolicella Classico Capitel dei Nicalo 1997 and Rosso della Fabriseria 1998 Tedeschi

The Fratelli Tedeschi ("German brothers") of the Veneto in north-east Italy are on a roll at the moment; their wines are currently looking much more exciting than those of Masi, for example. (Isn't it great that at long last the Veneto is full of ambitious producers such as Allegrini, Gini, Anselmi and of course Quintarelli and Pieropan?) This single vineyard Valpolicella is a seriously exciting combo of richness and bite with that characteristic bitter cherries flavour but no lack of oomph.

Much more arresting, however, is the Vino da Tavola they call Rosso della Fabriseria. It's made from specially selected plots of their best Corvina grapes, the ones that would normally be dried to make super-potent Amarone, but are instead made into an amazingly concentrated regular table wine. If you came across this at a dinner party, there's no way you'd forget it. It is perhaps very slightly too oaky but just shows what those Valpolicella vineyards are capable of. I see from the Majestic list that it won a silver medal in this year's International Wine Challenge, as well it might.

The Valpolicella is £5.99 (£5.49 if you buy two bottles) while the Rosso della Fabriseria is £11.99 from Majestic Wine Warehouses in Britain. Check out WineSearcher for stockists elsewhere.

15/12/00

Pedro Ximenez Solera 1910, Bodegas Alvear, Montilla

What could be more delicious at this time of year than something rare, dark, rich, nutty, ancient and extremely potent? Only 200 cases of this nectar, revered in Spain, were ever produced, from the grape used to sweeten sherry, grown in the next door Andalucian region Montilla which has always had its own strong personality. Raisiny syrups made from dried PX grapes are available even at British supermarkets nowadays but this is wildly superior - as well it might be for the price.

£40 per half-litre from La Vigneronne, London SW7 tel 020 7589 6113