

The unfinished Obelisk and beer for wine lovers

4 Nov 2005 by JR

According to research announced at the British Museum last week, King Tutankhamun drank red wine. As one just returned from her first, hugely enjoyable, trip to Egypt, I feel a twinge of sympathy for the poor boy. Egypt's wine production, now released from state control, is apparently much improved, but not improved enough for this confirmed lover of fermented grape juice.

After trial sips of reputedly the best domestically-grown red and Obelisk, its counterpart made from grape concentrate imported from Italy, I resigned myself to my first week without wine in decades and substituted abstinence (a word I find shamefully that I have never tried to spell before) and beer, Mainly beer, it has to be said. My family seemed strangely amused by my newfound enthusiasm for Sakkara Gold.

They should not have been. I had my beer epiphany a few weeks ago. I had previously found a few sips of beer perfectly nice on a very hot day, but more than that quantity of most beers had proved too gassy, too bland or too bitter to enjoy. I had met the self-styled Beer Hunter and prolific author on brewing matters and matters brewed Michael Jackson on several occasions to swap tales of publishers and television producers but he had never tried to convert me from grape to grain.

This was left, curiously enough, to Michel Roux Jr of Le Gavroche, the famous two star London restaurant. Michel, who disconcertingly is as thin as a rake thanks to his inexplicable devotion to marathon running, has also written a book, *Matching Food & Wine*, on matching food not just to wine (which has frequently been done) but also to different beers. And to this end, served up a six-course meal, each course with what he proposed as a suitable wine partner and, alongside, a suitable beer.

At the end of this selfless and, needless to say, ruthlessly clinical research project, I can reveal that in only two out of the six cases did I prefer the wine to the beer. Result for brewers everywhere!

The sauce with the moules marinière was so strongly wine-based that even the magnificently named **Gulpener Korenwolf Dutch wheat beer** (the pale, fruity, aromatic style that I normally like, even in its mass market Hoegaarden format) stood no chance. Radcliffe's Muscadet sur Lie 2004 (£5.49 Thresher/Wine Rack) was the dish's natural partner.

And Villa Maria Reserve Pinot Noir 2003 Marlborough from New Zealand (£14.99 Waitrose) was rich and delicious with the Scotch-style (sic) lamb stew while that old chestnut, the distinctly floral **Worthington White Shield**, now made by the Museum Brewery in Burton-on-Trent, seemed simply too sweet for this savoury dish. (Perhaps if the main course had been sweeter, venison with a berry-based sauce perhaps, it would have worked better?)

But I did make the acquaintance of a new Scottish beer that is surely designed expressly for wine addicts such as myself. **Innis & Gunn Original Oak Aged Beer** has already won awards for both its taste and extremely stylish packaging and I'm sure that to those who know a bit about beer, this is akin to Michael Jackson's announcing that he has just discovered a rather pleasant wine called champagne. But please bear with me, CAMRA hardliners and the like. I am trying to spread the word to the other, grape-besotted camp.

Like many of my favourite beers, I have to confess, Innis & Gunn is relatively high in alcohol, 6.6 per cent, making it almost half the strength of wine. It comes in a smart, squat little 330 ml bottle that looks almost like a flask of Scotch – as well it might since the producers of Glenfiddich have a significant stake in Innis & Gunn. It is aged in second-fill bourbon casks, for two years – far longer than most ales. Clearly aimed at those who seek flavour above all else, it is a deep caramel colour with apple-fresh acidity as well as mellow richness.

This rich beer went strangely well with our spicy, creamy chicken satay (not a dish I readily associate with the Gavroche) and, I have to admit, knocked the New Zealand Riesling into whatever a cocked hat is. This nectar should be available at £1.99 a bottle in larger branches of most big supermarkets apparently. Innis & Gunn have just launched two even stronger, longer-aged bottlings.

The other perhaps surprising triumph was that of a beer brewed using a champagne yeast over Taittinger NV. **Kasteel**

Cru is evidence of profitable co-operation between brewers and winemakers, and indeed between brewers of two very different nationalities, Coors and the Brasserie de Saverne of Alsace in this case. At 5.2 per cent alcohol and with a extremely fresh, dry finish, this elegant lager made the champagne seem rather heavy and plodding as an aperitif with our featherlight cheese straws. Unfortunately for the moment it is to be found only in restaurants and bars but I hope this will change as I can imagine enjoying this greatly at home next summer.

Rare peppered tuna with ginger and sesame dressing was going to present a challenge to any drink served with it. The Grant Burge Barossa Vines Chardonnay 2004 tasted just too fat and oily with such an energetic dish. The sweet and briskly sour **Liefmann's Kriek Cherry Beer** was a better match, but only for those who, unlike me, appreciate the taste of maraschino cherries, bubblegum or root beer. That said, I am a sucker for many a heavy Belgian beer. This one is 6 per cent alcohol and £2.30 for a 375 ml bottle from larger Asda, Sainsbury's and Waitrose branches.

With stilton and brie, Michel really got into his beery stride and served both the spicy, hoppy **Grolsch lager** and **Brakspear Triple**, a new version of an old, bottle-conditioned ale revived this year to celebrate the first anniversary of the Henley brewers' return to brewing in Oxfordshire. This is made, I'm told, using 'the rare double drop fermentation system' which certainly tastes as good as it sounds and I feel inspired to introduce it to the world of wine. I hope Oxford students go easy on this rich, nutty marvel for it is all of 7.2 per cent alcohol. But since it costs £1.99 for half a litre from larger branches of Sainsbury's and Waitrose – far more than a can of Carling – I probably needn't worry. Even Grant Burge Barossa Valley Shiraz 2003 paled into insignificance alongside the old ale – which did indeed make a fine partner for the stilton. The pair of them made me feel quite proud to be English.

A selection of seriously interesting beers and other drinks that are not available in mass distribution and could be presented to the CAMRA card-carrying person in your life can be found at Beers of Europe of Kings Lynn www.beersofeurope.co.uk and The Beer Shop, 14 Pitfield Street, London N1 www.pitfieldbeershop.co.uk.