The perfect tv red?

8 Dec 2005 by JR

Chances are that you will spend some of the next few days slumped in front of a television screen – a welcome change for some of us from being hunched in front of a computer screen.

The more I talk to people about how they use wine, the more I realise how great is the demand for what one might call tv wine. Some of us may bleat about how wine is meant to be drunk with food and at the table, but in practice a very significant proportion of wine is in fact drunk without food and with no more ceremonious accompaniment than a channel changer.

Although for some tv wine drinkers it will be enough for the wine to be liquid, alcoholic and cheap, FT Weekend readers are surely more discriminating than this. For many men (and it has been mainly men who have told me about their desire for the perfect tv wine) the first duty of a wine is to be red. A significant proportion of red wines are highly unsuitable for drinking without food however: all of those with significant tannins, the chewy preservative elements that dry the inside of our mouths and are so obvious in many young wines destined for extended ageing.

In fact I would go so far as to say that the great majority of Italian reds and red bordeaux are better drunk with food to distract from their chewiness than in what we might call slump position. (A tannic wine tastes less chewy with chewy foods such as steak or a roast.) Sources of softer Italian reds more suitable for tv drinking include Puglia and Sicily, but then these southern regions tend to produce wines relatively high in alcohol, which will have a more marked effect (for better or worse, depending on your viewpoint) if you drink them with without the absorptive effect of food. Italian reds that are fruity and approachable but not necessarily too potent are made on the Adriatic coast in the Marche and Abruzzi, some Valpolicella and certainly Bardolino in the Veneto, in Friuli and Alto Adige. It used to be the case that Piemonte's Dolcetto ('the little sweet one') was a lovely soft wine for sipping without food, but too many producers nowadays seem determined to cloak it in astringent oak just as they have done with the other local 'everyday' grape Barbera.

As for red bordeaux, this is the quintessential dry, structured wine made for drinking with food – although more and more bordeaux is being made to emphasize its fruit and I would be very surprised if at least a dozen brands of inexpensive bordeaux aimed specifically at slumpers did not emerge in the next few years. For the moment, I would recommend bordeaux enthusiasts to stick to the more luscious vintages of the right bank, a 2000 Pomerol or Lalande de Pomerol perhaps or - lighter but softer - a 1997.

Spain can field many a tv red. Just be wary of Ribera de Duero and Priorat which are generally made tough, tannic and oaky in youth. Rioja styles vary too much to generalise about but an unoaked Joven (young) one would do the trick. Many of the inexpensive reds made in more obscure Spanish wine regions which seem to flow out of Iberia at such a rate today are soft and fruity enough to be fun to drink without food.

'Fruit-forward', the wine style most readily associated with Australia, is the key to a successful no-food wine. Indeed in general the New World is much, much better at making reds for drinking without food than Europe. This is partly because more reliable sunshine there is translated into fully ripe grapes and partly because winemakers deliberately make wines to conserve every ounce of fruitiness rather than fashioning a more restrained style of wine that may need a few years in bottle before it shows its best.

South America in particular makes legions of soft, fruity reds with minimal tannins that can easily be slurped without any solid matter. Chile is the past master of this but Argentina competes on the same playing field, as of course does California. Although the majority of these Pan-American reds are made from the Bordeaux grapes Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec and Carmenère which in their homeland produce wines that are pretty tough and astringent in youth, in the Americas the grapes benefit from extra ripeness and therefore softer tannins. And what all these North and South American reds have in common is a certain apparent sweetness, which helps every mouthful down and gives the taster the impression that the wine itself is food. This 'sweetness' is typically due to a higher alcohol level than is common in Europe, which may mean that tv drinkers have to be careful not to sip with too much abandon.

South Africa and Australia also produce oceans of ripe, fruity, soft reds – although in these countries a high price tag often denotes a wine with an ambitious charge of tannins since it has been made for a long life in bottle.

In my personal view the quintessential grape variety for drinking without food is Pinot Noir, although I'm sure the producers of the finest reds in its homeland Burgundy would shudder at the thought. I am not proposing that tv wine drinkers settle down with a glass of Chambertin or Romanée-Conti, but a glass of super-fruity Pinot Noir from New Zealand, California, Australia or Chile - or even Germany or Austria, both of which make some very fine examples nowadays - could be just the thing. A good one should have immediate appeal, a certain fruity sweetness, not much tannin and a lively, refreshing streak of counterbalancing acidity. Many of these wines, especially the cheaper ones, are made to be drunk young and without too much serious thought.

Another telly grape is Pinot's close relative Gamay, the Beaujolais grape. Good Beaujolais is an immensely satisfying drink even without food, being almost an honorary white wine with its crispness and very obvious fruity aroma. Overall quality in the Beaujolais region is at long last increasing rapidly. I urge the slurping slumpers to take full advantage.

Some recommended tv reds

Cono Sur Pinot Noir 2004 Chile

£3.99 Majestic, Sainsbury's

Regular price is £4.99 but this light, super-fruity Chilean is usually on special offer somewhere. See www.quaffersoffers.co.uk

L Z Rioja 2003 Telmo Rodriguez

£6.99 Adnams of Southwold

This robustly fruity, unoaked wine is a more substantial mouthful than the Pinots.

Touraine Rouge 2003 Domaine Thierry Michaud

£8-9 Novalys Wine (0207 723 8327) and City Beverage Company (0207 729 2111) of London and Andrew Wilson Wines of Stafford (01782 372 888)

A fruit-forward red Loire made from Cabernet Franc and Cot (Malbec) with real interest and not too much alcohol.

Picardy Pinot Noir 2003 Pemberton

£13.95 Jeroboams around London

Sophisticated, rich Western Australian take on red burgundy.