How about drinking wine for fun?

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Terry Theise is an unusually passionate and articulate importer of fine German and Austrian wine, and grower champagnes, into the US. After prolonged email communication, I finally had the pleasure of meeting him in Washington DC in late May. There could have been more congenial and certainly more bibulous settings than a Starbucks first thing in the morning but a paper cup of tea was enough to unleash an excellent suggestion from him, the inspiration for this article. "What do you drink for fun?" he asked (meaning wine of course). "When I come back from a long buying trip what I want most is Alsace Muscat."

It's not desperately easy to come across Muscat d'Alsace in the UK, I have found, but once I'd tracked down Gustave Lorentz's 2005 I could see exactly what he meant. This particular one anyway was just so exuberantly, almost cheekily full of life and fruit – yet so delightfully simple, like a bunch of grapes bursting in your mouth, that it was utterly undemanding. Just the thing to relax with, and no need to have the tasting notebook handy to record any of the finer nuances.

I thought I'd ask a range of wine professionals what they choose to drink for fun and started with my wine writer colleague **Hugh Johnson**, whose beautifully written memoir *Wine - A Life Uncorked* shows that he is a true lover of wine for drinking's rather than pontificating's sake. "For fun? You're kidding," he began. "Champagne first, I'm afraid, and a *pression* very often." I have never seen him in the same room as a beer so I obviously know him much less well than I thought. He continued, I rather like the light, bitter north east Italians (Lagrein etc) for thirst-quenching at arm's length, as it were, from serious wines."

I know just what he means. I also love the super-digestible bitterness of Italy's lighter reds, but I digress. On to some more wine luminaries. Still in the upper echelons of UK wine society, I wrote to **Michael Broadbent MW**, author of the world's most comprehensive record of tasting the fine and the rare *Vintage Wine* to ask him what he drank for fun. Not much, seems to be the answer. [But see his later comments.]

He rang me back to say that he was too busy updating his tasting notes for a new edition of *Vintage Wine* to answer my question and couldn't wait to get off the phone. I'm sure his publisher if not his wife is delighted. This, incidentally, is the man who complained because the superlative, cobweb-festooned bottle of rioja that was opened for him at some Spanish bodega did not have a vintage on it, so he couldn't add it to his book.

I thought it would be interesting to know what notable sommeliers drink for fun. After all, the good ones are exposed to a wide range of the finest wines constantly in their work. So what do they choose to relax with? I was not disappointed by the enthusiasm with which three at the top of the tree in three different countries replied.

The current 'Best Sommelier in the World', **Enrico Bernardo** of Le Cinq restaurant in the Hotel George V in Paris surprised me with his choice of white wine. "Personally I like very much two sorts of wine for pleasure, for drinking with friends, both of which are uncomplicated but have lots of character. I like New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc for its freshness, its green fruits aroma reminiscent of kiwi, lime and green apple but with its minty, exotic notes that also remind me of passion fruit. It's a very immediate wine, summery with lots of colour and life. Kim Crawford's 2005 is a good example."

His red wine choice is perhaps more predictable. "On the other hand I like northern Rhône Syrah for its depth, richness and its capacity to deliver complexity and length. I like it in its youth for its black, spicy character, like wild blackberries, olives and black pepper, and also as its ages towards notes of game, black truffles, leather and jame. It's a wine with deep roots and strong personality, a charming autumn wine."

His counterpart from the 1998 world wine waiting championships **Markus Del Monego** of Germany is, perhaps predictably, even more precise:

"I have three wines, which I love to drink as everyday wines:

2005 Heuguumper, Gutedel, Hansperter Zierelsen

The name translates as "grasshopper". This is a crisp, light and easy-going Chasselas wine from a dynamic and young producer. The ideal wine for hot summer days. I am just sipping a glass whilst writing these lines.

2005 Schloss Vollrads Riesling Edition, Weingut Schloss Vollrads

A wonderful Riesling reflecting the terroir of the Rheingau and the efforts of the Schloss Vollrads team. It is their wine, luscious fruit, great minerality and wonderful for moments with sun, rain or snow.

1999 Château Cissac, Cru Bourgeois Supérieur, Haut-Médoc

Cissac has for me what is typical for Bordeaux: elegance and freshness. A wonderful wine which ages marvellously well. At the moment 1999 is showing great. It is a wine which matches almost every situation, always keeping up with classic style

2000 San Leonardo, Marchese Guerrieri-Gonzaga

This wine is my special treat after hard working days or to accompany difficult texts to write. I always have some half bottles at home. Wonderful terroir-driven character, which proves that you can well relax with characterful wines too.

Well-known New York sommelier and wine importer **Daniel Johnnes**, now based at the restaurant Daniel, is a Francophile through and through: "My fun wines are usually forward, fruity, food-friendly and what I call 'wines to drink by the bucketful'. I love Loire Valley reds and whites. Few wines excite my palate like a good Vouvray sec or demi-sec from Gaston Huet or Philippe Foreau. A bit less serious would be a good Saumur Blanc such as L'Insolite from Thierry Germain [a wine that ??. For qualifiable drinking I love Muscadet. Also irresistible and stimulating is a good Chablis or Petit Chablis.

"For red, I find the juicy, light and refreshing flavours of Cru Beaujolais, Chinon, Anjou Rouge or top notch Bourgogne the most satisfying and versatile. Then there are more esoteric wines such as Puffeney Trousseau Côtes du Jura. I also love the warm wines of the south such as southern Rhônes, Collioure, Roussillon and Languedoc. Because of the alcohol levels those wines are more demanding.

"It is hard to limit my selections. I like too many wines to just list one or two and there are so many flavours I find appealing. If I absolutely had to say one white, it would be Chablis and one red would be Cru Beaujolais."

But what about those who produce some of the finest wines in the world? What do they unwind with? I asked the chatelaine of Bordeaux first growth Château Margaux, **Corinne Mentzelopoulos**, first and she replied immediately, "Easy: in Chamonix when I am skiing there is nothing like a little Savoie Crépy and in Greece - hang on there - a well done Retsina is marvellous. Even my Greek friends think it's horrendous - in view of the heat and the food!" These simple tastes were revealed, I might add, on the day that she released her 2005 vintage at the jaw-dropping record price of 350 euros a bottle – to the trade.

Just up the road in Pauillac, the man in charge of super-second Château Pichon Baron, and all of AXA's wine properties around Europe, **Christian Seely**, confessed to an innate penchant for a wine with which AXA have no professional connection whatsoever, fino and manzanilla, the lightest, driest and most fragile (and refreshing) of sherries – which must be difficult to find in Bordeaux.

For one of the Napa Valley's head honchos, **Bill Harlan** of stratospherically priced Harlan Estate and Bond, Campari qualifies as fun, "or something we don't usually drink –something a friend has brought, a German Riesling perhaps - a white wine or a California Pinot Noir".

I had the chance to put my question in person to Australia's best known wine writer **James Halliday**. Hirsute brows knit and I sensed a bit of a Michael Broadbent moment, but this ex-lawyer is never short of a word: "I always used to include one of Australia's top rosés in my top 100 wines - Turkey Flat or Charles Melton's - saying I know it won't sell, and, blow me, everyone's drinking them now."

I'm off for four weeks in Australia where I will, I can assure you, do my very best to tackle wine for fun.