Isa Bal best in Europe

21 May 2008 by JR

Many congratulations to purple pager Isa Bal, head sommelier of The Fat Duck, Heston Blumenthal's restaurant in Bray-on-Thames, who was recognised as Best Sommelier of Europe in the biennial Europe-wide competition, held on 17 and 19 May in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Another British-based sommelier, Eric Zweibel MS of Summer Lodge Country House Hotel, Evershot, Dorset, came third, while Paolo Basso of Switzerland came second.

This has been a particularly good year for Isa, who was runner-up to Gearoid Devany of Tom Aikens restaurant in Chelsea in the Academy of Food & Wine's UK Sommelier of the Year competition, held in London last month.

The Best Sommelier of Europe competition is organised by the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI). In this year's competition, the eleventh, 30 celebrated sommeliers represented 30 European countries, including Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, France, Norway, Finland, Portugal, Turkey and Sweden. Two other candidates from the UK competed: Alan Holmes from Chewton Glen, New Milton, Hampshire, and Hungarian-born Gabor Cseke from Great Fosters in Egham, Surrey.

"This is a fantastic result for Isa and Eric, they both did a brilliant job in what was a really tough competition," commented Sophie Roberts-Brown of the Academy of Food & Wine. "All the sommeliers competing were of an extremely high standard. The fact that we had two UK-based winners placed first and third just shows that British restaurants are now attracting and training the highest calibre of staff. This result is a great boost for the UK's hospitality sector and the art of sommellerie."

The three sommeliers who made it through to the final had to complete a series of tests including decanting red wine, food and wine matching, identifying a mystery liquid (sake), identifying 10 beverages - five in clear glasses and five in black glasses - and identifying and giving food recommendations for three wines.

Isa Bal, 37 (photographed here by Sam Bailey), was born in Antalya, Turkey. He studied hotel management in Turkey before taking a position as chef de rang at The Vineyard at Stockcross in Newbury, Berks. There he developed a passion for wine, which led him to become the hotel's head sommelier five years later. After a stint at Maggiore's Restaurant in Covent Garden, London, he went to the three Michelin-starred Fat Duck.

Purple pagers can check out his posts on members' forum by clicking on the Author heading, which will put all posters in alphabetical order according to the little arrows.