JancisRobinson.com

Jancis Robinson - the long version

29 Aug 2008 by Jancis Robinson

Jancis on her life in wine...

After a virtually wine-free childhood and teenage years in a village of 46 people in northern Cumbria just south of the Scottish border, I was introduced to wine at Oxford where I read Maths & Philosophy while being delightedly exposed to fine food and wine for the first time. I had long been fascinated by food so it was a very short step to fall in love with wine – something that happened over a glass of Chambolle Musigny, Les Amoureuses 1959. But at that time the subjects of food and wine were regarded as irredeemably frivolous so I spent three years in the travel business, as a graduate trainee with Britain's biggest holiday company. A lifelong aversion sent me off on a year in Provence, surrounded by vineyards and people to whom eating and drinking were indeed what life was all about. On my return to London I was determined to find a job in either food or wine.

My wine writing career began on 1 Dec 1975, virtually pre-history as far as modern wine is concerned, when I started as assistant editor of the British wine trade magazine *Wine & Spirit*. Since then I've been lucky enough to travel all over the world of wine (which nowadays includes Asia - a continent I never thought back in the 1970s that wine would help me explore) learning that our expanding wine world is inhabited by some of the most colourful and interesting characters that ever walked the earth.

Perhaps more important is the fact that what they produce, which was always pretty romantic, fascinating and heartwarmingly earthy, is nowadays far more reliably delicious than it ever was. When I started out, it was remarkable if a wine smelt clean and not of sulphur or dirty filterpads. Today, hardly any wines are technically faulty (even though an awful lot of them are dull).

There's a lot to be said about price and value as they relate to wine. I don't believe there is an absolute correlation between wine's price and quality. There are many delicious wines that don't cost a great deal, while there are hundreds of overpriced bottles carrying price tags that have been conjured out of the air by some hopeful marketeer or winery owner.

Should you by any chance want to know in even more detail about how I got from being someone who couldn't type but somehow wangled their way on to a wine trade magazine to running a website with subscribers from more than 80 countries, you could plough your way through my autobiographical memoir known as *Tasting Pleasure* in the US and *Confessions of a Wine Lover* everywhere else.

For the brief version of my bio, see here. For a longer summary see the bottom of this section, or choose one of the following options below: swot, prolific author, the groaning mantelpiece, non-bimbo broadcaster, well-rounded person, warm and cuddly human being with an unusual name.

... swot

1997 - Honorary Doctorate of The Open University, a great British institution founded by the Labour government in 1971 whereby people of all ages and conditions can study for a university degree. At the ceremony at which I was awarded the honour of being able to call myself Dr Robinson, there were scores of graduates with serious disabilities and one who was collecting his degree on his 80th birthday.

1988 onwards – I got hooked in to the Oxford University Press book factory to edit the first (and second and third) *Oxford Companion to Wine*: an honour for me and for wine, I felt, to follow in the distinguished path pioneered by the late Sir Paul Harvey and the first ever Oxford Companion, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* published in 1932.

1984 - took and, more amazingly, passed the Master of Wine exams, becoming the first non wine trade person to earn the letters MW after their name. There are now over 260 MWs worldwide and exams are held each year in London, the US and Australia. This fiendishly difficult qualification involves almost a week of exams, both theoretical and 'practical' (ie blind tasting). One day I'll explain why on earth I subjected myself to this ordeal - though I think being pregnant helped rather than hindered, as witness my doing especially well in the tasting papers. For more information on the Institute of Masters of Wine (IMW) see www.masters-of-wine.org

1976-78 – I rapidly set to all of the wine trade exams organised by the Wine & Spirit Education Trust. This outfit is based in London but is now the world's dominant wine educator. I joked at the time there'd probably be a question in the first, Certificate exam: 'Valpolicella is a) red, b) white or c) rosé' and there was in fact one that went 'Valpolicella is a) French, b) Spanish or c) Italian'. The WSET seems to be in a state of constant change but it does cover the ground in a very professional way, and their courses always include tasting as well as more and instruction.

1969-71 - Maths and Philosophy at St Anne's College, Oxford. I was one of the first three undergraduates ever to tackle this strange new arts-science hybrid.

1961-68 – Carlisle and Country High School for Girls. Head girl, following in novelist Margaret Forster's footsteps.

...prolific author

I am never quite sure how many books I have written. The first once happened, as everything else in my career, by accident. A book packager read an article about me in The Guardian and asked me to do a synopsis of an introduction to wine for him. Once I'd done it, he said his bosses disapproved of alcohol. Unwilling to waste the effort, I showed it to a friend in publishing who introduced me to the literary agent Caradoc King of AP Watt (of whom I am one of his oldest authors) who promptly sold it back to my friend.

Here's a list of the books I can remember, most recent first with those currently in print in bold. See also books & DVDs and How to find old wine books.

American Wine (2013 Mitchell Beazley/University of California Press) with Linda Murphy

Wine Grapes - A complete guide to 1,368 vine varieties, including their origins and flavours (2012 Allen Lane/Ecco) with Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz

The Concise World Atlas of Wine (2009 Mitchell Beazley) with Hugh Johnson

How to Taste/How to Taste Wine (new edn Nov 2008, Simon & Schuster/Conran Octopus)

The World Atlas of Wine (6th edn 2007, Mitchell Beazley and, subsequently, many other publishers around the world) with Hugh Johnson

The Oxford Companion to Wine (3rd edn 2006, OUP and, subsequently, several other publishers) editor

Jancis Robinson's Wine Course (2nd edn 2003, BBC Books and Abbeville Press)

How to Taste/Jancis Robinson' Wine tasting Workbook (2002, Simon & Schuster/Conran Octopus)

The World Atlas of Wine (5th edn 2001, Mitchell Beazley and, subsequently, many other publishers around the world)

Jancis Robinson's Concise Wine Companion (2001 OUP) with Julia Harding

The Oxford Companion to the Wines of North America (2000 OUP) consultant editor

The Oxford Companion to Wine (2nd edn 1999, OUP and subsequently others) editor

Guide to the Best Portuguese Wines (1999 Livros Cotovia)

Tasting Pleasure/Confessions of a Wine Lover (1997, Viking Penguin USA/Viking Penguin)

Jancis Robinson's Guide to Wine Grapes (1996 OUP and subsequently others)

Jancis Robinson's Wine Course (1995, BBC Books and subsequently others)

The Oxford Companion to Wine (1st edition 1994, OUP and subsequently others)

Vintage Timecharts (1989 Mitchell Beazley and subsequently others)

The Demon Drink (1988 Mitchell Beazley and Mandarin)

Jancis Robinson's Food & Wine Adventures (1987 Headline)

Vines, Grapes & Wines (1986 Mitchell Beazley and Alfred Knopf)

Masterglass (1983 Pan and subsequently others)

The Great Wine Book (1982 Sidgwick & Jackson)

Which? Wine Guide 1982 (1981, Consumers' Association)

Which? Wine Guide 1981 (1980, Consumers' Association)

The Wine Book (1979, A&C Black and Fontana)

...the groaning mantelpiece

MAJOR PRE 1995 AWARDS TO JANCIS ROBINSON
1978 Rouyer Guillet Cup for top marks in Wine & Spirit Education Trust Diploma
1983 Glenfiddich Drink Book of the Year
1984 Glenfiddich Radio/Television Programme of the Year
1984 Glenfiddich Trophy
1984 Master of Wine
1985 Marques de Cáceres Award
1986 Glenfiddich Drink Writer and Food Writer of the Year (a unique double)
1986 Wine Guild of the United Kingdom Premier Award
1987 André Simon Memorial Award
1987 Cliquot Book of the Year (US)
1992 Glenfiddich Television Programme of the Year

1995 AWARDS TO THE OXFORD COMPANION TO WINE
André Simon Memorial Award (UK)
Cliquot Book of the Year (US)
Julia Child / International Association of Culinary Professionals (US)
Glenfiddich Award (UK)
Premio Veronelli (Italy)
Premio Longhi Cerretto (Italy)
Wine Guild of United Kingdom, Exceptional Certificate (UK)
Redwood Books Award, Book Design and Production Awards (UK)
Gold Medal, Academy of Gastronomy (Germany)

1995 AWARDS TO JANCIS ROBINSON
Eighth annual Wine Literary Award, from the Wine Appreciation Guild, San Francisco, US for 'an exceptional contribution to the literature of wine in the English language' (US)
Tenth Ruth Ellen Church Award, from the Midwest International Wine Exposition, Chicago, US 'created to recognize outstanding contributions to wine and food journalism' (US)
Catalan Agriculture Medal (Spain)

1996 AWARDS
Glenfiddich Drink Writer of the Year
1996 Glenfiddich Trophy for food and drink communicators (Britain's top award)
Voted second Woman of the Year for 'Celebrating Wine in American Life' Week by Women for WineSense (US)
Jancis Robinson's Wine Course voted Wine Book of the Year and Television Programme of the Year by the Wine Guild of the United Kingdom. Jancis Robinson also won the Wine Guild's overall Premier Award (UK)
Voted first Communicator of the Year by International Wine and Spirit Competition/Vinitaly (Italy/UK). Runners-up were Marvin Shanken, *Wine Spectator* and *Decanter* magazines.

1997 AWARD
Honorary Doctorate, The Open University (UK)

James Beard Award for Best Television Food Journalism for Jancis Robinson's Wine Course (US)

1998 AWARD
Silver Medal, Academy of Gastronomy (Germany)

1999 AWARDS
Decanter magazine (Wo)Man of the Year (UK)
Women for WineSense Inspirational Award, LA Chapter's first Hall of Fame (US)
Glenfiddich Award for Best TV Programme (Vintners' Tales)
First (and only, as it turned out) Glenfiddich Award for TV Personality of the Year
Tasting Pleasure/Confessions of a Wine Lover wins Wine Writing Literary Award at Versailles World Cookbook Fair
Vintners' Tales wins Gold Award for wine TV programmes at the World Food Media Awards, Tasting Australia

2001 AWARDS
Florida Winefest André Simon Wine Writer's Award (2nd ever winner, after Robert Parker)

Oxford Companion to the Wines of North America shortlisted for a James Beard Award (US), André Simon Book Award (UK) and Lanson Award (UK)

2003 AWARDS
Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE)
Winner of the first-ever Pro Bono Vinum award from Wine International magazine
The Golden Vine Award (Tasting Australia)
Winner with Hugh Johnson of the Schweizer Goldforbeeren for best wine book (*World Atlas of Wine*) of 2003
Winner with Hugh Johnson of the German Gastronomic Academy's Silbermedaille, also for the Atlas

2004 AWARDS
Wine International's Pro Bonum Vinum Wine Personality
Panetta Award for a notable woman (tenth, and first non-Italian, recipient)
Premio Internazionale 'Caduto Prima Donna'
The German Gastronomic Academy's top award, the Golden Feather, not given every year but given to the 2nd edn of *Das Oxford Weinlexikon* (Hallwag)

2007 AWARDS
Harpers Most Inspiring Wine Critic and Most Influential Wine Writer, eventually voted Most Inspiring Person in Drinks
Voted second Most Influential Person in the World of Wine by visitors to Decanter.com (after Robert Parker)
Premio EVA for women of achievement from the government of Navarra
The Oxford Companion to Wine chosen as the only drinks book among the James Beard Books Committee's '20 Essential Books to Build Your Culinary Library' chosen for the 20th anniversary of the James Beard Foundation

2008 AWARDS
Only wine writer to be shortlisted for Lifetime Achievement Award (won by Tim and Nina Zagat) in the first International Restaurant and Hotel Awards to be held June 2008 in Beverly Hills (US)
Inducted into Wine Media Guild Hall of Fame (US)
World Atlas of Wine given Special Hall of Fame Award for being the Best Book on Wine at Gourmand World Cookbook Awards 2008
Voted Best Wine Journalist 'by a landslide' for 'integrity as well as her willingness to listen' in a poll of 300 key members of the US wine trade for *Wine Business International*, June 2008 (US)
Gastronomic Academy's Gold Medal presented to the 3rd German edition of *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Germany)
World Atlas of Wine wins IACP (Institute of American Culinary Professionals) Cookbooks award for best book in the Wine, Beer and Spirits category (US)
Meininger Outstanding Achievement Award 2008 at Prowein (Germany)

2009 AWARD
Society of Wine Educators Grand Award (Sacramento) 2009 (US)

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2010 AWARDS
JancisRobinson.com voted first-ever International Wine Website of the Year, Louis Roederer Wine Writers Awards 2010
Officier de l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole, French Minister of Agriculture (France)
Joint winner (with Michel Bettane of France) of the late Victor de la Serna Memorial Award, Royal Spanish Academy of Gastronomy (Spain)

2011 AWARDS
Haltwag Handbuch Wein, the much-revised German version of *How to Taste*, was awarded the Schweizer Silberlorbeeren Medaille by Historia Gastronomica Helvetica (Switzerland)
Voted third most powerful person in wine after Robert Parker, and Lorenzo Benicéká-Falorni, on Decanter.com
Goldene Traube Pannonien Award, Burgenland (Austria)
Chevalier du Tastevin, Château du Clos de Vougeot (France)

2012 AWARDS
Honorary President of the Wine & Spirit Education Trust
Comendador da Ordem do Mérito Empresarial (Order of Merit, Portugal)
Drinks Business second most powerful woman in wine (after Gina Gallo)

2013 AWARD
Freeman Honoris Causa of The Vintners' Company for services to wine

AWARDS FOR WINE GRAPES
Best Drinks Book of 2012 *Wine & Spirits* magazine (US)
Hall of Fame for Best Drinks Book, Gourmand World Cookbook Awards (France)

André Simon Award for Best Drinks Book

James Beard Award for Best Beverage Book (US)

...non bimbo broadcaster

I started out as rent-a-presenter, writing and presenting 'The Wine Programme' which I believe was the world's first TV series on wine and have yet to be corrected.

Then Nick and I started Eden Productions, our own TV production company and I've been involved in the programmes listed below.

Some of the work I have enjoyed most, however, is narrating television documentaries. Unlike filming, you don't need any make-up. You don't have to be careful what you wear (except for manmade fabrics that can make terribly distracting crackling noises into the hypersensitive mikes used by sound engineers). All you need is to be able to read. In fact it seems a miracle to me that people are prepared to pay me to go and sit in a little dark room, watch an interesting programme and do a relatively undemanding performance while playing with words. One of these days I'd like to offer a service to producers of writing and editing scripts because I enjoy this aspect of it so much too, but alas narrated documentaries have fallen from fashion, as have narrators with voices as relatively posh as mine.

'The House', the notorious and seminal fly-on-the-wall six-parter about Covent Garden's Royal Opera House was one of the most fascinating series to narrate - not least because I really didn't realise at the time quite how damaging it would turn out to be, which was a bit unfortunate as the then General Director of the Opera House, Jeremy Isaacs, was a very good friend. Subsequent subjects included Olga Korbut and a study of north London strictly Orthodox Jewish women called 'And God Created Netball'.

1983 - writer/presenter of first series of 'The Wine Programme', the world's first TV series devoted to wine, shown first on Channel 4 in the UK and subsequently in Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and eastern Europe.
1985 - second series of 'The Wine Programme' C4
1985 - writer/presenter of 'Jancis Robinson's Christmas Wine List' C4
1986 - narrator for 'Forty Minutes' BBC2
1986/7 - presenter of BBC Design Awards BBC2
1987 - narrator for 'Wine Tasting' and elsewhere
1987 - third series of 'The Wine Programme'
1987 - writer/presenter of 'Jancis Robinson Meets...' Thames
1989 - writer/presenter/producer of 'Matters of Taste' C4 (Glenfiddich Award)
1991 - writer/presenter/producer of 'Matters of Taste' C4 and Australia
1992 - writer/presenter/producer of 'Vintners' Tales' BBC2
1994 - co-host of first series 'Grape Expectations' TV Food Network (US) 1995 - co-host of second series Grape Expectations
1995 - writer/presenter/producer of 'Jancis Robinson's Wine Course' BBC2 and numerous broadcasters worldwide (James Beat Award)
1996 - narrator of 'The House' (Royal Opera) BBC2
1997 - writer/presenter of 'The Food Chain' BBC1
1998 - writer/presenter of 'Vintners' Tales' (2nd series) BBC2 (Glenfiddich Award and Jacob's Creek World Food Media Award)
1999 - writer/presenter of 'Taste with Jancis Robinson' BBC2
2003 - presenter of 'Uncorked' on Italy, various networks worldwide

plus numerous one-off narrations and appearances.

well rounded person....

Other stuff that I do includes eating, drinking, talking and listening. The closest I have been to any commercial involvement (see my ethical policy) was my work as wine consultant for British Airways from 1995 until I resigned in 2010. Since early 2005 I have been a member of the Royal Household Wine Committee, choosing wines for HM the Queen to serve her guests - also on the basis of blind tastings.

Nick and I have been closely involved with the Geoffrey Roberts Award, an annual international travel bursary for someone in food and/or drink. In 1999 Nick dreamt up Wine Relief, an initiative designed to raise funds for the admirable work done by Comic Relief (improving lives in the UK and Africa. Put 'Wine Relief' in the search box to see just how many millions have been raised through wine-related activities. He came up with Menu Relief in 2013.

Since the early years of this century we have also been proud to play a part, on four continents, in the eye-wateringly successful fundraising efforts of Room to Read, an exceptional charity founded by ex-Microsoft John Wood to spread literacy throughout the developing world. Wine has played a significant part in generating donations from Room to Read's many generous supporters around the world.

I'm a Cumbrian, married to a saintly Mancunian (a United fanatic since birth), Nick Lander, who writes about food and restaurants for the *Financial Times* and is food service consultant to arts organisations such as the Royal Opera House, the South Bank Centre and the Serpentine Gallery. He used to have a restaurant, L'Escargot, in Soho in the 1980s and is the only restaurant critic in the world to have run such a successful restaurant. In 2012 he published *The Art of the Restaurateur*, which was an *Economist* book of the year. See his weekly contributions at Nick on restaurants.

We have three exceptional children vintage-dated 1982, 1984 and 1991 and a grandson born in 2010. Our son, vintage 1984, re-opened The Quality Chop House in Clerkenwell, London as a particularly wine-minded restaurant in November 2012 to considerable acclaim. His father, needless to say, has not reviewed it. We live most of the year in London but travel extensively.

...with an unusual name

I was given the unusual name Jancis because my mother and her sister had read the novel *Precious Bane* by Mary Webb in their teens and liked the name of the heroine Jancis Beguildy so much (despite the fact that she drowned herself and her illegitimate son) that they decided the first one to have a daughter would call her Jancis. Mary Webb was very popular in the 1920s and 1930s and wrote rural melodramas of the sort that Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* parodies. (Our prime minister of the time, Stanley Baldwin, even wrote a preface to *Precious Bane*, a book in which the male characters tend to be called Seth and Gideon.)

It may be a significant fact that most of Mary Webb's work was set in and around Shropshire. Until Jan 2007 neither I nor my mother knew whether Jancis is an old Shropshire name or whether Mary Webb made it up but purple pager Bob Ross of Franklin Lakes, NJ managed to find *'Shropshire Folklore*, ed by C S Burne, from the collections of G Q[F? J?] Jackson, by Georgina Frederica Jackson, 1886, page 575, which has a series of primitive acrostics on the word Finis, including this one:

F for Francis,
I for Jancis,
N for Nicklin,
I for Jicklin,
S for Sammy Sail-Box.'

Very interesting (to me!) and much appreciated.

Incidentally, my birth certificate actually says Jancice because it was only when I was eight that my mother re-read the book and realised she'd got the spelling wrong.

I have never actually met another Jancis but I have dedicated a book to one in the Bristol area, who must have been born in the 1970s; I've had a letter from one who must be closer to my age and living in Milan; and I'm told there was once a dress shop in the town of Reigate in Surrey just south of London called Jancis. In Brazil in November 2003 I was contacted by a lady of Polish extraction whose parents had emigrated to Brazil with the family name Jancik, which I had never come across before but I do see that www.jancis.com belongs to an American family called Jancis. In December 2005 I heard from another Jancis born in 1950 living in an English village whose parish newsletter is called - purple pages. In 2013 I was contacted by a Manula Jancis of Connecticut who is of Latvian origin.

In January 2013 I learnt that by a strange coincidence Professor Carole Meredith, my co-author José Vouillamoz's mentor as a grape geneticist and now co-owner of Legler Meredith vineyard and winery on Mount Veeder high above the Napa Valley, is the great niece of Mary Webb. Her paternal grandfather's sister, maiden name Gladys Mary Meredith, was the author of *Precious Bane*.

CV IN SUMMARY

Key elements below are in **bold**

1968-71 MA in Maths and Philosophy, Oxford University
1971-74 Marketing, Thomson Holidays
1974-75 *Presence*
1975-80 **Editor, *Wine & Spirit* trade monthly magazine** (Haymarket Publishing)
1976-80 **Founder** and author of *Drinker's Digest* newsletter
1978 Winner of the Rouyer-Guillet cup as top Diploma student, Wine & Spirit Education Trust
1979 *The Wine Book*
1980-86 **Wine correspondent, *The Sunday Times* of London**
1980 *Which? Wine Guide 1981 for the Consumers' Association*
1982 *Which? Wine Guide 1982*
1982 *The Great Wine Book*
1983 *Masterglass*
1983 **Writer/presenter of *The Wine Programme*** (Channel 4), world's first tv series on wine
1984 **Master of Wine**, first person outside the trade to pass these demanding exams
1985 Writer/presenter of *The Wine Programme* (Channel 4), second series
1986 *Vines, Grapes & Wines*
1987 Writer/presenter of *The Wine Programme* (Channel 4), third series
1987 Writer/presenter of *Jancis Robinson Meets...*(Thames TV)
1987-89 Wine correspondent *London Evening Standard*
1987 *Jancis Robinson's Food & Wine Adventures*
1988 *The Demon Drink*
1989 Producer/writer/presenter of *Matters of Taste* (C4) about Elizabeth David
1989-95 **Columnist, *Wine Spectator***
1989 *Vintage Timecharts*
1990- **Wine correspondent, *The Financial Times***
1991 Producer/writer/presenter of *Matters of Taste* (C4)
1992 Producer/writer/presenter of *Vintners' Tales* (BBC)
1994 **The *Oxford Companion to Wine***, 1st edn
1994 Co-host of *Grape Expectations* (US TV Food Network)
1995 **Producer/writer/presenter *Jancis Robinson's Wine Course*** (BBC) and eponymous book
1995 Co-host of *Grape Expectations* (US TV Food Network), second series
1995-2010 Wine consultant, British Airways
1997 *Confessions of a Wine Lover/Tasting Pleasure*, a professional memoir
1997 Writer/presenter of *The Food Chain* (BBC)
1998 **Producer/writer/presenter of *Vintners' Tales*** (BBC), second series
1999 *Guide to the Best Portuguese Wines*
1999 Writer/presenter of *Taste with Jancis Robinson* (BBC)
1999 *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, 2nd edn
2000 *The Oxford Companion to the Wines of North America*, consultant editor
2000- **Bi-monthly syndicated columnist** for publications around the world including Australian Gourmet Traveller *Wine*
2001 *Jancis Robinson's Concise Wine Companion*
2001 ***The World Atlas of Wine***, 5th edn, with Hugh Johnson
2002 *How to Taste/Jancis Robinson' Wine tasting Workbook*
2003 Made **Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE)** by Her Majesty the Queen
2004- **Member of the Royal Household Wine Committee** advising on the Queen's cellar
2003 *Jancis Robinson's Wine Course*, 2nd edn
2006 *Vine Varieties*, with Julia Harding
2007 *The World Atlas of Wine*, 6th edn, with Hugh Johnson
2008 *How to Taste/How to Taste Wine* 2nd edn
2010 Made Officier de l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole by the French Minister of Agriculture
2011- Honorary President of the Wine & Spirit Education Trust
2012 Wine Grapes, with Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz
Given an Order of Merit by the Portuguese government

Freeman Honoris Causa of the Vintners' Company