A day out at Windsor

21 Apr 2009 by Jancis Robinson

I had a lovely day yesterday. This may read a bit like a Twitter tweat, but I promise it will get rather less inconsequential.

In southern Britain we are at last blinking in the bright spring sunlight and enjoying slightly warmer temperatures, so spirits are generally high. My task yesterday was to drive out to Windsor Castle, the Queen's second official residence that is so visible from the air as you fly in to Heathrow airport, to taste wine for the royal cellars.

I have been a member of the Royal Household Wine Committee for almost six years now and am sad to be nearing the end of my second three-year term as one of only two non wine trade members. Marathon-running chef Michel Roux Jr of Le Gavroche is the other, but he's a new boy and so still has some years ahead of him tasting with the permanent members, representatives of wine merchants with Royal Warrants Berry Bros, Corney & Barrow and Justerini & Brooks.

As the less rabidly republican of you might imagine, it is great fun to be waved in to the gates of Buckingham Palace and then taken along its well furnished corridors to the palace cellars for a tasting of wines to be chosen for royal occasions. En route within the Palace it is difficult not to be sidetracked by the portraits, the acres of red carpet and gilt, and the little slices of backstairs life that one sees.

But it had been decided that, for the first time in 10 years, the committee would not be meeting at Buckingham Palace but would have an awayday tasting at Windsor, so yesterday I had the chance to see the workings of another royal household, in what is a much finer, more historic building – a 900 year-old fortress that is currently the world's largest inhabited castle, no less. It was looking particularly lovely in yesterday's sunshine. (The moody photograph below was taken at sunset, a nod to my valedictory status as palatial palate.)

It was a treat to be allowed to drive straight in to this collection of magnificent buildings, through the Henry VIII gateway, up the broad sweep of Chapel Hill inside the castle and then through an even narrower medieval gateway, realising it had probably been designed to accommodate two horsemen rather than a modest Mercedes. Somehow both Michel and I managed to miss the Equerries' Door, where we'd been instructed to report, and met instead at the rather less evocatively named Side Door, where the porter told me his wife was a Waitrose Wine Specialist, advising customers on their wine selections in a local store. And he'd been to both the English vineyard Denbie's and Reims.

The cellars where our tasting was held turned out to look quite remarkably like those under Buckingham Palace (or 'BP' as members of the Royal Household call it – I'm not sure that they reduce Windsor Castle to its abbreviation), a succession of light, tiled vaults that look not unlike a Victorian hospital. But the stonework on the way there at Windsor is stunning – all those Early English doorways and pointed arches, everything looking especially polished in the aftermath of the painstaking restoration that followed the Windsor Castle fire at the end of the Queen's *annus horribilis* in 1992.

The tasting itself was particularly fascinating. Much of the volume of wine bought for the Queen's cellar is stuff of the calibre of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc or everyday AC Bordeaux for serving at large receptions, but yesterday we were looking at smarter stuff for smaller gatherings: 24 possible white burgundies; a range of vintage and non vintage champagnes; three fino sherries from British merchants with a royal warrant; two possible mature clarets; and a look at the maturity of a range of 2000 and 2003 red bordeaux that were already in the royal cellars - which was well timed as I am just starting to look at examples from these vintages in my own cellar. (The Queen and I – we have *so* much in common.)

I will be reporting in more detail on most of what we so usefully tasted yesterday (blind, as always), but for the moment can tell you that **Harvey's Fino** was generally preferred over Berry's and Corney's – although I marginally preferred the **Berry's Fino**, which apparently comes from Lustau. We blind tasted **Ch Latour à Pomerol 1989 Pomerol** and **Ch Gruaud Larose 1990 St-Julien** for possible immediate purchase, and much preferred the (much cheaper) right bank wine that is already drinking beautifully. No need to hang on to this complex blend of vigour and molten Demerara sugar.

Tasting this amount of wine, however much is expectorated, of course makes you fiendishly hungry, and we were

rewarded with a three course lunch in the Octagonal Dining Room with its sumptuous view over what seems to be the entire Thames Valley and, most memorable of all, a snoop around the Windsor Castle kitchen. I kicked myself for having forgotten my Flip video camera because this vast, stone-flagged hall with upper windows is quite extraordinary. Lined above shoulder height with beautifully polished copper pans, fish kettles and moulds, many of them stamped with the initials of past kings, it has blackened spits all around it too, as well as the latest ovens and work surfaces carefully inserted into the medieval setting. Michel Roux was agape. This was presumably the kitchen that supplied the wonderful dinner Nick and I enjoyed here a year ago with Carla Bruni and her husband (see Sarko, Her Maj and us). Yesterday it looked spick and span, but there was not a trace of any foodstuff or person anywhere. There must be more modest kitchens that are used for the likes of our lunch, which had to be advanced a little to 'deconflict' with the Queen's quiet pre-birthday lunch a couple of vast chambers ('the Red' and 'the Green') along from ours.

From there, nodding graciously to the policemen at the Henry VIII Gate on the way out, I had to drive straight to Kilburn High Road. Quite a contrast.