

UK Sommelier(e) of the Year

30 Apr 2009 by Jancis Robinson

The 2009 UK Sommelier of the Year, announced last night after a tense final at Tate Modern, is 27 year-old Laura Rhys from Gérard Basset's Hotel [TerraVina](#) near Southampton, which Nick visited earlier this year.

Frenchman Gérard sportingly told Nick this morning, 'She was fantastic. She won the blind tasting prize and on stage she made us dream. A young English lady who beats two French men (Christopher from the Square and Joan from Hotel du Vin, Winchester) in a sommelier competition - that is brilliant!'

'The standard of this year's competition was unbelievable. To have the UK's top 15 sommeliers demonstrating such high levels of expertise under such nerve-racking conditions was thrilling', commented Christian Holthausen of Piper-Heidsieck and Charles Heidsieck champagnes, who sponsored the competition. He is pictured here with Laura against the London skyline.

'The current economic climate has prompted an interesting set of new challenges for the sommelier with an added emphasis on the ability to direct customers to interesting fine wines that suit every budget. Today's exhilarating competition has been a true test of these talents and highlights the complex skill set a sommelier has to master, combining the art of showman, authority and businessman.'

The panel of judges, headed by Master Sommelier Matt Wilkin and including last year's Sommelier of the Year Gearoid Devaney and food and drink writer Tom Parker-Bowles, assessed the 15 semi-finalists (winners from the regional competition held in February) on numerous technical skills including a blind tasting and written exam.

Tensions rose in the afternoon when the three finalists, Laura Rhys, Yohann Jouselin from Hotel du Vin & Bistro, Winchester, and Christopher Delalonde from The Square, London, were announced. A series of demanding tasks were presented: a realistic role-play restaurant scenario testing the sommeliers' ability to deal with customers, their management skills and their ability to cope under pressure; a blind tasting; a food and wine matching exercise; and an against-the-clock wine list error-spotting exercise. The grand finale involved, as usual, precision pouring. The three sommeliers had to pour a single magnum of Piper Heidsieck into 16 champagne glasses, filling each equally without returning to any of them.

'This year it was very difficult to choose between the three finalists. All are professionals at the top of their game and who have a passion for the subject. They all handled the pressure of the competition admirably - the industry should be proud of this level of achievement,' commented chief judge Matt Wilkin.

Laura wins a trip to Champagnes Piper-Heidsieck & Charles Heidsieck, and the admiring gratitude of all wine-loving Englishwomen.