Wine reclaims Geoffrey Roberts

3 Jun 2010 by Jancis Robinson

This year's applications for the annual Geoffrey Roberts travel award were the strongest set for a long time and for the first time in six years the award has gone to a winner in wine, Geoffrey's original speciality, rather than food.

Derek Mossman Knapp [derek@garagewineco.cl] of Chile (pictured left) will spend the award, worth £3,000 or $4,500, encouraging artisan wine production from dry-farmed old vines in southern Chile in the wake of this year's earthquake. He plans to spend a year travelling through old vine country 'in a beat up red truck that blends in' in an attempt to publicise, and engender respect for the proper use of, the grapes produced by historic vines such as the ancient Carignan plant shown here.

'I believe many who live with very little, and now have much less,' he says, 'would be better served to develop their fruit into something the higher-end modern wine industry needs instead of a commodity where they will always be slowly losing out against the powers of the market economy. I will be looking for Carignan, and also Malbec and Cabernet Franc. I will also be looking for old-vine Pais/Mission worth grafting to noble varieties. I have seen this happen to more than one family with only a few hectares of Carignan and I think it could be coaxed into happening more often to benefit more families.'

At his own Garage Wine Co, part of the MOVI group of small Chilean wine producers, his aim is to 'try and be an example for Maule growers of how they might, on a similarly small scale as ours, produce their own wines as their forefathers did before them'. On the left is the matriach of a family of vine growers in Maule.

Runner-up for the 2010 Geoffrey Roberts Award is American wine writer **Alice Feiring** (pictured here on www.alicefeiring.com), who is hard at work on a book *Naked Wine* about her speciality, 'natural wines'. According to this dance-therapist-turned-wine-writer, whose first wine book had the provocative subtitle, *How I Saved the World from Parkerisation*, 'Right now the world of wine is definitely at a crossroads, not just for organic or biodynamic viticulture but also for a more pure way of wine making. Why is wine so important? Because in its highest form, the creation of a fermented grape juice is where nature, art and man come together in a very special and magical place. We've been through its industrialisation and now we are on the brink of a return to the past, to wines that are artisanal and driven by passion.'

The judges also gave a special commendation to two strikingly similar applicants. **Mary Buschell** of Michigan and **Wendy Johnson** of California both work with goats on a farm. Both applied for a Geoffrey Roberts Award to help them travel to north-west Italy to research farmhouse techniques for making goat's milk cheese. They have been put in contact with each other and with Patricia Michaelson, proprietor of La Fromagerie in London and author of the authoritative *Cheese*.

The Geoffrey Roberts Trust is a registered charity established in memory of the pioneer importer of California wines into the UK. It is therefore appropriate, although purely coincidental, that all of those cited above are based in the Americas. This year's applications came from all over the world, including Kabul and South Africa.

The judges were Neville Abraham CBE, founder of Les Amis du Vin in the UK, Sally Clarke of Clarke's restaurant in London, food writer Jill Dupleix of Sydney, honorary secretary Venetia Lebus, Willie Lebus of Bibendum Wine, who once worked for Geoffrey Roberts, wine writer Jancis Robinson and restaurant writer Nick Lander.

The last wine-based winner was **Shalva Khetsuriani,** who in 2004 travelled from his native Georgia to the fine wine regions of France. For details of other winners since this annual travel award was first made, in 1996, see www.geoffreyrobertsaward.com, where there are also details of how to apply.

Applications for the 2011 Geoffrey Roberts Award will be welcome during the first three months of next year.