Champagne celebration - the pictures

4 Dec 2010 by Jancis Robinson

See also Celebrating the first decade - a first report.

Who would have guessed that Thursday 2 Dec would turn out to be one of London's coldest and most snow-afflicted ever (see, for example, LCB loses roof)? We Brits are not used to serious snow pre-Christmas, which resulted in extremely difficult travelling conditions, so it was all the more amazing that so many of the 250 Purple pagers who had bought tickets for our tenth-anniversary champagne celebration last Thursday managed to get through the snow and ice to the historic German Gym by London's Eurostar terminal.

There were Purple pagers from Canada, Korea, Washington DC, France and Denmark (and those were only those I happened so speak to), many of whom had deliberately created reasons to travel to London to coincide with our tasting of 23 fine champagnes. Sadly, there were others in much closer locations such as our very own Rachel Shaughnessy in Haywards Heath, Michael Schmidt in Germany, and Purple pager Martin Nettleton in Sheffield who simply could not get through the snowdrifts.

At least the German Gym, an atmospheric listed building, the first custom-built gym in the UK commissioned by the German Gymnasics Society in the 1980s, is very close to both St Pancras and Kings Cross stations, but it does have the major disadvantage of having its large entertaining space on the first floor with the most temperamental of lifts and no water or sink on the first floor.

Adding to the tension of the day was the fact that all of the champagne and all of the champagne glasses had been assembled in the depths of rural Kent by specialists Sensible Wine Services, who told us that the day before they had had to dig their vehicle out of a snowdrift. I anxiously monitored the weather forecast and was mightily relieved when Richard Hemming, who organised this event almost single handedly, let me know early on Thursday morning that Sensible had managed to leave Kent (see this thread on the forum).

But the Sensible driver was keen to get back before too much more snow fell so Richard found himself with all this lot to get to the first floor. Winemaker Belinda Thomson of Crawford River in Australia, currently working for Jorge Ordoñez in Rueda, happened to spend the night before our celebration staying with Richard and his girlfriend Kath. Her Thursday flight to Bordeaux's Vintech exhibition was cancelled when Gatwick airport was closed by snow, and she had volunteered to help him set up the German Gym. I'm sure she didn't realise that she would have to spend the day hauling all these cases of champagne and crates of glasses up a floor. The photograph immediately below was taken by Richard. All the rest are the work of Brad (Mr Tamlyn) Currin.

By the time Nick and I got there at 5 pm the tables had at last arrived from another outfit and were rapidly being set up according to Richard's table plan. Fortunately, some of the champagne exhibitors got there early and were invaluable in helping to get everything done in time - glasses unpacked, ice in buckets, rather otiose spittoons in place. I specialised in arranging the 600 cheese straws in six large cardboard boxes we had ordered from Flour Power City Bakery, with the help of Louisa Taylor from Montrachet, who co-ordinated the order, and Julia, who remembered how delicious they are. Beautiful flowers, purple of course, had been delivered by scarletandviolet.com earlier in the day.

Most important, I thought, was to have the home team easily identifiable, so I imposed purple top hats on us all - except for Julia (above left, standing in for Rachel on reception), who hates hats with a passion and was let off with a specially commissioned purple rosette. These one-size objects turned out to be about the right size for Richard (seen below with me), Walter Speller and Tamlyn Currin (right), but a little small for Nick (who sought every excuse to take his off - see the red-jumpered one below) and a little big for me. Thank you, Blu-Tack and cotton wool. Sitting unused were purple toppers that had been destined for Rachel and for our German wine specialist Michael Schmidt.

Our champagne tasting was timed for 6.30-8.30 but soon after 6 pm the first thirsty Purple pagers arrived and by 6.30 there was a long queue of would-be tasters waiting to hand over impressive quantities of thick coats, boots, hats and cases to our son Will and to Ray O'Connor of the International Wine Challenge, another long-suffering friend of Richard's. Victoria Daskal, who used to write for this site, and her husband Paul Carlisle quietly went to their aid.

If only to justify the cost of hiring the audio system, I thanked a very well behaved roomful of Purple pagers, their guests and champagne importers, seen listening below.

But of course the most important ingredient in the evening, apart from the attendees, was the champagne. See the complete list of champagnes poured. As you can see, we were treated to a wide range of fine wines, from such top-drawer grande marque NVs as **Billecart-Salmon, Bollinger, Louis Roederer** and **Pol Roger** (the last two from so-handsome magnums) to such treats as **Jacquesson, Cuvée 734** (based on 2006), and **Laurent Perrier, Grand Siècle,** via wines from growers such as **Edmond Barnaut, Philippe Brugnon, Egly-Ouriet, Lallier, Roger Legros** and **Pierre Moncuit** and such vintage wines as **Le Mesnil, Blanc de Blancs Grand Cru 2004, Jérôme Dehours, Les Genevraux Extra Brut 2004,** and a past wine of the week **Joseph Perrier, Blanc de Blancs 2002**. Several wines were deliberately low-dosage dry champagnes and two of them, the Dehours and **J Charpentier, Cuvée Pierre-Henri NV**, were made exclusively from Pinot Meunier.

Just for a bit of fun, we left an 'official' copy of the tasting sheet Richard had assembled, complete with assemblages, retail prices and stockists, on the final table and asked people to put their initials by their favourite champagnes. In all we gathered 121 sets of initials (far more than I expected actually) and the winner, with 16 votes, narrowly pipping by far the most expensive wine, the Laurent Perrier, Grand Siècle, that can often sell for £100 a bottle as is seen being poured here by Steve Brandwood in a particularly smart silver cradle, was the much more modestly priced, all-Meunier J Charpentier, Cuvée Pierre-Henri NV imported by champagneparexcellence.com of Eastleigh, Hampshire, and priced at £33 a bottle. Quite a surprise result.

Alas I had too many commitments to taste all the wines but I did taste the Charpentier and found it very charming - as

were the Frenchwomen pouring it (shown here), whose stand just happened to be next to the official scoresheet. I'm not for a moment suggesting that there was a FIFA-like vote-rigging, but their close proximity may just have swayed the odd voter.

I am delighted to say that, thanks to the generosity of the champagne importers who donated their wines, and to that of all those who bought tickets, whether they were able to attend or not, we are able to give all the profits generated on Thursday night, £5,000, split equally between the wine-trade charity The Benevolent and Room to Read which is so effectively spreading literacy throughout the developing world. This means that between them, the generous champagne importers and Purple pagers have funded the special Christmas payment to more than 40 of the Benevolent's 250 beneficiaries as well as 15 years of girls' education in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka or Vietnam.

Thank you all very much indeed - especially those who bought tickets but were unable to get to our celebration in the end. Perhaps we can celebrate the tenth anniversary of Purple pages specifically next year?