Geoffrey Roberts Award 2011

7 Jan 2011 by Jancis Robinson

Now is the time of year when we like to spread word of the travel award that Nick and I help to run. Every year the winner of the Geoffrey Roberts Award has £3,000 (about $4,500) to spend on travel that we feel will advance the worlds of food and/or drink. The Award has been given every year since 1996 to commemorate the life and work of pioneer UK importer of New World wines Geoffrey Roberts, pictured here.

All you have to do to apply for this opportunity - available to anyone, anywhere, of any age - is visit www.geoffreyrobertsaward.com (where you can read all about the background to the Award) and choose the **How to apply** option. We welcome applications any time between now and 31 Mar 2011. The winner will be chosen on the basis of what we judges feel is likely to achieved as a result of that travel - not so much on a personal level but on a broader canvas. Don't worry if your English is not perfect.

Last year's winner was an exception, a particularly articulate refugee from the communications business, Chilean wine producer Derek Mossman Knapp, whose aim with funding from the Geoffrey Roberts Award 2010 was to travel around the underrated Maule Valley in southern Chile, where there are so many old vines and under-rewarded growers, documenting the possibilities and encouraging the best of them to produce serious wine from this great resource. Below is his revealing account of what has so far been achieved - quite a lot.

A delayed start

News of my winning the Geoffrey Roberts award last May found me flat on my back with meningitis, which took the wind out of my sails for a good while and thus delayed the real beginning of this project. It was only this spring (September in Chile) that I could begin travelling in earnest and connecting with small farmers in Maule who had old-vine dry-farmed Carignan planted within their old Mission, or Pais as it is called here, vines.

I have over these past few months spent time with a number of small farmers, off-the-grid producers, with Carignan itself and others with old-vine blends that need some grafting to round out future field-blended wines. There are some fascinating characters in the region who quite literally live in a different world - no pickup trucks, just horses. Some make a derivative of grappa as well as their own rustic wines. These are some terrific folks who this year [post earthquake] have had a very tough time of it and, incredibly, are briskly brushing themselves off and getting on with things.

My goal in this project, beyond documenting the small farmers of the region in the wake of the earthquake, is to begin to connect some of these growers with a better means to market, something beyond selling their fruit to the local co-operative, where prices are set by many things other than the quality of the fruit, and where the grapes are destined to find their way into £2 plonk. I am trying to engage these farmers with the prospect of what some of their fruit could produce, and show them one example at least of what a small firm like my Garage Wine Co can do all by itself in the right company and working a different model.

Toward this goal there have been other advances, not far away, amid 14 pioneering wineries, large and small, which have produced Carignan wines in the Maule for several years now. The Club de Carignan, oft mentioned in the press over the past year, is presently drafting an agreement among themselves to produce an old-vine, dry-farmed Carignan wine under a common name and image, each with its own derivation and style of both wine and label and of course each with the producer's corresponding signature or surname. The rules that will govern this wine's growing, vinifying and ageing, the use of the name and image, are currently being agreed. It is, to say the least, an interesting departure for the Chilean wine industry. It is also the beginning of a remarkable opportunity for some of the small farmers in Maule.

Many of you are most probably familiar with the tremendous variety of terroir and vineyard sites that exists in Chile, but also the tendency for colossal firms to have vineyards in most of the appellations. It is a reality that has tended to obfuscate the sense of origin and/or regionality of wines from Chile. Within this group of Carignan producers are some of the largest and smallest wineries in Chile, from an affiliate of the giant Concha y Toro to my own small Garage Wine Co. What is in store over the next few months and in the vintages to come will, in a small way at least, begin to change a piece of the Chilean wine trade. And within this new order of things, within dry-farmed Maule, there will be small farmers, albeit making a very small quantity of wine, who will with experience and guidance have the opportunity to take their own wines to market like their forefathers did before them.

We have also heard from runner-up Alice Feiring who has finished her book on natural wines and expects to see it

published in September this year.

Please spread word of the Award to anyone you feel who might be interested in applying for it. Applications should be made by 31 Mar 2011 via www.geoffreyrobertsaward.com and the winner(s) will be announced in May.