

A little bird told us

8 Jun 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT

I'm sitting in bed in a hotel room on the Costa Brava. I've just discussed with our daughter two floors below us who will give our grandson his breakfast, organised accommodation in Paris for an American friend, taken advice on how to promote [our next book](#) in Australia, and discovered where to find the cheapest flight from San Francisco to Newark. All this without moving or saying a word.

There are huge benefits to the communication revolution, but how is it affecting the world of wine? Trading fine wine, like virtually everything else, with the emphasis on the virtual, has become much, much faster, and all transactions are now much more transparent. With websites that can keep track of stock in real time and credit card payments, a case of wine can be sold and paid for within minutes of being offered to a merchant or broker – very unlike the courtly rhythm of auction sales.

For many of us handling a bottle and, ideally, being given the chance to taste its contents before making a purchase would be the ideal way to buy wine, but online selling is making ever-increasing inroads into all sectors of the wine trade. There are now many successful online-only wine merchants such as Slurp and Naked Wines in the UK, Millésima in France, Pinard de Picard in Germany, and even the likes of [vinfolio.com](#), [wine.com](#), [winetasting.com](#), [wineaccess.com](#) and [Lot18.com](#) in the US where it has long been more difficult to transport alcoholic liquid than guns.

Thanks to the most successful, and seriously useful, price comparison website Wine-searcher.com, everyone nowadays should be paying more or less the right price for the wines they buy too. A few unscrupulous fringe operators still seem to pop up to take advantage of those who know nothing about the subject by offering them 'investment wine' at ridiculously inflated prices, but it is a wonder that they manage to get away with it.

[Wine-searcher.com](#) records the stock and prices of more than 16,000 wine retailers around the globe and lists availability in ascending price order for any wine in almost any likely market, dramatically exposing price gouging.

And once wine drinkers have acquired their carefully researched bottles, safe in the knowledge they have not overpaid for them, they can share their impressions of their contents on another hugely popular wine site based in Seattle. On [CellarTracker.com](#) is a giant communal database of more than 2.5 million wine reviews written by what its founder Eric LeVine calls 'real users'.

But who would have thought that Twitter, of all things, would not just offer all manner of wine commentators and 'real users' the chance to swap recommendations, but also play a part in setting fine wine prices? Tweeting is becoming an increasingly significant phenomenon during the primeurs tastings of the latest vintage in Bordeaux each spring. The 2011 primeur campaign of even such a supposedly traditional wine merchant as the centuries-old Berry Bros of St James's, London, was initially orchestrated by one @BigSiTheWineGuy, their Bordeaux specialist Simon Staples, tweeting furiously in the Berry's people carrier between Châteaux. 'Dom de Chev - what a corker!' and all that.

There are still merchants quietly doing the tasting rounds in Bordeaux, making notes that will, after sober reflection back home, be transformed into a printed offer of the latest vintage with order form on the back page, but they are becoming a rarity. Not least because the prices now come out later and later and entirely unpredictably.

Château owners now find their wines being rated in the unforgiving public glare of the Twittersphere even before the main primeurs week at the beginning of April, so eager are some of the American wine commentators to pronounce. None is more powerful at providing proprietors with the confidence to overcharge than @RobertMParkerJr, whose tweets from Bordeaux are scanned and analysed as forensically as any pronouncement from the Sage of Omaha. When he tweeted from Bordeaux in March that the 2011s were better than he had been expecting, our hearts sank. Bang went any chance of really attractive discounts for the vintage just released.

But the stuff still has to be sold somehow, so we have @BigSiTheWineGuy desperately trying to flog Château Palmer 2011 (£900 for six bottles in bond) with the tweeted observation that this 'Bentley' of a wine is 'Half the Price of Neighbour Ch Margaux and as good. Perfection costs. Also makes Giscours and Issan look like Jaguars with 15k miles

on them.'

And it is not just at this rarefied price level that communication about wine has been speeded up. Nowadays I am sometimes reminded about a tasting I should attend by reading tweets written by those who have already got there. The London *Evening Standard's* wine writer (@hernehillandy) is quite splendidly curmudgeonly about almost everything – including the selection at Tesco's recent showing of its latest wines to the media. But at least he reminded me that I had promised to be there myself. (I will report next week on one or two finds I made there.)

Much to the horror of some of my more literary friends, @JancisRobinson has found that she enjoys tweeting. For the last three years I have found it far more fun and valuable than vicious and a chore. I can make short recommendations that way, share some of life's quirks and idiocies, stir up support for campaigns and good works and, most importantly, garner advice. My Twitter followers have been extraordinarily ready to help when I needed to find, say, a decent radio station in south west France or advice on drying out shoes in Hobart.

One other entirely beneficial development for us wine nerds has been the increasing tendency of restaurants to put their wine lists online. We have to depend on them to keep it up to date of course – a crucial aspect of web behaviour – but this does give us an invaluable opportunity to study what's available in advance, researching other online opinions of the wines if necessary. This is particularly useful for those establishments with wine lists like bibles that would, if studied at the table, take our attention away from our dining companions for far too long. Some of these wine lists of course are already moving on to iPads. And yes, of course, everything written above is already way out of date.

Below are some of my favourites but there are so many more!

SOME VERY SELECTED WEBSITES

AliceFeiring.com
Decanter.com
DrVino.com
Fermentation.typepad.com
JancisRobinson.com
SusieandPeter.com
TheDrinksBusiness.com
Thewinedoctor.com
Vinography.com
WineAnorak.com
WineDiarist.com
Wine-Searcher.com

SOME VERY SELECTED TWEETERS

@ablegrape
@antrose33
@EricAsimov
@jbonne
@londonvino
@nealmartin
@newbordeaux
@PlanetVictoria
@RandallGrahm
@RichardHemming
@RN74
@robertjoseph
@ruth_ford
@sarahwine
@Timatkin
@TwoPaddocks
@Willielebus
@Will_Lyons
@winematcher
@winewomansong

