What wine professionals choose

24 Oct 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT

I think it's fair to say that the people any group of professionals is most keen to impress is their peers. This is why I'm always so interested in an initiative called Absolutely Cracking Wines from France. Most years since 2003 we British wine writers have been asked to nominate three 'absolutely cracking' French wines in various price categories for a big communal tasting of what in French might more elegantly be called our *coups de coeur*.

This year's selection was even more interesting because for the first time the top UK sommeliers were asked to make selections, although they were shielded from our writerly financial constraints of Under £8, £8-15 and £15+, and simply asked to nominate 'a Christmas white, red and sparkling or sweet wine'. (Rampant inflation: until 2010, the three categories were £3.99-5.99, £6-9.99 and £10+.) So it was to be expected that we would all tend to choose those wines we feel are cutting edge, showing we're vinously on trend.

With this in mind, I present the following trends that emerged from this year's recent Absolutely Cracking selection (given the inglorious Twitter hashtag #abcrack). The 156 wines ranged in price from £4.79 for Jamie Goode's Ardèche Gamay from Marks & Spencer to £42.50 for Egly-Ouriet's grand cru champagne from Vine Trail chosen by Igor Sotric, sommelier at China Tang.

The Wine Society is the insiders' UK wine merchant of choice. This co-operative buying organisation was cited no fewer than 22 times, streets ahead of its nearest rival as supplier of Absolutely Cracking wines, Majestic with 10 mentions and Marks & Spencer and Les Caves de Pyrène with nine each. The tasting took place at Paramount on the 31st floor of Centre Point in central London, incidentally affording us tasters a fine view of our building's rival skyscraper The Shard, at the foot of which we knew Les Caves de Pyrène were holding a concurrent tasting, of Loire wines - a popular choice for writers but not sommeliers. In the distance were the Kent hills while far below us we could see the white, carefully numbered tops of London buses (who knew?).

Lea & Sandeman and Yapp Bros were mentioned seven times. Other retailers which featured often were Roberson, Slurp, Vine Trail, Waitrose and Tesco with six mentions each and Sainsbury's and Goeduis with five apiece. The grand old St James's Street rivals Berry Bros and Justerini & Brooks scored a non-inflammatory four each. Of the many new online operations, Wine Direct, From Vineyards Direct and Swig all featured but it would seem that Slurp have been most successful at courting the wine writers.

The sommeliers, not surprisingly, tended to cite merchants who supply the restaurant business, so I was particularly impressed that Hamish Anderson of Tate restaurants chose the overperforming basic 2010 Trimbach Riesling from Majestic (a steal at £10.99) and Gérard Basset, current holder of the Best Sommelier in the World title, proposed a hearty £13.99 Bandol from the democratic shelves of Waitrose. His own sommelier at Hotel TerraVina in the New Forest, Laura Rhys, who has just been given this year's Award of Excellence by The Academy of Food Wine Service, also chose a Bandol, Mas de la Rouvière Rosé 2011, £17.25 from Yapp Bros.

Beaujolais and its like are finding favour with opinion formers. Included in the range were no fewer than three Beaujolais, three Crus Beaujolais and four wines made nearby in its image from the same grape, Gamay. Jamie Goode's version, the £4.79 from M&S, is a Vin de Pays d'Ardèche from the co-op there, while Steven Spurrier's Madargues, £7.95 from The Wine Society, is made by the St-Verny co-op and is a Côtes d'Auvergne, promoted to full-blown appellation status two years ago. A third Gamay, domaine-bottled Vielles Vignes 2011 by Robert Sérol in the Côte Roannaise appellation, sold by The Wine Society at their favourite price £7.95, was chosen by two wine writers quite independently: scourge of wine scams Jim Budd and Master of Wine Rosemary George. Meanwhile, at the top end, sommelier Maxime Bichon of Terroir and Brawn wine bar-restaurants loyally chose a £20 Ardèche 2010 Gamay from Domaine Romaneaux-Destezet imported by her employers Les Caves de Pyrène. (Jamie Goode chose a red St-Joseph from the same producer.)

As I reported two weeks ago, Bordeaux is out. Just one red Bordeaux was among the wines selected by the wine writers, and three were chosen by the sommeliers. On the other hand, I was rather surprised by how relatively few red burgundies featured. Anthony Rose chose a great-value Bourgogne Rouge 2010 from Nicolas Rossignol, currently sold by Lea & Sandeman for 5p less than our £15 limit. Tom Harrow chose a Gevrey-Chambertin 2008 from a new Dutch-Australian winemaker Mark Haisma which Vinoteca are selling for £32.50. Both of these are delicious and had me salivating for more - but then burgundy is notoriously capricious.

On the other hand, Rhône is definitively in. No fewer than seven southern Rhône wines featured in the wine writers' under £15 choices and there were five northern Rhônes and a Châteauneuf-du-Pape in their 17 £15+ red wine selections. Of the 18 reds chosen by the sommeliers, six were from the Rhône, with St-Joseph, Syrah at its most accessible, the favourite appellation. It's always fun to see what specialists recommend so I approached the choices of Rhône author John Livingstone-Learmonth with particular interest. His red Côtes de Ventoux, Sélection La Jeannette 2010 from the Gonnets of Châteauneuf's Font Michelle, £7.43 from Tanners, was one of the most artisanal and expressive wines under £8. And Bernard Gripa's white Les Figuiers St-Péray, £19.96 from Vine Trail, has long been a favourite of mine. The vintage in question, 2010, is exceptionally good in the Rhône.

Roussillon whites triumph. Not surprisingly, there was no shortage of Languedoc-Roussillon reds in the under £8 selection, considering how many of them are available and at keen prices. What was rather more surprising were the four white wines from the Roussillon and in particular my old favourite Le Soula Blanc, whose current, 2008, vintage was the choice of no fewer than three top sommeliers: Isa Bal of the Fat Duck, Emily O'Hare of the River Cafe and Xavier Rousset of Texture and 28-50, the London wine bars named after the traditional latitudinal range of the world's vineyards.

Jura and Savoie are on the up. Five years ago I suspect most British wine writers went from one year to the next without tasting anything from these two small eastern wine regions, but there were six representatives in this year's selection. The only problem was that the organisers could not always find the precise vintage chosen - an important disadvantage of the whole exercise.

WHAT I CHOSE

Under £8

Dom des Pierres Dorées 2010 Beaujolais

Stunning value for a 70% hand-picked wine from one of my very favourite Beaujolais producers. Authentic stuff with an interesting nose of dried grasses.

£7.99 Laithwaites/Direct Wine

£8-15

Rieflé, Côte de Rouffach Gewurztraminer 2009 Alsace
I loved the unusual combination of rose petals and dried citrus peel - a much more delicate and appetising Gewurz than most, with a dry finish. Just 13% alcohol. [Alsace was another popular choice, constituting six from each of the writers and sommeliers.]

£14.95 Roberson

£15+

Dom Patrick Javillier, Cuvée Oligocène 2010 Bourgogne Blanc
A fine, long-living Meursault in everything but name and price, from an impeccable address.

£20ish Four Walls Wine, James Nicholson, Christopher Keiller, Formula Wine

See my tasting notes on Absolutely Cracking French wines.