Why shipping temperatures matter

25 Nov 2012 by YuXin Ong

I first met YXin Ong of Kod Selections in Singapore when he was a student at Oxford. He had clearly got the wine bug and introduced me to Eric Toler. He wrote to me explaining, 'I finally moved into the trade last year (Oxford, civil service, management consulting, investment banking, wine importing - common route, no doubt)'.

He provides the following salutary tale.

Earlier this year I shipped a full container of wines (Huet, Amirault form the Loire, de Sousa and Laherte Frères in Champagne, etc) from France, having specified reefer truck pick-up and switched-on reefer container.

To my horror, the arrival notice showed that the wines had been shipped in a dry (i.e. non-refrigerated) container. When we opened up the container in Singapore, a full 27 days after it had been 'stuffed', measured temperatures were between 32 and 35°C. There were no popped corks or visible signs of seepage in the small number of cases we opened up, and the insurer is now claiming that they '[can]not see any proof for a total loss or even a damage to the goods insured'.

We've consistently taken every care to ensure that our wines arrive in the best possible shape (eg. unstuffing the container ourselves), and it's heartbreaking to see someone else's labour treated thus. So I thought it might be worthwhile reminding consumers that they should care about how their importers. distributors and retailers treat the wines en route.

When I approached Kermit Lynch for advice after a container of wine had been shipped without refrigeration (despite our clear instructions), he correctly forecast trouble with the insurance company. Half a year later, we've just reached a settlement where we are effectively buying the wines back in order to protect our winegrowers' and our reputations. While some of the bottles we've tasted were seemingly fine, others bear the characteristic scars of heat damage - advanced colours, cooked odours and flat, attenuated flavours. It is of course impossible to tell *ex ante* if any individual bottle is damaged, and no honest, conscientious wine merchant would want to see these wines sold to an unsuspecting buyer.

Mishandling of wine is endemic and unacknowledged. In our case, even though the wines had been picked up in refrigerated trucks, they were loaded onto a dry (ie un-refrigerated) container. That nobody thought this odd speaks volumes - the status quo is to ship wines without any sort of temperature control, even to sunny, tropical Singapore. The prevailing attitude seems to be: if end consumers can't tell the difference, why should the middlemen care? It is shocking that to save a few pennies per bottle, and sometimes out of sloppiness, the middlemen run the unnecessary risk that the wine will be damaged en route.

Acknowledging the problem is the first step to solving it. We've seen that with cork taint and, to a lesser extent, wine forgery. I'd like to see winegrowers insist that their wines be shipped under climate-controlled conditions. I'd like to see middlemen make the effort to ship and store wines properly, and consumers and wine writers complain loudly when they come across a heat-maimed (or worse, murdered) wine. Otherwise we'll always wonder why the wines tasted better at the vineyard.

In his book *Adventures on the Wine Route*, Kermit Lynch famously wrote: 'The difference between a wine shipped at cellar temperature and one shipped in a standard container is not subtle. One is alive, the other cooked.'

We plan to sell the wines at half the listed price and have plastered a warning label over the front label of every single affected bottle: 'CAVEAT EMPTOR, CAVEAT BIBITOR - BUYERS, DRINKERS BEWARE: This bottle was shipped from France to Singapore in an unrefrigerated container and was exposed to temperatures of at least 30°C. It should not be regarded as representative.'