An Avery tribute in Southwold

18 Jan 2013 by Jancis Robinson

I've spent the last two days in snowy Southwold tasting an unconscionable number of top 2009 red bordeaux in blind tastings and will of course be reporting in detail on what these comparisons revealed. This morning we'll be 'looking at' dry and sweet 2009 white bordeaux.

This is an annual tasting organised by recently retired Bordeaux négocient Bill Blatch, who used to produce such useful reports on each Bordeaux vintage. Nowadays he is working on a book about Bordeaux for Berry Bros and, to judge from his current appearance, on his tan. (He's a keen diver.)

I remember taking part in the very first of these vintage assessments in the late 1970s at the home of Simon Loftus of Adnams just outside Southwold before the whole thing moved to the Crown and Swan hotels in the seaside town itself and grew to include more wine merchants. More recently I have participated in the tastings of 2008s, 2006s and 2005s. (Put Southwold in the search box and choose Rest of site in the drop-down menu to the right of it to see all my reports on these substantial horizontal blind tastings.)

Well-known Bristol wine merchant John Avery was one of the most senior participants, and certainly the most generous provider of fine bottles to enjoy at the two dinners, as I wrote in Avery-underwritten La Mission dinner last year. This year's tastings were considerably quieter than usual since we lost John Avery last March, but last night at dinner we were able to toast him in a great Avery red burgundy.

Aidan Bell used to work for John. He is now a wine merchant on his own account at Davis, Bell & McCraith Wines and is the main organiser of exactly what is tasted when in Southwold. He told the story of how, when working for John Avery, he had come across a cellar in Worcestershire with several cases of Averys 1961 Chambertin. Under John's guidance, he made an offer for the wine that was accepted and brought the bottles back to Averys. He started to discuss with John how they might sell these very senior bottles and John was horrified. 'We're not going to *sell* them', he boomed, and, as was so often the case, the majority of the bottles found their way into his wonderful personal cellar.

Fortunately for us, Aidan was given a few of the bottles and brought one for us to share in John's memory last night. It was in great shape, and wonderfully sweet. Pale ruby and still lively, it was not like any Chambertin you taste in Burgundy today. Sebastian Payne MW suggested Gigondas, as one blending ingredient. I wondered (topically) about Algerian red. It was certainly robust and gorgeous - and according to Aidan was the best bottle he had encountered. This was an Averys-bottled wine made long before British wine merchants were required by law to obey AOC regulations. According to Matthew Hemming who works for Averys today, John had told him that the Avery Chambertin was always whatever the best wine they tasted in Bourrée of Gevrey's cellars was.

We were lucky enough to share many great bottles last night. I'll add notes on them to our mushrooming collection of tasting notes, currently being swollen by Tam's addition of all our reviews of 2011 burgundies. The tally is already approaching 1,350 and there are many more in the pipeline.