A grape treat

14 Feb 2013 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See Exotic grapes - a love story for my detailed tasting notes.

The Friday before last [1 February] I was treated to one of the most pleasurable wine tastings I can remember. It was not that the wines themselves were the greatest ever. In my time I've been lucky enough to enjoy various series of classic and historic vintages. This was not one of those. And at least part of the reason I enjoyed it so much was that it was in such a congenial setting.

It was in a particularly interesting house close to my own that I had long wanted to snoop inside. The 26 bottles were lined up on a pine table in a pretty, light, comfortable dining area with a wooden floor, lots of cookbooks and interesting bits and pieces round about, a (non-smelly) fire glowing in the grate, intriguing family photographs, unscented flowers and a view over a well-tended garden.

The tasting had been organised by a genuine grape enthusiast, not to say grape obsessive, whose interest in wine in general and unusual grape varieties in particular is so marked that he prefers to remain anonymous lest his clients feel neglected. After ensuring I had everything I could desire (decent glass, tasting sheet, spittoon, water and, nowadays, chair) Mr Grape Obsessive tactfully withdrew to his study, just within sight, while Mrs Grape Obsessive showed me where I could refuel on Clarke's delicacies. I may not eat much when slurping and spitting but there is nothing that stimulates the appetite more effectively than wine tasting, so provision of something more nourishing than a Carr's water biscuit is always appreciated.

A wine professional might have arranged the wines by colour and then by ascending order or body or sweetness. But to Mr Grape Obsessive, the grapes were the thing, so he arranged the bottles in alphabetical order by name of grape variety - the theme of the tasting being wines made from particularly exotic grape varieties that he had picked up on his travels over the last four years. He told me that he thoroughly researches any new region his work takes him to so that he knows in advance exactly what to look for. 'You can find the most extraordinary things in wine shops', he assured me. I gathered from Mrs Grape Obsessive that she was delighted that at long last these hoarded bottles were being opened and would soon be out of the house.

Since there was no particular vinous rhyme or reason to the order of bottles, I sat down where there was a space, which happened to be beside the first bottle of Uhudler I had ever tried. Mr Grape Obsessive, of course, had both a white and red version of this questionable south-eastern Austrian speciality that is made from American hybrids. It was a big mistake to start with the pale red Uhudler, made by Pfeiffer of Concord, the common labrusca grape variety responsible for so much grape juice and jelly/jam in the United States, and the much more obscure American hybrid Ripatella. You know how American grape juice smells? Indeed anything grape-flavoured in the US. 'Foxy' has become the accepted term for this unforgettable smell that is somewhere between fraises des bois and damp fur. I tried to rinse out my glass to ready it for the next wine, made like 99% of all wines from the European vine species. I failed and had to get a new glass. I'm not saying American vine species are evil. But their grapes and wine sure taste odd to palates more used to conventional wine aromas made from European grape varieties.

As co-author of a recent heavyweight book on 1,368 vine varieties - *Wine Grapes* had been tactfully left out in a prominent position in front of the fire - I had come across many of these exotic grape varieties before. But Mr Grape Obsessive gave me my first ever opportunity to taste Resi or Rèze, whose 700th anniversary was recently celebrated in its native Valais at a celebration organised by my co-author José Vouillamoz. The 2011 version made by the Chanton family of Visp, specialists in obscure local grape varieties, was apparently the star of the anniversary celebrations, while Mr GO's 2006 was the star of his tasting for me. It had developed beautifully into something that managed to be both tangy and somehow burnished yet seemed to have lots of life ahead of it, too. In *Wine Grapes* we note that there are just two hectares of this historic Valais grape variety left. There should be more, and recently José discovered, through his groundbreaking work analysing the DNA of grape varieties, that a few ancient Rèze vines can be found in Savoie in the French alps and that the variety is related to several others, suggesting it was once much more widely planted.

By compete coincidence, just after this tasting I was to spend four snowy nights in the French alps in Savoie, home of several varieties that have been shown by the work of José and other grape DNA specialists to have played a key role in the genealogy of some of the world's most important grape varieties. Imagine my delight when inspection of the shelves of the local charcutier in St-Martin-de-Belleville revealed a bottle of Mondeuse Blanche, mother (or father) of our very own Syrah/Shiraz and of which a mere five hectares are planted in the world. Twenty euros well spent, I can tell you.

I opened the bottle of Domaine Grisard's quite deep golden 2010 Cuvée Prestige Mondeuse Blanche and sniffed it. It

somehow reminded me powerfully of the northern Rhône. In fact, with its heady aroma, savoury, almost salty finish and notably low acidity, it tasted like nothing more than a particularly low-acid Condrieu, the northern Rhône's famous Viognier wine. I went to consult the material for *Wine Grapes* on my laptop. (You don't think I can remember all 1,400 pages, do you?) And there I was reminded that another of José's DNA analyses had established that Mondeuse Blanche not only has a parent-offspring relationship (DNA profiling alone will not tell you which one is which) with Syrah, but it also has the same with Viognier - and with Mondeuse Noire, Savoie's characteristic red wine grape. It's amazing what you can learn on holiday - sorry, working trip.

And Mr GO reminds me that his tasting was merely the northern half of his collection. I'm already looking forward to the southern half.

My exotic favourites

Grape names are in capitals.

REDS

H Badoux GARANOIR 2009, Aigle, Valais, Switzerland

Pravis NEGRARA 2008 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti, Trento, Italy

Domaine St-Germain PERSAN 2009 Savoie, France

Deutzerhof PORTUGIESER 2009 Ahr, Germany

Hummel PORTUGIESER 2010 Villány, Hungary

Strohmeier BLAUER WILDBACHER 2002 Neuberg, Weststeiermark, Austria

WHITES

Chanton RÈZE 2006 Visp, Valais, Switzerland

Megalomaniac, Eccentric SAVAGNIN Oliveira Vineyard 2010 Niagara Peninsula, Canada

Dominique Belluard GRINGET 2010, Savoie, France

Klausen KERNER 2011 Eisacktaler, Südtirol, Italy

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