



Written by
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Varsity tasting match - an Asian triumph



Yesterday was the annual Varsity wine-tasting match sponsored by Pol Roger champagne. Six whites and then six red wines were served blind to teams of six plus a reserve from each of Oxford and Cambridge universities. They are seen here at work in a hushed room in the Oxford and Cambridge Club in London. Their answer papers, with guesses at what the wines were and tasting notes on them, were marked by me, an Oxford graduate, and fellow Master of Wine Richard Bampfield, an alumnus of Pembroke College, Cambridge. In charge of adding up and much besides was James Simpson MW of Pol Roger.

It was a close-fought contest with Oxford out in front after the white wines were tasted but Cambridge achieving a higher total score than Oxford for their assessments of the reds. In the end Oxford won overall by 791 points (out of a total of 1,440 if every person guessed everything

correctly) to Cambridge's 778. Very creditable results.

As with the famous boat race, team members are largely post-grads rather than undergraduates, of which there was just one on each team. The Oxford reserve taster was first-year biologist Jia Hao Choo (on the left in the picture below), whose only previous exposure to wine was an Introduction to Wine course available to Oxford freshmen last term. He managed a better score than half of those on the actual Oxford team, so if the scores of the respective reserve tasters had been taken into account, Oxford's win would have been even more convincing. Jia Hao Choo won a bottle of Pol Roger 2006 and free access to my [online wine course](#).



Prize for the best individual score, a magnum of Cuvée Winston Churchill and membership of our very own Purple Pages, went to the Oxford captain Janice Wang (on the right in my picture), who was the only taster to do particularly well in the white-wine section. She also did well with the reds though her team mate Jit Hang Jackie Ang managed to score two more points than Janice on the reds – and Lucy Yang of Cambridge notched up two more points than Jit Hang Jackie An on the reds, though like most tasters was rather baffled by the whites.

Janice, incidentally, who took part in last year's tasting match, is a psychologist who has published extensively on perceptions of wine and music. She has very efficiently already sent me these links:

I. on the crossmodal matching between wine and music

<http://flavourjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13411-015-0045-x>

II. modulating the experience of wine through music and sound

<http://flavourjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13411-015-0043-z>

III. so what if music influences the taste of wine?

<http://flavourjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13411-015-0046-9>

The Cambridge captain Nick Cooper is an Australian medical geneticist engaged in fascinating research into genetic factors and various diseases, particularly type 1 diabetes. I was lucky enough to sit next to him at lunch and enjoyed myself almost as much as when I sat next to a certain Alex Hunt, yet to become an MW, when he was on the Oxford tasting team many years ago.

The wines were chosen by MW student Cassidy Dart from Enotria's range. (It would presumably have been too obvious to choose them from Pol Roger's much more limited portfolio – although this has been done in the past.) We kicked off with a very obvious Australian Riesling, which must have bolstered most tasters' confidence, but the whites ended with a deeply dodgy old Bertani Soave that seemed to me to have lost fruit entirely. And it was significant that so few of the tasters recognised the Grüner Veltliner – I thought it a rather faint example.

The reds were more reliable examples of a Loire Cabernet Franc, a Margaret River Cabernet Sauvignon, an Oregon Pinot, a mature rioja, an Amarone and a Chianti Classico. (They all have to be effectively monovarietal because the first five marks are for the predominant grape variety.) Overall, the standard of blind tasting was very high, so congratulations to all, not least the coaches. Apparently, just like most MW students, they taste daily in the week leading up to the contest.

You can just make out Hubert de Billy of Pol Roger in the background of my picture. He came over to present the winning team with the giant silver cup – and the promise of a trip to Champagne. Members of the losing team got a bottle of NV each while the winners of the winning team were treated to a bottle of vintage Pol 2006 apiece.

Wines poured, from anonymous bottles, were:

WHITE WINES

1. Skillogalee Riesling 2013 Clare Valley
2. Marqués de Riscal, Finca Montico 2013 Rueda
3. Ken Forrester Reserve Chenin Blanc 2014 Stellenbosch (very good)
4. Machherndl Grüner Veltliner Federspiel Kollmutz 2014 Wachau
5. Domaine Josmeyer, Les Folastries Gewurztraminer 2012 Alsace (very good)
6. Bertani, Vintage Edition 2013 Soave (past it)

RED WINES

7. Cave de Saumur, La Cabriole 2014 Saumur-Champigny (pretty)
8. Howard Park, Miamup Cabernet Sauvignon 2011 Margaret River
9. Omero, Pinot Noir 2012 Willamette Valley
10. Marqués de Riscal, Gran Reserva 2006 Rioja (beautifully mature)
11. Bertani, Villa Arvedi 2012 Amarone di Valpolicella Valpantena

12.Villa Cerna 2011 Chianti Classico