

# Reds, whites and Blues

Oxbridge rivalry goes beyond the Boat Race – the wine-tasting contest is hard-fought, too



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It's Boat Race day tomorrow. At 4.35 pm, the brawny brain-boxes of Oxbridge will slug it out over 4¼ miles of the Thames, just as they have done almost every spring since 1829. Oxford won last year, but Cambridge's Light Blues are ahead overall, boasting 78 wins to the Dark Blues' 72, with one dead heat.

I'm told that the oarsmen train for the equivalent of two hours for every stroke in the race, of which there are over 600. Tough stuff indeed, but a stroll in the park compared to the gruelling training undergone by their counterparts in the university wine-tasting teams.

The Pol Roger Oxford & Cambridge Blind Wine-Tasting Match has been held every year since 1953. Cambridge have won the past two events, but overall have bagged the prize only 19 times, compared with Oxford's 33. I meet the teams as they prepare to do battle for this year's trophy.

"It has been exhausting," admits Cambridge's Gillian Todd, a psychology PhD student at Darwin College. "We've been training five times a week and the breakfast blind tastings have been the hardest. But we're peaking at just the right moment."

Janet Scott, the co-captain of the Oxford team who is studying medicine at Worcester College, says her team has undergone a similarly arduous routine. "My Finals ended on Burns Night, and training for this started in earnest during my hangover the next day," she explains. "We've been doing 12 wines

a night for the past week and 24 on Saturday. We also practised on the train this morning."

There are six students on each side, plus a reserve whose score counts only if there's a tie. Twelve unknown wines (six white and six red) have to be identified by their predominant grape variety, country of origin, main viticultural region and vintage, with comments required on how the answers are arrived at. There are 40 minutes on whites, a break, then 40 minutes on reds – it's a game of two halves.

"The reserves have the most fun," whispers Pol Roger's James Simpson MW, the match co-ordinator. "They tend not to spit out, but still get the prize if their team wins."

Conditions are perfect as we gather for the match at the Oxford & Cambridge Club in Pall Mall, in central London. A spotless white tablecloth is topped by highly polished glasses, discreet spittoons, and beautifully ordered pencils and pads of paper. The competitors look earnest (probably nerves) and, in some cases, elderly. A glance at the team sheets tells me that at least two of them are in their 40s and one already has four degrees under his belt. I trust that neither team is fielding a ringer.

I'm invited by the judges – Jancis Robinson (formerly of Oxford) and Bill Baker of Reid Wines (Cambridge) – to taste the same wines with them (blind) in an adjoining room. James Simpson looks on with the amused air of someone itching to be asked a secret, only to reply that he's not telling.

The whites are fiendishly difficult. I spot a couple of Rieslings and what I think may be a Chablis but, apart from that, I'm completely at sea. Jancis and Bill mutter darkly about the obscurity of



Winners by a nose: part of the Oxford team. Left: judges Bill Baker and Jancis Robinson



some of James's selections, and none of us spots the first wine as Verdicchio, or the third as a California Marsanne.

While the teams have their break, their first-round answers are marked.

"That first wine has really shaken them," Jancis giggles, as she casts her eyes over the papers. "Wait till you see this chap's scattergun approach to

German wine regions," chuckles Bill in return.

After the break (with Oxford talking tactics and Cambridge talking football), we try the reds. James has been even more mischievous here and I spot only the claret and Rhône, with no idea of vintage. I give up and join the teams for a beer and a debrief in the Red Lion.

"Some of the wines were impossible," says Gareth Tilley, who is reading law at Exeter College, Oxford. "I've just seen the answers and still don't know what half of them are. I'm fine on Pinot Noir and Gamay, but there weren't any, dammit. And as for Verdicchio, we listed 60 grape varieties yesterday and it definitely wasn't among them. Where is it and what is it?"

"If I take one thing from this," says Oxford's co-captain, Rob Hayward of Brasenose, "it's that I got the Bordeaux commune right. I heard Jancis Robinson once say that the wines of St Estèphe can taste like licking a wet stone, and this did. I'm thrilled to have got it right."

As we wait for the result, I ask Bill Baker how the candidates have done. "Pretty well," he says. "I don't think that the answers are as erudite as last year, but that probably has more to do with the esoteric nature of this year's wines." He gives James Simpson a stare.

Aidan Craig, the Cambridge captain, is announced as the individual winner, having played a blinder on the reds. "Wine's my passion," he says, "and I just know that I'm going to squander my future kids' inheritance on it."

Patrice Noyelle of Pol Roger announces the winning team. It's Oxford, by a nose (well, 15 points) – one of the closest finishes ever. The Dark Blues are wildly excited in victory and the Light Blues dignified in defeat. Glasses of Pol Roger Champagne are charged, drained and refilled, and the celebrations and post-mortems look set to run and run.

An omen for tomorrow, perhaps?

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