A Tale of Two Cities - The 60th Anniversary Oxford and Cambridge Blind Tasting Match

It is not often that you spot the gentleman of the wine press attend as it about to start their first day at public school, but smart suits and ties were the order of the day on a freezing cold February morning in the heart of London clambod.

No, not the morning after the night before at Chinawhite, but the lobby of the Oxford & Cambridge Club in Pall Mall. The occasion? The 60th Anniversary Oxford and Cambridge Blind Wine-Tasting Competition held on Thursday 21 February, a competition originally inaugurated by the late Master of Wine Harry Vaughn in 1953, the year of the coronation.

No not Oxford and Cambridge about to go into blind wine tasting battle, but, for the first time ever, and hopefully the last, according to one of the organizers, Pol Roger’s James Simpson MW, a trade and press team has also been assembled to do gladiator rode to nose combat.

On that cold and frosty morning, you could have been forgiven for losing sight of the fact that blind tasting is supposed to be fun. Already, there had been Twitter runnings about the fiendish paper set two years ago, described by Janice Robinson MW as the trickiest blind tasting match ever!

Both the Oxford and Cambridge teams take this match very seriously indeed. They are in regular, rigorous training. No surprise then that they went straight into nervous hurdles on arrival at the club, apparently running through last minute tips. In contrast, it was as much as some of the press could do to get out of bed as such an ungodly hour.

Much unsuccessful lobbying had been done in advance by the press captain MW Lyons, if not to find out the identity of the wines themselves, at least to get some idea of the kind of wines we might be expected to taste.

Had our august captain been a little less drop-in not heaving on any training or pop a tea at all? All he could tell was that the man who selects the wines, Pol Roger’s Cassidy Dart, said that the wines would be fair.

Briefing and Tasting

Pol Roger’s James Simpson MW set the ball rolling by announcing the judges, Janice Robinson MW and Hugh Johnson on the university side, Anthony Hanson MW and Sebastian Payne MW on the trade / press side.

He then briefed the teams. There were to be 12 wines, 6 white, 6 reds, with 40 minutes testing for each set of six, with a 20 minute break in between. Points would be awarded for grape variety, country, region, district and vintage, and, good loggie tasting notes.

What I hadn’t realised when invited asked to join the press team was that there was to be no hiding place. We were to sit with a member of the opposing team on either side with no conferring. I wonder if I would have been quite so quick to accept if I’d known that.

No conferring

The Whites

Banter over, we were under starter’s orders. Then, off we went. The initial tasting suggested that these were exceptional wines. That helped focus our wine type and style, suggested the likelihood of an array of French classics. As we tasted, the wines slowly started to reveal their personalities given a little more time to breathe.

The Whites

2. 2011 Château de Beaucastel, Rousanne Vielles Vignes, Châteauneuf-du-Pape. It came across as a lightly oaked chardonnay, but after seeping the next wine (obviously a white Burgundy, I thought) it was not so excessively, it was quite peppy, a bit Rhône but, northern or southern? Hmmm, I thought northern. Wrong.


4. 1997 Egon Müller Scharlachberg Riesling Auslese. Dark gold, blocked exud, definitely German reafing on the nose with all that rich and intense but not too sweet apple and honey backed up by Granny Smith acid bite. Lovely hue, but 1990s or 1980s? 1990s?

5. 2009 Georges Vernay Condrieu, Coche du Vernay. The toughies of the six nuts to crack, spicy and rich, but Alsace or Rhône? I ruled out vigner, because of my number two guess, so opted for Alsace pinot gris, Overbeaking.

6. 2004 Château Clos Lucé, Barba (I plumped for Hungarian Tokaji to start with, but second time round, after tasting, its rich barley sugar and honey didn’t quite have Tokaji acclivity, Barba 2003 or 2004? Mixed by a year.

The Reds

1. 2000 Saumur Champigny, Clos Roseau. This suggested Bordeaux, but cabernet blend, or maybe I opted for Left Bank Bordeaux merlot, right country, right grape family, wrong region.

2. 2006 Dupeyron-Vousne-Romansier Ter Cru, Malbecius. And nor fragrance and berry fruit but New Zealand or France? I initially went to New Zealand for its exuberance but reverted to Burgundy because of the tannine, acidity and lower alcohol. But 2005 instead of 2006.

3. 1999 Bouchard Perrieres & Brouilly at Hottorics, (Though they might at first, but not quite enough perfume or raspberry jam, so reverted to Tuscany, but plugged for top Chianti Collepiano rather than Brunelle, and 2007 rather than 2006.

4. 1999 Marchin-Beaujolais-Cerneuix. A beautiful oozes Bordeaux to be sure, but Merlot or Grapes? I licked myself later for saying Pauillac, because since I tasted a 2005 in 2012 wines, the tobacco smoke should have been a giveaway.

5. 1997 Vega Sicilia Unico. Remarkable. I planned for Spain and more pure pan a Rioja because of the slight mentioned oak and smell. One of the press team in the pub afterwards had put down Château Musar, which I thought might be, but it was not, but it was really good and I was out vintage by a country mile.

6. 2003 Kungsepp Syrah, Hudson, Vineyard, California. A bit irregularity and pepper, spicy woody and savoury power suggested it was World Syrah and sure enough it was, though I thought Chile’s Elqui Valley.

The Awards

The awards ceremony was held in the vaulted cellar of Berry Bros & Rudd’s premises beneath Saint James’s, where animated 2002 Pol Roger-fuelled conversation was followed by the revelation of the winners by Cassidy Dart and the announcements by James Simpson MW.

Accompanied by much whooping, Oxford were declared the winners by 928 points to 777, just 12 points separating the two teams. Both university teams had accupied themselves well with all those hours of coaching paying off.

Jonathan Fedler from the trade and Michael Schröder on the press side were mentioned in dispatches as the panel second and top, whilst my own. I won a consolation manuger Pol Roger 2002 Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill (the top taste), satisfying but behaviourial result in the context of an even more appropriately close contest. The trade clinched it by 114 to 100 points.

No other, the ambience was exceptional and the occasion was great fun. As Jason Morris appeared to observe in the closing speech after a well-deserved long lunch, ‘there had been a great concordance’.

Peter Richards MW remains hopeful.

The fringe of any wine event should be above all fun. However, you seriously take it isn’t an exact science but there is a deductive process involved. Basically, you need to engage nose and brain and use your intuition.

As the Cambridge captain Ellie Kin said, blind tasting is quite scientific because it favours both your head and your senses. True, and Lady Lucy plays a big part too! 100 for you one day may not work the next.

Why do it? It’s about creating a challenge for yourself, said Ellie Kin. How true. This real competition is with no one else but yourself. As a recent trend revealed the winner of the Jane Dacre Carnegie sums up neatly. Do not look for approval except for the consciousness of your own

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