

New World Wines

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Newsletter

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You may remember that my September newsletter covered the Loire Valley. From Sancerre to Chablis is about a 90-minute drive and it was with some excitement that I headed for Chablis and my rendezvous with Celine Brocard. I had heard good reports about the 2002 Burgundy vintage and having sold out of *Jean-Marc Brocard's* wines over the last year was looking forward to tasting the potential replacements.

Celine had arranged to taste about twenty wines from the 2002 vintage and here are the highlights:

One thing was very clear. This was a ripe vintage where the key was to pick early enough to retain the acidity while ensuring full ripeness. Jean-Marc Brocard and his team have fashioned some excellent wines (with a few misses where the acidity and freshness is not present), ripe and full bodied for early drinking. For people who like a fuller style of Chardonnay but without the oak this is for you!

Montmains Premier Cru

I have been purchasing the Montmains for several years now and have found the wines very consistent. The wine showed considerable minerality although the fruit was relatively subdued. Compared to several other of the premier crus it was a shrinking violet but I rather liked its restrained personality.

Vaucoupin Premier Cru

A riper nose than the Montmains with more fruit and slightly less minerality. Taste of pears and apples on the palate. I slightly preferred this to the Montmains at this stage of its evolution.

Beauregard

Very ripe nose, pure and rounded. Good long finish but perhaps a little lacking in finesse.

Bougros 2002 Grand Cru

Very pure and powerful with a long finish. Of all the wines tasted this is likely to last the longest. Very good indeed.

I have ordered all of these wines except the Beauregard as well as some 1996 Les Clos, which should be sublime now.

Celine took me to lunch afterwards in Chablis. The town is a mixture of the old and new, a result of some bombing in World War II, and really quite attractive. Most of the 'big' names in Chablis have a tasting room in town and I would recommend at least a diversion on any drive south from Paris.

Following a few days in Paris with the family it was time to head for Reims to meet up with Michael Bolt for the second half of the journey. This time it was truly into the unknown as I had never been to the Champagne district or the Mosel.

After an overnight stay in Reims at the Hotel Crystal, well located on the main pedestrian area, and an excellent dinner at Flo we headed for the nearby town of Ay to visit the champagne house of *Gosset*. This is the oldest house in 'Champagne' and several Bermuda sommeliers had highly recommended their wines. We met with Nathalie Dufour who took us on a most interesting tour of the premises, a mixture of the ancient and the modern, followed by a tasting of their wines. My notes:

Brut Excellence

Their entry level champagne was supple and easy to drink, but not exceptional.

Grand Reserve

A blend of wines from vintage years (i.e. years deemed of sufficient quality). Consisting of 46% Chardonnay with the balance Pinot Noir and a few % Pinot Meunier. The wine does not undergo a malolactic fermentation and only grapes from premier and grand cru vineyard are used. The wine was quite a deep golden colour, with lots of bubbles and the typical smell of yeast. Very fruity and powerful with good acidity and a long finish. Would be excellent with food.

Vintage 1996

62% Chardonnay, 38% Pinot Noir blend. Grand cru and premier cru grapes only. Nathalie commented that 1996 was a 'vintage for the ages'. The Chardonnay was upfront on the palate with lots of acidity and structure. Vibrant, this wine has a long life ahead of it. Excellent.

Rosé Non Vintage

56% Chardonnay, 35% Pinot Noir and the balance red wine (Pinot Noir). Pale salmon colour with powerful notes of red berries. Finishes quite sweet. Good.

Celebris 1995

Produced only in exceptional vintages and from grapes from Grand Cru vineyards. 46% Chardonnay, 54% Pinot Noir. Deep golden colour but already much softer and more mature than the 1996. Long finish with some nice secondary flavours. A wine to be drunk in the next five years. Very good.

Rosé 1998

Strawberries on the nose. Again a high proportion of Chardonnay. Good acidity and easy drinking. Good.

I was impressed with the wines and plan to import the Grand Reserve, Vintage 1996 and Celebris. They will be a bit more expensive than my previous champagne offerings but will still offer superb value.

I asked Nathalie what was the proper way to open and pour champagne. She advised that to open you needed to hold the cork with one hand while twisting the bottle with the other and gently ease the cork out of the bottle. As to pouring I had always felt one should pour champagne on the inside of the glass held at an angle. No said Nathalie just pour straight into the glass. Live and learn!

After a brief stop off in Verdun to visit the war memorials and museum we drove on to the Mosel. After the flat and relatively uninteresting countryside of France and the German border it was a pleasure to see the steep hills again, especially when covered in vines.

Our first evening was spent in Bernkastel in the heart of the ‘middle’ Mosel. Most of the best vineyards are nearby, filling the steep south-facing slopes. The town is very attractive, if somewhat ‘fairytale’ and touristy. Unfortunately the temperature was high and our hotel did not have air-conditioning. In any event we had a good meal at the hotel’s restaurant and the next day met with Dirk Richter, owner of *Max Ferdinand Richter*, and, rather like Alphonse Mellot in Sancerre, an ebullient spokesman for the region. He took us on a tour of the vineyards, many of which were too steep for tractors. Because of the heatwave the outcome of the harvest was up in the air, although ironically he suggested that the more poorly located vineyards (i.e. north-facing) might produce the best wines this year due to their cooler and less exposed sites. Returning to his cellar we tasted through the following wines, all from the 2002 vintage:

Riesling Classic 2002

Fresh and vibrant nose. Fragrant but with a somewhat short finish. From the Kingdom of Heaven vineyard.

Richter Estate Riesling 2002

Lovely nose, fruitier than the Classic and with a longer finish.

Brauneburger Juffer Riesling Kabinett 2002

Lovely wine in the slightly sweeter style. 9% alcohol.

Wehner Sonnehur Kabinett 2002

Slightly sweeter than the Brauneburger, very bold ripe flavours with a long lingering finish. Perhaps even more complete than the Brauneburger. 8% alcohol.

Brauneburger Juffer Sonnehur Spatlese 2002

Lean minerally, with quite crisp acidity. Full of fruit, spicy and elegant.

During our visit Dr. Richter suggested that we meet another producer, Christian Ebert of *Schloss Saarstein* in the Saar (pronounced Zarr) region west of the Mosel. Having been

exposed to temperatures in the 90's we retreated to an air-conditioned hotel, the Park Plaza, in the city of Trier for the night. As it turned out this unplanned stop was to prove fortuitous as not only were we able to sleep in comfort but also had the opportunity to explore the city in depth. Trier is noted for its marvelous Roman ruins but also has many other attractions. Highly recommended for a one or two day stopover.

The next day we visited Schloss Saarstein and tasted through his range of very impressive 2002's. All the wines from Kabinett to Auslese were brilliantly made with a light hand and full of fruit and finesse. The highlight of the tasting was the 2002 Eiswein which was absolutely fabulous. On the basis of this tasting I have ordered three wines – the Serringer Kabinett, Serringer Auslese, and one case of the Serringer Eiswein.

Christian's wife, Andrea, joined us at the tasting and very kindly provided us with a light lunch on their balcony high up in the hills overlooking the river below. They travel widely to promote their wines and I hope one day they will visit Bermuda for a tasting dinner. Please, please (do I have to get down on my knees) try some of these wines which although off dry are beautifully balanced.

Andrea recommended a restaurant for us in Trier and we greatly enjoyed Bagatelle on the bank of the Mosel. The cooking was very good and the wine list and atmosphere really splendid.

That was not the end of our journey as we next headed for Alsace for a quick visit. We stayed in the Hostellerie Le Maréchal in Colmar, full of atmosphere and, although the rooms were small, very reasonable value. Dinner that night was at the Au Fer Rouge, a Michelin one-star establishment which lived up to its billing. The next day it was back to London for yet more oppressive weather, indeed the hottest day in England's recorded history came one day after our return.

The wines outlined in this newsletter, except for the champagne, are arriving in the next week or so and are listed in the wine price list section of the website. The wines from California and Oregon will also be arriving soon of which more will be said in an upcoming newsletter.

John M. Sharpe

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