

Hi Wine for Funners

The autumn equinox marking the end of summer was accompanied this year by the rule of six. All change. Best laid plans for resuming meetings have been scuppered but nothing daunted we are hatching new ways of sharing wine for fun over the next few months, details to follow in due course.

Bottles galore

The Romans used glass bottles for wine, but the shapes that evolved (onion/bladder/mallet-shaped) fell out of use for practical reasons when it became clear that how the wine was stored had an impact on the process of maturing. In the 1730s people realised that storing bottles on their sides, known as 'binning', improved the wine and for this cylindrical bottles are optimum. This had the added advantage of keeping the cork wet so that it expanded and became a more effective stopper.

Whilst bottle shapes varied so did their capacity. Until 1860, wines were sold by the measure and then bottled. In 1821 Ricketts of Bristol patented a bottle moulding machine which enabled bottles of a uniform shape and size to be widely available. This protected customers as it meant that they could expect to buy a standard quantity of wine, usually 75cl. 1860 also saw the development of glue strong enough to stick to the glass, and so the paper labels we are so familiar with came into being.

Nowadays the most common standard shapes are bordeaux, burgundy and germanic, but there are many others. Indeed, in the 1980s regional or appellation bottles became quite fashionable. Chateauneuf du Pape, Chateau Grillet and Muscadet are well known examples. Today, certain styles of wine are often associated with particular shapes, such as chardonnay which tends to be marketed in burgundy bottles. Bottle shape can be a subtle marker of intention by the producers and might steer you to a particular style. Rioja featuring Tempranillo may be intended to age and thus bordeaux bottles are often used, whilst Garnacha-dominated, richer blends may come in burgundy bottles.

Clearly champagne bottles need to be able to withstand pressures of up to six atmospheres. The English had been making sparkling wine since 1662. Christopher Merret (also spelt Merrett), a member of the Royal College of Physicians, presented a paper to the Royal Society that year describing how to put 'fizz' into sparkling wine. Whilst it was not until 1697 before Dom Perignon, often credited with inventing champagne, detailed his methode champenoise, a full thirty years later. Ridgeview acknowledged the contribution of the good doctor with Ridgeview Cuvee Merret Bloomsbury Brut 2014 which won the International Wine and Spirit Competition's 'World Wide Trophy for Best Sparkling Wine'.

The English were ahead of the game in another respect, they had perfected the glass making technology which prevented the bottles exploding during secondary fermentation. As with so many innovations, this was an unintended consequence of the Royal Navy banning the use of charcoal, from burning oak, as fuel for the glass making furnaces. Once coal was used instead, the temperatures achieved in the furnaces were higher, producing stronger glass which proved equal to the task of containing secondary fermentation.

The colour of the glass has also been important. Wine keeps best in dark glass protected from harmful light rays (lightstrike), but of course this prevents the consumer from assessing the colour of the wine. Rose wines are almost always sold in clear glass (Mateus Rose is an obvious exception), but since they are not designed to age this is not seen as a problem. In general, German hock is traditionally sold in green bottles, and many Italian wines are marketed in brown glass. Roederer Cristal champagne is bottled in clear glass with its distinctive amber coloured wrap to prevent lightstrike damage.

News and views

This extraordinary year has also seen the earliest champagne harvest in the drink's history, according to the Comite Champagne. The first grapes were picked on 17 August. The weather conditions have been perfect in 2020, starting with plenty of rain, particularly in February, followed by warm weather from March onwards. This brought budding 16 days ahead of the ten year average. The grapes were lower than average in weight because July was the driest ever recorded in the region. Nevertheless it is said to be a "top quality harvest". This follows the "exceptional pattern" set in 2018 and 2019 and so a Grand Vin is anticipated. A spokesperson for the Comite Champagne said "A run of three superb harvest years means Champagne in a few years be ready to offer exceptional blends and vintages too, fit to celebrate the event for which the whole world is now waiting: the end of the Covid-19 pandemic". [I'll raise a glass to that!]

Majestic's podcast "A glass with..." is set to return this autumn for its eighth series. It features wine critic Olly Smith chatting to a celebrity guest about their love of wine, their interests and their lives over a specially chosen bottle. Guests will include Miles Jupp, Ainsley Harriet and James Bay. You may choose to taste along with them. The podcasts are available via App Podcasts, Spotify, all over podcast platforms and aglasswith.com.

Drinks Retailing News

This is the first time since 1988, 1989 and 1990 that there have been exceptional harvests in three successive years. A limit of 8000 kg/hectare as a maximum yield or 230 m bottles has been agreed by the growers and champagne houses. The pinot noir and pinot meunier were ready to be picked first, with growers having to be a bit more patient for the chardonnay harvest. Taittinger reported 'wonderful grapes' with no botrytis.

Four communes, Chaintre, Fuisse, Solutre-Pouilly and Vergisson, which only produce white wine from chardonnay, have been awarded new premier cru designations for Pouilly-Fuisse. The process has taken ten years and the designation will apply from 2020, with the wines being available in 12-18 months time.

England and Wales exported 550,000 bottles of wine and sparkling wine in 2018-2019, doubling previous totals. Japan, the third largest market for champagne in the world, accounts for 6% of English wine exports. Passengers in the first class lounges of Japan Airways will now be able to buy wine from the Gusbourne Estate in Kent.

Decanter

Donations to help the homeless during the Covid-19 crisis were made by a number of Royal Warrant Holders, including Camel Valley Vineyard in Cornwall.

12 vineyards have been awarded Sustainable Wines of Great Britain status. Three of those accredited are in Surrey. The criteria recognised conservation, minimal use of sprays, water and energy. This year's harvest will be the first wines recognised in this way. Both Waitrose and Marks and Spencer are supporting the initiative.

Those accredited are:

Camel Valley Vineyard and Winery, Cornwall

Albury Organic Winery, Surrey

Chilworth Manor Vineyard, Surrey

Defined Wines Limited, Kent

Easing Hill Vineyard, Worcestershire

Grange Estate, Hampshire

High Clandon Estate, Surrey

Hush Heath Estate Vineyard, Kent

Nyetimber Vineyard, Sussex

Three Choirs Vineyard and Winery, Gloucestershire

Venn Valley Vineyard, Devon

Yotes Court Vineyard, Kent

WineGB

A few useful tips and hints from *The Independent*:

Screw caps have been in use since the 1960's, but some have questioned whether or not screw caps allow the wine to age. Research proves that they do. In addition they obviously avoid the risk of 'cork taint'.

Does your wine smell of apple cider, vinegar or sherry? If so, it may be oxidised which may be caused by poor storage or a poor quality cork. This is different from being 'corked' which has been likened to smelling of a damp mouldy basement, wet newspaper or a wet dog.

Occasionally wine gets stewed from being stored in conditions which are too hot. In this instance it tastes 'cooked'.

What wines benefit from being decanted? Some white wines such as rioja and burgundy and even young champagne may be improved in this way.

Allowing wine to 'breathe' does not really help as simply removing the cork does not increase the surface area exposed to the air. Decanting or aerating would be better, but sample every 20 minutes or so as left too long the wine can be ruined.

The Independent

Offerings

Majestic [prices per mixed six]

Hey Malbec! 2019 Matias Riccitelli,

Mendoza online only £9.99 [£12.99]

Louis Roederer Brut Premier Champagne £35.99 [£46.99]

Macon-Chardonnay Reserve 2018

Cave de Lungy, Burgundy £9.99 [£12.99]

WineRack

Beefsteak club Malbec *£7.99 [£9.49]

Louis Jadot Beaujolais Village *£8.99 [£10.99]

Familie Valerie Picpoul *£7.99 [£9.99]

* offer ends 5 November

Waitrose

Laurent Miquel Nocturnes Viognier IGP Pays d'Oc £6.39 [£9.99]

Cordoniu 1872 Vintage Brut Cava £7.99 [£10.99]

Yalumba Organic Shiraz £7.49 [£9.99]

Sainsburys

Sainsburys Cremant de Loire,

Taste the Difference *£9.00 [£11.50]

Roc de Lussac, Lussac de St Emilion *£7.75 [£9.00]

The Ned Pinot Grigio *£8.50 [£10.00]

* all these will attract a further 25% off if you buy any six bottles or more

Laithwaites £30 off and free delivery for new customers

Kutjevo Grasevino £8.99 [£11.99]

mixed six

Rex Mundi Shiraz Grenache £5.24 (half price) if you buy 3 bottles in a case of 12 bottles

Finca Los Trinos Rioja Joven £7.99 [£10.49]

mixed twelve

In these ever changing times we probably need to clutch at any certainties we can find.
Might I suggest:

Wine is one of the most civilised things in the world

Ernest Hemingway

Looking forward to this year's champagne and emerging from these Covid days, putting sixes and sevens behind us to share some wine for fun.

Stay safe.

Hands, face, space.

Jane Moberly

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