

THE WINE STEWARD'S LETTER DECEMBER 2022

Please note that the last date and time for the receipt of orders for delivery before the College closes for Christmas is 5pm on Thursday, 15 December. The Wine Steward apologizes for the exceptionally short notice given.

As I sit at home in front of my computer screen on the day after the Cripps Feast, at a loss to know how to avoid this letter sounding like a cracked record, it is, I see, -2C. The Met Office forecast is for it to fall as low as -6 during the night. This inevitably conjures up images of wines appropriate to meteorological conditions that are likely to continue to prevail well into the New Year. (And I'm not thinking of 'mulled wine', either, which, nevertheless, at the right time and place, is acceptable, so long as it is homemade – I possess, incidentally, an excellent recipe for mulled wine syllabub.) At the same time, we need to remember that these will often be wines that need to begin the journey to room temperature in extra good time, especially if they are at the mature end of the spectrum and have complex flavours that require respect. These special bottles require us to think ahead, so as not to subject them to the harsh treatment of radiator or open fire or even the slightly gentler airing cupboard.

Leaving aside the question of specific pairings with winter or festive fare, the wines that flood the imagination at this time of year are invariably big, assertive reds that demand to interact with flavoursome food if they are to reveal their characteristics to the full. For what it's worth, my personal preference is to postpone sampling such wines until after the first mouthful of food and then, if circumstances permit, to drink them on their own only in the interval before the next course is served, though I confess that I don't always practise what I preach. There is, of course, nothing to stop us relishing the nose in anticipation! The reds that come to mind, though they don't exclude the suitability in some cases of lighter reds, are the wines of Languedoc and the Rhône Valley, New World wines, especially those of Australia and South Africa, along with the more muscular wines amongst those produced in Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Claret, too, though Bordeaux devotees will emphasize their elegance and intensity of flavour together with their more delicate perfumes. The mutual enhancement when claret is paired with the right kind of dish is one of the great pleasures of the table. Claret also has the advantage of being an ideal accompaniment to many cheeses. All this is advanced without regard to what is to be served prior to the main course. There are instances where the same hearty red, or claret, can also work well with a hors-d'oeuvre or starter, thereby obviating the need for a change, but obviously this will not always be the case.

Many colleagues familiar with the Fellows' list will already have their favourites amongst the winter warmers but let me mention a few that might otherwise go unnoticed. There are still a few bottles left of the Australian 2009 Three Amigos Shiraz-Grenache- (and indigenous) Mataro, which, for all its apparent origins in the Tower of Babel, is an elegant (and attractively priced) wine. It is nicely mature, has a deep purplish colour and a smooth texture. I opened a bottle with my roast beef today and was well pleased, at least once it had

warmed up a little. (Yes, I should have taken it out of the cellar sooner, but it was fascinating to experience its progress as its temperature rose.)

2012 and 2013 were excellent vintages in the Rhône Valley, especially in the north. They still have plenty of life left in them, though the humbler Côtes du Rhône are unlikely to develop much further. Saint-Joseph is an established *appellation* that is widely appreciated. We have the 2012 La Source from Ferraton Père et Fils and you may already have enjoyed it at High Table. For devotees of Crozes-Hermitage there has been a chance since the summer to compare three different examples in order to decide whether you would rank their quality in line with their price, there being a noticeable differential in this respect. As a treat, you might move to nearby Provence and indulge in a bottle of the 2009 Bandol Mas de La Rouvière, which is highly regarded. Some of these older wines have thrown a degree of sediment, so benefit from decanting or, at least, careful pouring. If in doubt, simply pour into the decanter or glass slowly. After all, if that proves not to have been necessary, no harm will have been done.

A Rhône anecdote by way of a parenthesis: when I enjoyed my remaining bottle of a Costières de Nîmes last month as an accompaniment to a casserole, I was convinced that it was the example we had on the list, only to discover that our Costières de Nîmes was a different one. Scrutiny of the back label of my bottle, which was entirely in French, revealed that it must have been part of a case I acquired in France in good-old pre-Brexit times. The moral of the story: we should all be ready to avail ourselves of our 2012 Château de la Tuilerie, which I must have thought well of at the time I tasted it.

If in the current economic climate you have been over-generous in your invitations, do not despair. The robust Torres Gran Coronas Cabernet Sauvignon 2009 will stand up well to demanding food flavours and will have those round the table keen to have their glasses recharged. Alongside the range of more elegant clarets, the simpler but nonetheless straightforwardly pleasing Château Larroque 2015 may be considered to punch above its weight. Perhaps the safest choice of claret at the lower end is the 2015 Château Tour Saint-Bonnet, which is easily enjoyed and has been a staple in Cambridge colleges for many a year.

As for an accompaniment to the traditional Christmas luncheon, the choice is wide open, though the hot ‘trimmings’ can sometimes cause a problem. In the past, I have been disappointed by the performance of a good claret or burgundy, so would prefer to reserve these for a cold collation, but the experience of others may well be different. I’d go southern French or Australian.

There are plenty of choices too amongst the ‘entertainment’ reds on the list. The red wines in the price range £7-9 often provide excellent value for money and our various merchants are assiduous in excluding the duds. Furthermore, your wine steward prides himself on never purchasing a wine in this category without having tasted it alongside its competitors. If you are entertaining a crowd, spare a moment to cast your gaze in a southerly direction and browse examples from South America and South Africa.

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This brings to me to the new edition of the list. You may wish to have a look in the first instances at the additions, which, as usual, are identified by an asterisk. These are relatively few in number, which is, in part, a reflection of the reduced number of tastings that have been

put on for college wine stewards this year. But it is also due to the fact that some of the wines purchased need time in the cellar before they can be considered ready for release.

You may also think it prudent to look as soon as possible at the wines now marked as L (for low quantities). It may be necessary to act quickly if there is amongst them a wine you wish to secure. Similarly, wines not so designated may in some cases soon end up in this category as a result of attracting high levels of interest. If you are puzzled by a wine that has both an L and an asterisk, it's because the wine had previously been reserved for use at a College event and was mostly used up on the occasion in question.

In this connection, I should add that some of the wines we enjoyed at this year's Cripps Feast are on the list but may now be in short supply and without an L to advertise the fact. So, if you are keen to have one or more of the bottles in question, you are advised to act quickly. In other cases, the wines we drank are not on the list but if you are interested in acquiring the odd bottle or two of these, you should discuss your requirements with Phil Shephard (or me). Please note that bulk orders of the vintage port or the sauternes will not be accepted!

It is undoubtedly heartening each time I am able to insert a new L. A healthy cellar needs to export as well as import.

Over and above the new wines singled out by an asterisk, we have replenished stocks of others, mainly white, that have proved popular. These are mostly wines that are comparatively consistent from one vintage to the next (largely, but not entirely, New World specimens) and where, as a result, it is felt that there is less need to re-taste. This is the case, for example, with the now established dessert favourite, Château Septy from the Monbazillac *appellation*, where we have a new supply ready to use when the existing vintage runs out. The asterisks will reveal that we have now already moved to the next vintage of a number of South African whites. In cases where the substitution occurs between editions of the list, there will, inevitably often be a modest price increase, but it is pleasing to note that some merchants have been able to hold the price of certain wines at the existing level. Eagle-eyed readers of the list will notice that there has already been an increase in the price of certain of our NV sparkling wines following replenishment. It is likely that our stock of one or more other wines in this category will need to be replenished before the next edition of the list. We shall endeavour to ensure that any price changes are recorded in the copy of the list that is kept in the Fellows' Parlour. Finally, if one of your favourite wines, for example the Isolabella della Croce Sauvignon Blanc, has disappeared from the list, the latest vintage may be on its way, so please feel free to enquire ahead of the publication of the June list.

Among the additions, there are certain wines that might be thought to merit particular attention. These include the pair of 2015 Barossa wines from Tim Smith's Bugalugs range: the Grenache and the Shiraz. They offer an opportunity to experience the quality of his winemaking at a price that is significantly lower than that of one of his higher-level wines, the Tim Smith Barossa Shiraz, the 2013 vintage of which has featured on our list for a little while. The latter is an impressive wine that was considered by members of the wine committee at the Trial Feast. It lost out to the Châteauneuf du Pape, but its quality was widely recognized. Its elegance possesses a distinct individuality that sets it apart from the syrah-based Rhône blends.

Also noteworthy is the addition of a 2010 Sauternes: L'Ouest de Lamothe-Guignard, the second wine of Château Lamothe-Guignard, whose flagship Sauternes was much admired at this year's Feast. The second wine will continue to drink well for at least three years, but we must endeavour to consume our three dozen bottles within this timeframe.

I have felt it necessary to set us apart from certain other colleges in continuing to ensure a presence of white Burgundy other than from the Maconnais, though I have winced at the price on your behalf. Neither of the two additions in question is a *premier cru*, but I can vouch for the quality of both Florent Rouve's Côtes du Jura Savagnin Face à l'Est 2017 (which we admired at the Trial Feast but felt it wasn't quite right with the fish course), and Claudie Jobard's Bourgogne Côte d'Or Cuvée Milliane 2018. The Rouve family of Rhône winemakers is well established, and it is good to see a member of the younger generation taking that heritage to an adjacent region. As for Jobard, her winemaking has impressed me for a number of years.

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There has been a request that we consider stocking an example or two of non-alcoholic wine and we have started the ball rolling. My expertise in this is non-existent and none of our merchants have been moved to include samples of the same at a tasting. The consensus is that much non-alcoholic wine is of disappointing quality. At this stage it is a question of seeking recommendations. It may be that one or more of our merchants may be able to point us in the right direction, but if there are colleagues who have suggestions, I would ask them to let me have them.

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At the Trial Feast, members of the wine-committee were this year joined by Sally Bird in her new capacity. We were pleased to have the opportunity to discuss the food and wine with her throughout, with the actual cooking being left to the chefs, who received well-deserved plaudits from the assembled company. Since we taste three wines with each course, it is an opportunity for me to include both obvious and less obvious matches. Leaving it to an individual to identify a wine at each stage would almost certainly lead to safer choices. I think it is fair to say that most of the matches we chose worked well on the night, though one was less successful than we had expected. This was the Sylvaner from Alsace, which was paired with the purée of broccoli. The experience was instructive. The wine was thought to work better than either of the drier options represented by two sauvignons from the Loire, as a result of its ability to complement the assertiveness of the broccoli. Although all those present rated the soup highly, the chefs refined the soup subsequently, reducing the strength of the broccoli and the result was magnificent. However, it had the result of exposing, as it hadn't before, the sweetness of the Sylvaner. Equally important was the fact that many of us started drinking it before the soup was served. It was nonetheless a marvellous illustration of the precarious nature of some wine and food pairings. Even subtle changes to the dish can upset that balance. On the other hand, one Fellow of the college seated near me at the Feast waxed lyrical after the first sip of the wine and continued to enjoy it hugely after the soup had been served, which perhaps constitutes a nicely positive variation on the adage 'you can't please everyone!'. The interesting thing for me was that the Sylvaner didn't have an adverse effect on the subsequent pairing of the Sancerre with the lobster and salmon raviolo. One can perhaps worry just a little bit too much about such things!

Prior to the Trial, members of the committee were able to view the works that had been carried out in the cellar following the discovery of a small amount of asbestos in a couple of the rooms. The logistical challenge of arranging for the work to be carried out without moving thousands of bottles to another location was an enormous logistical challenge that was ably met by Phil Shepherd and his willing assistants. The refurbishment hadn't quite been completed, so I think it would be appropriate for us to revisit the cellar next month in order to appreciate the achievement in its entirety.

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It is always good to receive comments from Fellows about the contents of the cellar and I am grateful to Dr Filipe Carreira da Silva for raising the question of our acquiring more by way of Portuguese wines. These are not often shown by those merchants who have continued to hold in-person tastings in Cambridge. He and I are therefore going to explore other possibilities. We most probably need to concentrate on dry whites, which would make useful additions as far as High Table is concerned. For the time being, we should probably not be looking to extend the range of red wines, but I take this opportunity to repeat for the benefit of new readers of the Letter that the 2011 Esporão Reserva Tinto made a strong impression when it was served at High Table last academic year. I have selected it since, but I am not sure that there were any Fellows dining on the evening(s) in question. There are certainly bottles still available and readers might like to consider it alongside the winter warmers I mentioned above.

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It is fascinating to observe how vineyards, wine production, and where it ends up attract enormous media interest, and it is undoubtedly valuable to learn what a cabinet minister hosting a small official or 'semi-official' dinner party at an exclusive London restaurant is moved to order from the wine list. Of more lasting value are the more technical reports. It is certainly not an industry that stands still. Only today have I received from France-Occitanie the following link, which I commend to colleagues with an interest in both wine and the French language:

[VIDÉO. Un domaine viticole de l'Ariège fait vieillir son vin dans l'eau de la rivière \(francetvinfo.fr\)](https://francetvinfo.fr/VIDÉO. Un domaine viticole de l'Ariège fait vieillir son vin dans l'eau de la rivière (francetvinfo.fr))

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Although a number of our more prominent merchants have resumed tastings in Cambridge for college wine stewards, the provision is still not back to where it was prior to the pandemic. Some merchants have restricted themselves to holding tastings in London. Other, smaller or niche, outfits have yet to return to the fray. These have included one merchant from Cambridgeshire from whom I have purchased a number of attractive lower-end wines that have formed very useful additions to our cellar and which I would never have purchased without having selected them at a tasting. Another merchant conspicuous by his absence has provided us with some of our well-regarded Italian wines. I have been in touch with both and would have been in touch with a third had he not in the interim issued an invitation to a Cambridge tasting next month. The other two are indeed hoping to resume tastings in 2023 (much as I am hoping to be readier to travel to London) and I have followed up a proposal from the local merchant to hold a tasting for members of the Selwyn committee on a mutually convenient date in January. There are two other merchants I intend to contact. The

eclecticism of our list is something that is generally welcomed. It is, however, dependent on our being able to deal with a range of merchants whose wares are spread across the spectrum.

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So, now finally to the third in our series of short appreciations by members of the wine committee. It was penned by Professor Webb, who presents some informed reflections on some of the Italians on our list that she has found particularly pleasing:

“I’m writing with some urgency, because it’s a great time to drink our Piedmontese reds. The four wines I think worth profiling here are our two Barberas and our two Nebbiolos. All of them are from 2013. Since Piedmont is the same region that produces the superstar Barolo and Barbaresco, other offerings from the area can be overlooked, but offer great value. These are all food wines and do not show off their best characteristics on their own. Barberas, known as the wine of the people, are not really intended to age in an extended fashion, so I’d say their time is now. Our two Barberas represent the two main areas for the wine, Monferrato and Asti. Monferrato offers a lighter approach, while you’ll find that our Barbera d’Asti La Tota has a lingering strength. It’s very smooth, but with great acidity, perfect to pair with red meat, mushrooms, or cheese. On to the Nebbiolos. The Langhe Nebbiolos are often billed as the more affordable and approachable version of the iconic Barolo and Barbaresco; they are produced in the same areas, but on cooler parcels of land. Often you can find impressive value in these wines, which tend towards gorgeous perfume and kicking tannins in a full body with a surprisingly light colour. Of our two, you’ll find very impressive bouquet in both, but again, a lighter expression in the less expensive Casetta while the Spetacol Renato Fenocchio is a real delight at the still accessible £14.86 price point, with an explosion of red fruit aromas, high tannins and dry elegance. Nebbiolos are happy to age, but I’d say our two are balanced and ready to drink now.”

Thank you, Heather, for providing an excellent note on which to end.

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It only remains for me to extend my sincere thanks to Phil Shephard for his devoted work, both in the cellar and above ground, and to take this opportunity to say how much I have appreciated the informed interest that Martin Pierce has taken in Selwyn’s wines. Fellows will miss Martin’s wine-tastings and his readiness to share with us both his expertise and his personal passions. We hope still to have the pleasure of his company from time to time.

MJT