

WINE

One Sommelier's Fairy-Tale Success

[Wine]

BY WILL LYONS



There are few who have earned the sobriquet “the world’s greatest wine taster.” The late Harry Waugh, one of England’s most gifted wine merchants, who was so popular in the U.S. that he had a dining room in a restaurant in Tampa, Fla., named after him, was one. Robert Parker, the Baltimore-based wine critic who invented the 100-point tasting scale, is probably another. Michel Bettane, the French wine critic who wrote for *La Revue de vin de France* for more than 20 years, could be thought of in this bracket.

But when it comes to qualifications, one man has sniffed and slurped his way through more wine examinations than perhaps any other. That man is Gérard Basset, 54 years old, who boasts not just a Master of Wine qualification, but also a Master Sommelier, and a Wine M.B.A. from the Bordeaux École de Management, for which he wrote a thesis on the psychology of the wine list. If that wasn’t enough, in 2010 he was named world champion by the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale (ASI) in Santiago, Chile. If anyone can claim to be the world’s greatest sommelier, it is probably him.

Not bad for a man who left school at 16 with no formal qualifications, began his career washing dishes at a hotel on the Isle of Man and, in 1977, when he first came to Britain from his home in France, knew absolutely nothing about wine. So last summer, when it was announced he was to be awarded an Order of the British Empire in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List, the fairy tale was complete.

“It was such a beautiful day,” he says, in an accent that retains much of the character of his first language. “If I go back to my childhood, I was very anti-royal. We thought these English people were crazy—we, after all, killed our kings. But when you live in England, you understand more the importance of the monarchy. It took me a while, but slowly I became quite fond of the queen.”

In the end it wasn’t the queen who bestowed the medal (for services to hospitality) but the Princess Royal, Princess Anne, who charmed him with her French while the band at Windsor Castle included two Edith Piaf scores in their playlist. “It was a nice touch,” he says. “The whole day was very special.”

There is something intrinsically intimidating about being in the company of a sommelier. No matter how much you know about wine, when you walk into the hushed theater of fine dining and are handed a leather-bound wine list with its countless bins and vintages, the heart always skips a little faster. Not so in the company of Mr. Basset. Modest, almost to the point where he is deferring to your wine knowledge, he admits to being a generalist who can never “know it all.”

“If you say ‘I know everything’ then you never learn,” he says. “You learn from everyone, those



Gerard Basset

who are much more qualified and those who are not.

“I very much believe you have to carry on learning. For all the courses I have done, yes, they have been beneficial, but I have done them because they are very

If anyone can claim to be the world’s greatest sommelier, it is probably Gérard Basset.

interesting, fascinating.”

He believes wine lovers are living in part through a golden age, as across the board quality has never been higher. He cites the quality of wines in France and Italy, which have come back with a new, lighter style. But he also laments the fact that most of us can no longer afford the very top wines from France.

“If you were comfortable a few years ago,” he says, “and you had a good job and were earning a good living, not mega-rich; you could afford Château Lafite or Latour. But now, who can afford to spend £600 on a bottle of wine to drink at home?”

He began drinking wine at home as a boy growing up in France. Back then, he used to mix it with water—two parts wine, eight parts water, a drink he still enjoys to this day. It was football that brought him to England, when his hometown club, AS Saint-Étienne, then one of the top clubs in Europe, came to play Liverpool in what would now be the Champions League quarterfinal. Liverpool won 3-1 in what has gone down as one of the most historic matches in the club’s history. It must have left an impression on the young Gérard, as he returned a few years later, eventually settling in the south of England, where he worked as a sommelier

in Hampshire. In 1994 he co-founded the Hotel du Vin chain in Winchester, selling it 10 years later to MWB Group Holdings for £66.4 million. Not ready for retirement, in 2007 he opened TerraVina—a boutique hotel with a Napa-inspired restaurant—in the New Forest with his wife Nina.

This is where we meet, at first over a glass of water, but later a glass of Côte-Rôtie, a dense, damson-flavored wine made on the hills of the northern Rhône, not far from where he grew up in Firminy. It is a wine that hasn’t succumbed to the sometimes polished, overripe, high-in-alcohol style found in increasing numbers in his favored Napa.

“We are moving to a point where the American domination of wine through publications such as the Wine Spectator and the influence of Robert Parker is reaching a plateau,” he says. “People are a bit fed up with all of these big wines. I like some of them but when you taste them and they are 15.5%-16% alcohol, it is too much.”

He points out that the natural-wine movement—wines made from organic grapes by artisans with very little intervention in the winemaking—in many ways is a reaction to the sometimes forced, viticulturally exceptional wine styles seen on the market today.

From a winemaking perspective, the wines have never been better but, he says, like football, you can’t have a team full of 11 exceptional players. In the final blend you sometimes need grapes with too much acidity and tannin, in other words, grapes that might be left on the sorting room floor today.

“In old Bordeaux vintages such as Latour ’61 or ’69, they didn’t have sorting tables. I think we have gone toward a style that is too polished and that is why we get so many jammy wines. There’s room for everything but when it is too one-sided, then it is wrong.

I think the natural wine movement has brought an element of almost rebellion.”

But he’s not inclined to say more, as, far from being a wine bore, he doesn’t wear his knowledge as a badge of honor or pre-

tend wine tasting is an exact science. “It’s not,” he argues. “It’s highly subjective.”

“Some days you don’t taste well,” he says. “If you feel tired, or if it is later in the afternoon.” He smiles. Even the best are fallible.

Drinking Now



Alpha Domus Hawkes Bay 2009
New Zealand
Price: £14 or €17

A fascinating wine. Viognier is a white grape variety better known for its mellow, honeyed character, found in the Rhône appellation of Condrieu. This example comes from New Zealand and has an attractive, gentle perfume on the nose. The wine has been fermented in barrel, which imparts a distinctive creamy, brioche character with a little note of ginger. It matches superbly with scallops, which bring out its mineral backbone.



D'Oliveira Medium Dry Madeira Aged 5 years
Portugal
Price: £23 or €27

There is an awful lot of unexciting Madeira on the market but that shouldn’t put you off. This fortified wine from the volcanic island that sits in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of West Africa, can be hugely rewarding and not too expensive, either. This example displays an attractive amber hue in the glass, with a sweet almond note. Texturally, it is as light as a butterfly and I found it matched with a variety of cheeses.



Côte-Rôtie, Fortis Stéphane Montez—Domaine du Montillet 2008
Rhône Valley, France
Price: £32 or €39

The Côte-Rôtie vineyards are some of the oldest in France, if not the oldest. They hug the slopes that stretch upward from the Rhône river. This wine is made by the exciting producer Stéphane Montez, who adds around 15% Viognier to the blend, giving it a lift. The nose is inviting, with a distinctive damson and black-cherry character. This wine is superb with steak.

Jon Whelehan / Noble Green Wines (D'Oliveiras Madeira)