

Corkscrew: wine reviews

June 12, 2018

I find it both exciting and complimentary to have been invited to judge at this year's Citadelles Du Vin. The event, held in Bordeaux, is my third year there and was by all accounts the best, mainly because Australia was this year's invited guest of honour.

There were 24 Australian wineries who submitted a variety of their wines to this show, more than in previous years. There were 45 judges from around the world with myself being the only Australian. Our wine panel of five judges consisted of three oenologists (one who was panel chair) from Spain, Italy and France with a judge from Quebec and myself.



There were nine panels in total and between us we sipped our way through 1000 wines in three days. Day one we kicked off, as you do in European wine shows, with an *amuse bouche*; on this occasion we had three wines that all panels reviewed before getting down to business with individual wines allotted to different panels.

Our panel started with 25 wines from the Central Valley, Chile; a region about 70km north of Santiago. Out of the 25 wines tasted we gave two gold and eight silver medals. To receive a silver medal at this type of show, a wine has to receive between 85-88 points and a gold from 88-100; no bronze medals are awarded as it's all about lifting the breed and pedigree of what a medal actually represents.

Bronze medals are looked down upon in Bordeaux and if a Bordelaise winery actually received a bronze from any other wine show, in all probability they wouldn't display it on their bottles. The styles of wines judged in this class included Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Merlot, Carmenere, Zinfandel, Nebiolo Carignan and red blends, which was one of the wines we gave a gold medal.

After this, it was off to lunch at Chateau Dubraud in St-Christoly-de-Blaye. The food was exquisite as were the wines from this chateaux. Winemaker Alain Vidal took us through a tutored tasting of his wines and dining at this vineyard in bud burst with a mild breeze blowing was beautiful. That evening some friends and I went to a great restaurant in Bordeaux, a place I visited in 2016, called L'Entrecôte. Great food, great service and very reasonably priced wines by Australian standards.

Day two and our first category of wines consisted of 22 whites including Chardonnay, Viognier, Sauvignon, Semillon, Chenin, Colombard and Trebbiano. Although the wines came from France, Italy and Portugal, we gave four silver medals in this class to wines coming from the Languedoc-Roussillon region.

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The next class consisted of 23 reds from France and all from Languedoc-Roussillon, consisting of Merlot,

Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, red blends, Carignan and Shiraz or Syrah (as they call it in France). Our panel awarded six silver medals in this class to Syrah, Carignan, a red blend and Malbec, such is the diversity of this region.

The lunch at Café de la Gare in Saint-André-de-Cubzac was rustic French fare and fantastic, all washed down with award-winning wines from previous Bordeaux shows. Later in the evening we travelled 70km south to a great place you must put on your itinerary called Arcachon Bay. It is a cross between St Tropez and Antibes.

Although we didn't walk around the town, our bus driver got lost so it turned out to be a short sightseeing visit. We went on a cruise around the bay which included finger food and award-winning wines. It was a warm and magical evening. Suffice to say, the next time I'm staying with friends in the Dordogne, I've told them we must visit and stay for a weekend in Arcachon Bay.

On day three we started off with 21 sparkling wines made from a variety of grapes including Muscat, Chardonnay, Prosecco and other white blends from such countries as Brazil, Italy, Spain and France. We awarded five silver medals with three going to Brazil and two to Italy. Generally speaking it was a boring class but you have to take the good with the bad.

Following on from this we tasted 24 red wines from Croatia (Dalmatian Coast), Cyprus and Israel (Galilee). The varieties were similar to the styles tasted on day two with an odd grape variety I don't think I've come across before called Marselan; a cross between Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache.

It was first planted near the French town of Marseillan in 1961 by Paul Truel, a professor and ampelographer (someone who studies grape vines). Although this Marselan came from Galilee, the grape is also widely planted across China. We awarded six silver and three gold in this class with all the winning wines coming from Israel.

We had lunch that day in the barrel room of Chateau de la Grave in Bourg where you can stay in the chateau itself (www.chateaudelagrave.com). Again the food and wines were amazing. In the evening we headed over to Pauillac and to the beautiful Chateau Pontet-Canet.

A fierce storm had hit just before our arrival and the rain was tapering off. We went on a tour of the winery and vineyards with owner Alfred Tesseron. The vineyard and winery are certified organic and biodynamic with sustainable farming practices. The evening was quiet and still as we drank Ruinart champagne and admired the state rooms and artworks while meandering to the balcony looking out over the vineyards.

Our dinner here was first class with the Chateau Pontet-Canet red wines – vintages 2009, 2008, 2003, 2000 – and Tesseron Cognac Lot 53 matched with each course on the menu. Wine dinners don't come any better than this. The setting, the food and the winery was simply brilliant.

A special award presentation took place during the dinner where the FIJEV group of Circle of International Wine Journalists and Writers gave the top award to an Australian wine, the McLaren Vale-based Serafino Wines for their **2014 Serafino Magnitude Shiraz**. I was invited to go up and open the envelope to announce the winning wine.

The following week after this wine show a much bigger show was taking place at VINEXPO in Hong Kong. Serafino was officially presented with the French award on that occasion where 151 Australian exhibitors showcased 225 brands to more than 40,000 people. The spotlight was clearly shone on Australian wine both in Bordeaux and Hong Kong.

The next day when leaving, it all came crashing down. I had managed to avoid the strikes in France three weeks previously when judging in Strasbourg but not on this occasion. A sudden strike by air traffic controllers left my flight from Bordeaux to Paris two hours late, which in turn made me miss my flight from Paris to Sydney. As all the airport hotels were full, I had to spend an uncomfortable night on a chair at Charles de Gaul airport. It was gruelling to say the least. C'est la vie.

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