

BACCHANALIA THAT MATTER

HEDONISM AND THE PURSUIT OF WINE

by Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker

This issue, with the bleary-eyed pleasures of the Beijing bar scene looming large, we thought we'd look at the hedonism innate in the beverage we know and love as wine. In the West, wine's myriad pleasures go back to Greek and Minoan culture, while in China the production of various alcohols, some made from grapes, has an even longer history. In fact, it's hardly possible to imagine a Chinese poem without a raised drinking cup – and equally hard to conceive Greek and Roman culture without the gods Dionysus and Bacchus, usually with a reveling group of intoxicated supporters in tow. Dionysus was accredited with the introduction of the vine to Greece and much more besides. But let's face it: Greek and Roman wines, often preserved with salt, resins or herbs, would be unlikely to give pleasure today. Which raises some questions: Can all wines provide pleasure? Which are more likely to please a wide range of people? Are there wines that, like birds' nests or sea cucumbers in Chinese cuisine, tend to attract connoisseurs alone?

Tokaji Aszú remains one of the most pleasurable wines on the planet

Taking pleasure in wine is necessarily personal and context-driven, as will be clear to anyone who's enjoyed a cheerful wine on a sun-swept beach, then brought some bottles home only to be disappointed. Some grape varieties, like Chardonnay and Merlot, are definitely easier to grow than others, but less experienced winemakers can still turn good fruit into bad wine.

So which wines tend to please people, if they are well-made?

Sparkling wines always intoxicate quickly. But be careful: Not all Champagne is worth the money. When quality is low, all you'll experience is a high-acid, paint-stripper kind of wine that, drunk in Bacchic quantities, tends to make people feel sick. Quality over quantity is essential with sparklers. Or choose a lower-acidity sparkling wine like Cava or Prosecco. If serving wines at a party, select easily gluggable examples of grapes



or wine styles that are not too extreme. Chilean Merlot, lighter styles of Australian Shiraz, not-too-oaked Chardonnay or southern French or Australian Viognier are all crowd-pleasers.

But what about those bottles that "serious" wine lovers really crave? Yes, the great wines of Bordeaux will feature here, but rarer Burgundies, Barolo and its neighbor Barbaresco, Madeira, old Hunter Valley Semillon, port and rare sherry are strong contenders. Tokaji Aszú from Hungary

remains one of the most pleasurable wines on the planet, truly "the wine of kings and king of wines." It's a beautiful dark gold to amber in color with an incredible nose of orange marmalade, dried candied fruits and honey, followed by a rich sweet palate balanced with zesty acidity. Who could want more?

Edward Ragg and Fongyee Walker run Dragon Phoenix Fine Wine Consulting (www.longfengwines.com), Beijing's first independent wine consultancy and are authors of the Dragon Phoenix Wine Blog.

SELECT SIPS

One to quaff
2007 Cono Sur Pinot Noir, Chile (RMB 109)

Pinot Noir is hard to get right and make affordable, but this example from Chilean producer Cono Sur is excellent value. Medium red in color, the nose has perfumed red cherry and raspberry fruit whilst the palate combines lively acidity, silky tannins and good length. (Available from Pernod Ricard; contact Jane Liu at jane.liu@pernod-ricard-china.com.)

One to drink
2006 Angove's Vineyard Select Clare Valley Riesling, Australia (RMB 249)

Australia's Clare Valley is home to some of the world's most exciting Riesling. This example from Angove's is elegant and restrained. Light green in color, the nose has

gorgeous lime fruit with mineral notes followed up by refreshing acidity and lovely length on the palate. (Available from Mercuris Fine Wines; contact Olivier Gilles: olivier.gilles@mercuris.com.cn.)

One to savor
1995 Barolo Brunate, Marcarini, Piemonte, Italy (RMB 780)

One of the most treasured wines, Barolo needs time to evolve. This example from famed producer Marcarini is superb. Medium red-purple with an orange rim, the nose offers redcurrants, tea, rose petals, mushrooms and much more! Robust tannins, lovely acidity and a cascade of flavors follow on the palate. (Available from Aussino Fine Wines; contact Oliver Murphy at olivermurphy@aussino.net.)