

Jancis Robinson Wine

From naff to nice

One sign of how much someone knows about wine is how they pronounce Moët. Insiders say “Mow-it” (“Mwet” in French) rather than “Mo-way”.

Since Moët & Chandon is the dominant force in the Champagne region, there are ample opportunities to get the name wrong. It is the biggest landowner, with 1,200 ha of vineyards. It also dominates the champagne market.

Size rarely spells glamour. And the image of Moët over the years has been one of a mass-market crowd-pleaser, producing acceptable but un-thrilling wines that tend to be sweeter than most. Moët was rarely the choice of wine insiders.

But now it should be. The champagne industry's flagship has undergone an impressive makeover. Today Moët's Brut Impérial, the non-vintage blend that is made in almost unimaginable volumes, is a thoroughly respectable champagne, and much drier than it used to be.

Twenty years ago, the blend was sweetened with up to 13g-14g/l of sugar. When Benoît Gouez became *chef de cave* in 2005, he reduced the so-called dosage, a regular aspect of champagne production, to 11g/l, and since then it has been limited to no more than 9g/l, though has recently been as low as 7g/l.

The current blend of Brut Impérial is based on wines from 2015, deepened with reserve wines, mainly from 2013. The crucial champagne statistic is how long it spends ageing on the lees of the second fermentation in bottle.

This bottle age means complexity and integration. The legal minimum for non-vintage champagne is 12 months but for Brut Impérial this has been extended from 18-20 months to 24-32. There's a further six months in bottle after the wine has been disgorged, when the lees are expelled.



As imagined by Leon Edler

Some fine Australian Chardonnays

- Bindi
- BK
- Cape Mentelle
- Coldstream Hills
- Cullen
- Curly Flat
- De Bortoli
- Fraser Gallop
- Giaconda
- Giant Steps
- Hardys, Eileen Hardy
- Kooyong
- Leeuwin Estate, Art Series
- Marchand & Burch
- McHenry Hohnen, Calgardup
- Oakridge
- Ocean Eight
- Paringa
- Penfolds, Yattarna
- Pierro
- A Rodda
- Shaw + Smith, M3
- Sorrenberg
- Tappanappa, Tiers
- Tolpuddle
- Vasse Felix



Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com. Stockists from Wine-searcher.com



Admittedly, the wine is the polar opposite to the stereotypical grower's champagne, with its austerity and high acidity. This was perhaps the style Gouez had in mind when he commented recently, “We're not obsessed by acidity. We want bright freshness with delicacy. Some people overreact to the evolution of grape ripeness and think consumers are looking for acid. But I'm sure that most champagne consumers don't like excess acidity.”

The vintage-dated Moët Grand Vintage has also been spruced up. And these days, drinkers are deemed sufficiently well-informed to be given the date the wine was disgorged on the back

‘Moët was rarely the choice of wine insiders. But now it should be, having undergone a makeover’

label - information supplied on the labels of virtually all grower champagnes. This information is not given on Brut Impérial labels because Moët's research suggests that too many consumers think it's a “best before” date.

Moët champagne is by no means the only wine that has gone from naff to nice. Rosé, once dismissed as irredeemably frivolous, has become thoroughly respectable.

The giant category of Australian Chardonnays would be another candidate. It was not that long ago that we all looked down our noses at how oaky and overblown they were. But now, the typical Australian Chardonnay is a lean, clean, refreshing answer to white burgundy at a fraction of the price (see my recommendations at left). My theory as to how Australians manage to change direction so nimbly and cohesively is that the leading producers all confer regularly at the wine ►

◀ shows that are still so important to the Australian wine scene.

Lambrusco used to be synonymous with sweet mass-market froth of the worst sort. Now it's a rather serious category, with a host of dry, gently sparkling reds seen as the connoisseur's choice to accompany many Italian dishes, notably the pig-based products of Emilia-Romagna. UK specialist Italian importer Passione Vino lists six Lambruscos of real interest.

A little further north, in the Veneto, Soave and Valpolicella probably deserve a bit of an image upgrade too. The best producers – Agostini, Fattori, Gini, Inama and Pieropan in Soave and Allegrini, Corte Sant'Alda, Dal Forno, Quintarelli and Viviani in Valpolicella – make wines worthy of any cellar rather than cheap supermarket bottlings.

Prosecco's an interesting one. For some wine drinkers, it represents sophistication. For others, prosecco is a clever, more youthful, better-priced alternative to champagne. It is now so ubiquitous, and made from such a massive region, that it can hardly claim precision, but fine prosecco does exist. I'm no big fan of mass-market prosecco – it tends to taste a bit too sweet for me – but thanks to the late Gianfranco Soldera of Case Basse in Montalcino, I have experienced top-quality prosecco, in the form of Casa Coste Piane's from the prosecco heartland of Valdobbiadene – although even that is not my favourite fizz.

Cava definitely has an image problem, which is unfair since it's harder to make cava – which has a very similar recipe to champagne – than it is to make prosecco in tank. Recognising this, producers of cava in the Catalan region of Penedès, which is where the sparkling-wine industry is based, are increasingly leaving the appellation. They are calling their sparkling wines something different from cava, such as Conca del Riu Anoia or Corpinnat, which means “born in the heart of Penedès”.

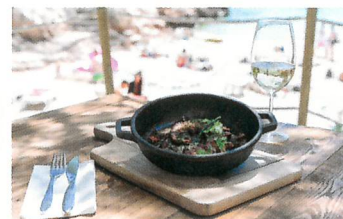
Like Moët, Harveys once dominated its sector, sherry. Although the fine-wine merchant Harveys of Bristol was hugely respected in the mid-20th century, Harveys Bristol Cream was far from the sherry aficionado's choice, being deemed too sweet and mass market. Nowadays, Harveys doesn't even have its own bodega in Jerez, but there are some tip-top sherries available under the Harveys name, based on particularly venerable soleras. Most are labelled VORS (for Very Old and Rare Sherry) and are at least 30 years old, yet retail in the UK at about £30 a half-litre. Extreme bargains indeed. Compare and contrast with the cost of a fine 30-year-old bordeaux or burgundy.

It's becoming more difficult to think of wines that are beyond the pale, so keen are producers to up their game, fortunately for us. **FT**

More columns at ft.com/jancis-robinson

MY ADDRESSES — IBIZA

GARETH WARD, CHEF



Ibiza may be famous for its nightlife but the Balearic island is also packed with casual eateries and fine-dining restaurants that make the most of local ingredients, not to mention the scenery.

— **Casa Maca** (above left) has uninterrupted views across the countryside to Dalt Vila (the old town) and the sea. The peaceful ambience makes it a perfect place to start the day. For breakfast, try the toast with grated tomatoes, topped with Ibérico ham or prosciutto. I also love Sunday roast here: the Yorkshire pudding is lightly crisp and the gravy smooth and rich.

— **El Portalon** focuses squarely on farm-to-table cooking. Chef and founder Anne Sijmonsbergen has a 450-year-old farmhouse that supplies organic produce to her restaurant and many others on the island. Try the *bocata de calamares* (slow-cooked, line-caught local squid, served with inked aioli and pickled mustard seeds) for lunch.

— Located on a beach on Ibiza's west coast, **Cala Gracioneta** (above right) is a terrific spot for a lively dinner. Start with the sharing plates, including Padrón peppers with spiced mayonnaise and cuttlefish croquettes. For the main, I'd recommend a rice dish, finished on the open grill in the traditional way. It's also a decent place to spy some celebrated DJs.

— For a more intimate dinner, head over to **Ca'S Pagès** to dine with the locals. It's a huge space surrounded by twisted trees and a thatched roof, giving a cosy feel. The menu is entirely Ibicencan, much of it cooked over an open fire. The suckling pig stew is not to be missed.

Gareth Ward is chef-owner at Ynyshir, a Michelin-starred restaurant with rooms in Wales; ynyshir.co.uk

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