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What we've been drinking (19 December 2008 - 2 January 2009)

The Decanter editorial team bring you what we've tried lately, as well as our favourite wines of the year.

Sarah Kemp
Publishing Director, Decanter

Catena Alta Chardonnay 2003

Tasted at the 1884 restaurant in Mendoza, Catena's Alta Chardonnay showed all the restraint, minerality and elegance of a top Burgundy. Beautifully harmonious, with excellent structure and length. At five years old, what a showcase for the best of Argentina.

Wine of the Year: Chateau Lafite, Pauillac, 1892

For all it represents - that fine wine is a living, everchanging, fascinating life-enhancing liquid. From one of the world's greatest terroirs the DNA of Lafite purity and elegance, and utterly drinkable.

Guy Woodward
Editor, Decanter

Shingleback Red Knot Shiraz, McLaren Vale 2006

Sometimes, at this time of year, you just want to come in at night and open something warming, comforting and easy, and not have to think about it too much. And South Australian Shiraz has that in spades. I'll be drinking many more complex wines over the Christmas break, but with a simple lamb casserole the other night, the rich, bacony juiciness of this was the perfect antidote to the London commute.

Wine of the Year: Felton Road Riesling, Central Otago 2007

Maybe it's just the precious memories of those few days of summer we had halfway through June, but this tropical fruit burst of grapefruit, passionfruit and lime managed to combine raciness with fatness, and juicy, rich flesh with biting, searing acidity in a way which just blew me away.

Adam Lechmere
Editor, decanter.com

Craggy Range, Sophia, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand 2006

This Merlot Cabernet Franc blend from the formidable Steve Smith has a lovely cigar box nose and attack, then sweet blackberries, delicate winter spices and an overall impression of elegance and length. Delicious.

Wine of the Year: Domaine Bouchard Père et Fils, Beaune Avaux 1928

This 90-year-old Burgundy was served at dinner during the Hospices de Beaune weekend. So often a wine of this age is memorable more from curiosity than delight in the taste. This was different. Amazingly youthful, deep ruby/brick red in colour with a nose of autumn hedgerows after rain. Wonderful palate with appreciable, faint but juicy tannins, and a scent of drying blackberries, raspberry leaf and sweet autumn fruits. The loveliest wine I've ever tasted.

Oliver Styles
Deputy Editor, decanter.com

Chateau Suduiraut, Sauternes 1986 (half-bottle)

Tried last week with Madeira-macerated Christmas cake, in front of a log fire... Autumnal coloured, with a typical, honeyed, Sauternes nose. The unctuous sweetness has melted with age leaving a lovely, soft, acidic backbone. This still has some body but the fruit is starting to drift away. What, one wonders, of the full bottles?

Wine of the Year: Didier Dagueneau, Blanc Fumé de Pouilly, 2004

Limpid lemon-green colour; a beautifully clean, 'green' smell. On the palate: super-defined structure, with green apples and lime and hints of flint/stones/metal on the finish. Some leesy notes, and the acidity could be described as 'searing', but it all works so beautifully. This was opened while preparing Langoustine Risotto in France two weeks ago. It really is a contemplative wine, from the first sip to the last.

Mark O'Halleron
Tastings Executive, Decanter

Chateau d'Yquem, Sauternes 1983

This was also a contender for my Wine of the Year, but there I plumped for a more modest offering. This, however, is a stellar wine; from when it touches your lips until the finish finally fades away (which takes a long, long time), it's a singularly spectacular experience. Delicate but rich, it's imbued with a whole host of characteristics, such as dried pineapple, apricot skin, earthy mushrooms, beeswax and honey. Glorious.

Wine of the Year: Manuel Quintano, Rioja Reserva 2001

In a year where I've been fortunate enough to taste the likes of Petrus, Le Pin, Harlan Estate, DRC and Screaming Eagle, I've certainly tasted more esteemed wines this year than this 'humble' Rioja Reserva, but few hit the spot in such a manner. Perhaps it was because I pretty much just pulled it out the rack with no expectations of what to expect, or because it matched the rather inclement weather outside, but this was a total delight and a wine really hitting its stride. Everything seemed to have binned perfectly; the fresh red fruit, the leathery development and the bright, sweet spice. It almost took me back to my formative wine days, when my experience and knowledge was limited and occurrences like this were far more regular. Lovely stuff and the other two bottles probably won't get to see 2009.

Tina Gellie

Acting Assistant Editor, Decanter

Jordan, Cobblers Hill, Stellenbosch, South Africa 2004

On another whirlwind global trip, winemaker Gary Jordan managed time for a quick chat over lunch, bringing this out towards the end of the meal. This Bordeaux blend (46% Cabernet Sauvignon, 33% Merlot and 21% Cabernet Franc) comes from the winery's top site and has a seductive nose of violets, fleshy bramble fruit and sweet vanilla spice. The palate boasts ripe, fresh summer berries, liquorice and round, chocolatey tannins, with lovely balance and length.

Wine of the Year: Domaine Cauhapé, Quintessence du Petit Manseng, Jurançon, France 1999

An accidental opening by a friend who thought this was dry proved to be my wine moment of the year – and in the top 10 of all my wine moments. Made from dried grapes, not those affected by botrytis, this is a sweet wine to match the very best of Sauternes or Tokaji. The nose is unbelievably complex: honey, citrus zest, straw and burning candles. The palate is at once delicate yet concentrated, with perfect balance and structure: mouthwatering acidity, opulent honey, citrus marmalade fruit and wet stone minerality. A truly superb and memorable wine.