

## What's in a Vintage? Is it Really Just Good Weather?

by Susan Barbour

When I made my first trip to Bordeaux in October of 2005—what was later to be dubbed "the vintage of the century"—the first thing I noticed was the light. Perhaps when you are staring down a row full of vines, you are more sensitive to the trajectory of the sun's rays, their character and the rate at which they wane.

Olivier Berrouet, the oenological engineer at Chateau Petrus, grew up in Bordeaux and so was intrigued to hear that a newcomer found the light so exceptional. He explained to me that because of Bordeaux's proximity to the sea, the mist and wind effectively washed the light. But, he added, not every year was like this.

It takes three essential factors to make a beautiful wine. A good plot of land with the right exposure, soil, and climate is the single most important thing. A first growth vineyard like Petrus has such outstanding terroir that it can make a beautiful wine—even in a very meager vintage. After that comes the grower and winemaker. They will make decisions about picking dates, irrigation, vinification techniques—all things which affect the style of a wine. And then, there is the vintage.



(Photograph by author. Sunset in Bordeaux, 2005)

As a child I loved looking at our family's copy of *The Old Farmer's Almanac*. When we moved to Champaign, Illinois and saw the corn and soybeans growing around the city's edges and heard neighbor's talking about the needs for or excesses of sun and rain, I grew more conscious of what it meant to live at the mercy of the weather.

In Bordeaux, when you feel the air wick itself dry by mid-morning and see the grape-leaves tinged with dying sunlight, you understand a climate's graces. So yes, it is weather. It is the kind of weather that makes you stop and recognize a moment as extraordinary. Then you know what it is to be *in* a good vintage. Perhaps the hostess at my bed and breakfast put it best. "We were sitting around the pool last night," she said, "and the ladies were saying to each other, when was the last time we sat out late into the evening, with bare shoulders, in October?"

It may be twenty more years before that vintage is ready to drink. But the memory of those days of dying light will last me as long as I live.

Happy Sipping,  
SJB

## English Wine...an Oxymoron?

by Susan Barbour

This past weekend, while strolling through bales of hay, wild blackberries and lowing cows, the unbelievable happened. I stumbled upon 14,000 glowing green vines. English wine? Was it a mirage?

Of course I knew that most every corner of the world makes wine (even my homestate, Illinois, has a few, usually with labels promoting college athletics). But what was remarkable was that the site actually looked...like winecountry. The slope in the angled evening sun and incoming mist were not unlike what one finds in, for example, Champagne.

Meopham Valley Vineyards has been in business since 1991. The owner is self-admittedly in the business because he finds it “a nice lifestyle.” In response to my technical questions he laughed and said “the important thing is just to enjoy drinking the stuff” and mentioned that the grapes are outsourced to another vineyard for the winemaking (they only handle the growing—which, to be fair, in such a cool climate is quite enough of a challenge).



The collaboration seems to have worked out. The 2005 sparkling rose was my favorite—a delightful minerality, strong acidic backbone, clean finish with a hint of berry. Bravo. I was not surprised to learn that Decanter gave it a bronze medal.

Next time you pass a local vineyard consider taking a detour. It's not always the

case that the wine wins prizes, but it's guaranteed to give you a new perspective on the spirit of the place you're visiting.

Happy Sipping,  
SJB

## The Wine is Corked at Oxford

by Susan Barbour

Of course, and to be fair, wine can be corked anywhere. But it is a veritable albatross, I have found, when it happens in the town of dreaming spires—especially when it is sniffed out by a Yank.

Oxford has two long-running wine societies, in addition to dozens of smaller college-based ones. Tragically, I did take part in any Oxford sponsored oenophilia before skipping the Channel for la Belle France (a regret I hope to redress on my next visit). I did, at a formal event later that year, manage to score one for Team America, but I otherwise conducted my wine appreciation underground--mostly because an initial encounter had left, well, a rather bad taste in my mouth.

Early on at one of the college bars, a chap told me I'd missed out on a "glorious" Chateauneuf-du-Pape their society had been pouring (I'd been at a department meeting during the freshers' fair). "Oh nice, which one?" I asked and mentioned I had studied and worked in wine. When he told me and I did not recognize the producer (there are over 320 producers in CDP), the oenophile responded (with audible "inverted commas"), "well you obviously don't know about wine then—so much for your American 'certificate'."

I did not bother to tell him that my wine knowledge was acquired in France—or that my "certificate" was from an international school, founded in London (that's the U.K.). I know a pissed Brit when I see one.

So what is up the British butt? I'd imagine it has something to do with a taste for gentility. Such a taste, gone unchecked, will homogenize all wines and wine-drinking into one grand semiotic of bourgeois behaviour [sic]—at the expense of the infinite varieties of tasting experience. If you're not into wine to increase your appreciation and empower your fellow tasters, then I daresay I'd rather stay at home and wash my (non-existent) car.

A moment of glory came when I attended a college high table dinner where we were sipping Meursault late into the evening. Divine! Then they opened a second bottle. Hoorah—except—um, gag me with a spoon!—the bottle was so corked and unlike its ethereal other that I had to sit there holding back tears while the others drank and cavorted.

"Susan....Susan *J. Barbour* is it?" Oh no. My anti-social stance had been spotted. (By the way, the Brits do love my name: I am waiting for the day when I discover I am, in fact, the heiress to the eponymous—and pricey—hunting jacket company. But *Barbour* was getting me nowhere this evening. Nor was my boisterous New World employment of my middle initial *J.* I'd already been presumed "North American" on account of it and "oh right...so, Modern then" on account of having only a Poundian pilferer's interest in the Classics.)

"What are you doing over there all alone at the other end of the table, come along and join the banter, will you? And what's the bother with your wine there? Bringing back the Prohibition are we???"

I smiled and sidled up to the woman beckoning me near. "Oh thank you, no, not at all, it's just that," I leaned in close and whispered, "it's just that you see, well, the wine is...is..." I looked around me to see at least six people drinking from the flawed bottle as though nothing at all were out of the ordinary. "It's just that the wine is corked."

"CORKED!?" she said.

"CORKED!?" repeated the wine steward, who was passing behind us that very moment. He raised the glass in the air and sniffed it uproariously, making the biggest show of nose I've ever seen. Then he announced, "She's right! It's corked! We've all been drinking corked wine all night!"

I proceeded to explain to a rapt audience how 4, 6 trichloroanisole (TCA) bacteria can infect corks, spread through the bottle, mute the expression of fruit, and make the wine reek of wet dog and moldy cardboard. I showed them each that the smell of cork could not be missed if they compared it to a glass from another, unaffected bottle. We went back and forth between the glasses, which is how I first learned to train my nose. Because the olfactory system grows quickly acclimated to the smell of TCA, I told them, it is important to pay attention to the very first nose, since that is where you will notice it most.



"Are you on the wine committee?" said an old man who had dragged his chair nearer to me for the lesson.

"I'm afraid not, sir," I said.

"Well," he replied, with utter dignity and charm, "you have just been made President."

Of course, this spontaneous and honorary appointment was forgotten by all except for me the next morning. But perhaps on another visit I can still, in the spirit of a true wine committee President, set a tone for more magnanimous wine-talk at Oxford. Then we put our nationalities behind us and all raise glasses to expansive

knowledge and the art of appreciation.

Can a University that has been teaching since 1096 make room for new attitudes? I managed to matriculate in a black leather motorcycle jacket over my subfusc ("and, if desired, a dark coat for women"), so I'm entirely convinced it can happen.

Happy Sipping,  
SJB

## My First Day as a Paris Celebrity: Lunch at Le Taillevent

by Susan Barbour

According to my horoscope I became famous on Thursday.

"Why not go to Le Taillevent to celebrate?" said R\_\_, my best friend in Paris, when I called him on Monday to give him a head's up.

Le Taillevent is hardly a no-name itself. As the inspiration for Gusteau's restaurant in the film *Ratatouille*, its virtual reputation casts a long and pixelated shadow. Luckily we were seated in a strategically discreet location, and R\_\_'s back looked delightfully anonymous in the Taillevent sponsored sportscoat.

Me: Do you think we have to start worrying about *paparazzi*?

R\_\_: Yes.

Me: Why are these *gougères* so good?

Founded in 1946, Le Taillevent takes its name from the nickname of 14th century cook Guillaume Tirel who wrote the first French cookbook: *Le Viandier*. The restaurant won its first Michelin star in '48, a second in '54, a third in '73, and then—in 2007—it was demoted to two stars. Chefs have been known to *faire suicide* over such a fate. However, in the words of the late Jean-Claude Vrinat, who was head chef until his death due to lung cancer in





2008, "sometimes a kick in the behind is a good motivator." Alain Soliv ers has inherited that kick.

Most meals here begin with a glass of the house Champagne, Taillevent, which is made by Deutz. It's not a household name outside of France, but during my Sherry-Lehmann days in Manhattan I frequently observed Norman Invasions in which French patrons cleared us clean out of our Deutz supply.

Light-bodied, delicate but supple, bubbles super-fine; it's lovely, for certain, but on this occasion I found it made me ecstatic. Why? It very well could have been the feather-light bubbles, which seem not to burst on your tongue but to invite you to participate in their own airy expansion. They are so fine you could easily fit a thousand on the head of a pin. I sat there marveling the ebullient acolytes of chalky soil and then—was it the alcohol??? the fame???—suddenly I lost my head....

Me: Wait a minute, is this Le Taillevent? What are we doing? Why are we here?

R\_: I was thinking that we both live in Paris, and it's Thursday.

It is so nice to have friends who ground you. Now it was time for the *amuse-bouche*, a delightful pumpkin soup with parmesan. Then our first wine pairing arrived: a 2005 Hautes-Cotes-de-Nuits from Domaine Mayer-Gilles. What a nose! I love white burgundies because of a signature note I always find in them—which to me smells of something between nougat and linden. (That my Swedish grandmother's maiden name was *Linden* surely plays a part in my romance with these wines, however—matrilineal logophilia and



synesthesia aside—white burgundy is simply the most complex and thoughtful Chardonnay I've ever had.)

For our starter courses I got the beet soup because I cannot resist anything beet-red. I also cannot resist saying *betteraves* and sub-vocalizing it with every mouthful. A beet is definitely not as sweet by any other name....

Problem: R\_\_ was getting my second choice, the marbled chicken with *foie gras*. The prognosis for order envy was disturbingly high. Luckily R\_\_ is always two steps ahead of me and got the waiter to bring a separate plate with utensils for sharing.

R\_\_: *Ca serait possible?*

Waiter: *Pour vous, tout est possible.*

Time for the mains. R\_\_ and I both opted for the seared scallops with endive. Perhaps on account of my new stardom I was feeling like I might be seized by the rapture at any moment, and scallops seemed light and just right. The only difficulty was the endive, which I find a bit difficult to pair with wine. Its bitterness always strikes me as falling in the brussel sprouts/asparagus/artichoke category of WINE KILLERS. Could it be done?



Still unaware of our fame, the sommelier Jean-Francois LeMoine came over to our table and poured us a glass of Vin de Pays Viognier from Domaine de la Janasse, 2008. I didn't catch the region or the varietal at first; I thought I heard him say *sud-ouest*, so I was expecting a white Bordeaux or a Bergerac. When I took my first nose I exclaimed, "Marsanne....Roussanne." These are varietals used in the Rhone to make such stellar whites as Chateauneuf-du-Pape and Hermitage. After a second swirl and inhale I added, "Viognier or Colombar. But if it is Viognier then it is surely not a Condrieu as the nose is quite subtle. I'm stumped."

R\_\_: He already said it was Viognier. You really need to get your hearing checked again. You are deaf as a post.

Me: Did you say I'm the guest with the most?

R\_\_: Yes.

But the question remains: how did it go with the scallops? I'm not entirely convinced it was a perfect winner. The lime and mineral notes in the sauce slightly overpowered the subtlety of this Rhone Viognier's aromas...and the acidity of the wine petered out ever so slightly at the end, leaving a touch of hotness or alcoholic finish. Am I a hater? *Au contraire*. I am just —at the end (and especially the beginning and middle) of the day—one who would

probably pick my food to suit the wine, and this wine pairing was playing second fiddle to the dish.



By this point we had chatted up the lovely sommelier about declassified wines (AOC winemakers break the rules by, for example, using 100% Viognier for a region that would otherwise require a blend and be labeled Cotes-du-Rhone, so the classification remains a plebeian "VDP"), and in our chattiness our secret had leaked: we were famous. Famous for what? For being famous of course! There was no use hiding it anymore, and the head waiter even insisted he take my picture with our dessert, a milk chocolate and praline

*déclinaison* infused with tonka bean. The tonka bean has an aroma reminiscent of vanilla, almonds, cinnamon, and cloves, which made it the perfect accompaniment to our Banyuls Grand Cru, Domaine du Vial Magneres 1998.

The madeleines and petits fours came. This time the waiter dared to leave the bottle of the next booze pairing on the table. At this point, most patrons settle the bill and trot off happily and curiously lighter than they were before, metabolizing the glorious food high. Bona fide celebs, however, receive a private tour of the restaurant. Our first stop was the pastry kitchen, where glorious tarts were being primped and piped.

Next we went on to the main kitchen where I met chef Alain. It isn't every day that celebs bump into one another. Everyone insisted we stop for a photo op.

I must say that while R\_\_ probably could have explained special relativity in at four languages at that point, the Le Taillevent Armagnac left him ever so slightly less than deft. He dropped my camera twice and accidentally took a video of the handshake before finally coming up with the gem below.



Look at Chef Alain, so remarkably zen! Does he meditate between meals?

Next we were escorted to the cellars. Sommelier Jean-Francois pulled out a bottle of 1897 Chateau Lafite-Rothschild and let me hold it. Like Chef Alain, Jean-Francois was remarkably poised. Unlike yours truly, he even appears steady in low-light!



I was clearly beside myself—can't blame this one on R\_\_. Instead I'll blame the food and wine pairings which, while perhaps not terribly innovative, surely make the case for why some French meals ought to be declared UNESCO World Treasures. Le Taillevent may have lost a star in 2007, but that doesn't mean you won't feel like one when you dine here.

In Vini Veritas,  
SJB

## How I Fell in Love with Wine

by Susan Barbour

Wine people have a million dollar question. It goes, "What was the bottle that did it for you?" I don't have a proper answer. For me, there was no bottle. For me it was an actual grape. A moldy, rotten, wrinkled grape.

You do not have to have an amazing sense of smell to love wine. You do have to have a sense of wonder. When you begin to pay the smallest bit of attention to anything, I guarantee it will open your perception. If you are very devoted, it may even become like a little guru. Wine will begin teach you how to appreciate more of what you already have around you. Your senses quicken and are put to use. That is why I call it falling in love. Because it is as though a new person has swept through your existence and introduced you to the life you've been missing. In other words, your nose (not to mention your heart) is a whole lot better than you think.

*Botrytis cinerea*, also known as necrotrophic fungus or, among wine-lovers, Noble Rot. This is the grape used in the famous sweet wine Sauternes, located just outside of Bordeaux, France. It is also used in Barsac, a lesser-known neighboring region, where I paid an innocent visit several years ago.



Everything I knew about wine at the time came from a DK Guide to France. I could, however, tell magic when I saw it. Noble Rot, I knew, referred to the serendipitous discovery that a particular fungus could shrivel a particular grape into a fuzzy raisin that produced one of the most exquisite sweet wines known to man. But it was not until the curmudgeonly old producer who ran the chateau bid me take a wrinkled grape and put it in my mouth that I became a convert. There was an explosion of honeysuckle and peaches, yes, but what did me in was what the old man said while I chewed. "You can be a red or white wine producer and have a bad year, there are still things you can do in the cellar to remedy that. But a Sauternes or a Barsac," he shook his head, "it doesn't cooperate with you like that. One receives the right conditions for rot from up above or one does not. It's something.... *mystique*, he said. Then he sighed the sigh of one who spends one's whole chasing after a proud and fickle mistress.

He motioned for us to follow him to the cellar where he ran to unplug one of the hundred barrels lying on their sides. Then he put his ear flush against the oak. I thought he was mad. "Allez, allez!" he waved us over. I pulled my hair back and did as he told me. And then I heard it. The grapes whispered and hissed in a steady chorus. The man laughed a giddy, idiot's laugh, and I couldn't suppress my enormous grin. Then he took us to the tasting room, where we compared the colors of vintage bottles with new ones, and tasted a sampling of both. Before we left I dabbed a bit of it behind my ears and promised myself to start committing every smell I encountered to memory, so that I could find the proper words for what I was experiencing, so I could go on feeling that awake and that alive.

So, yes, I confess. There was no "bottle" that did it for me. There wasn't even a robe or a bouquet initially. I was seduced into oenophilia by the mysticism of the vinerows and the music of the barrels. But it makes sense that I, a poet, would fall in love this way. You can spend your whole life sniffing out something that you think an "expert" might adore, but it is only when you find what enlivens *you* that that very long love affair will enroll you in its wondrous course.

Happy Sipping,  
SJB