

Food & Wine

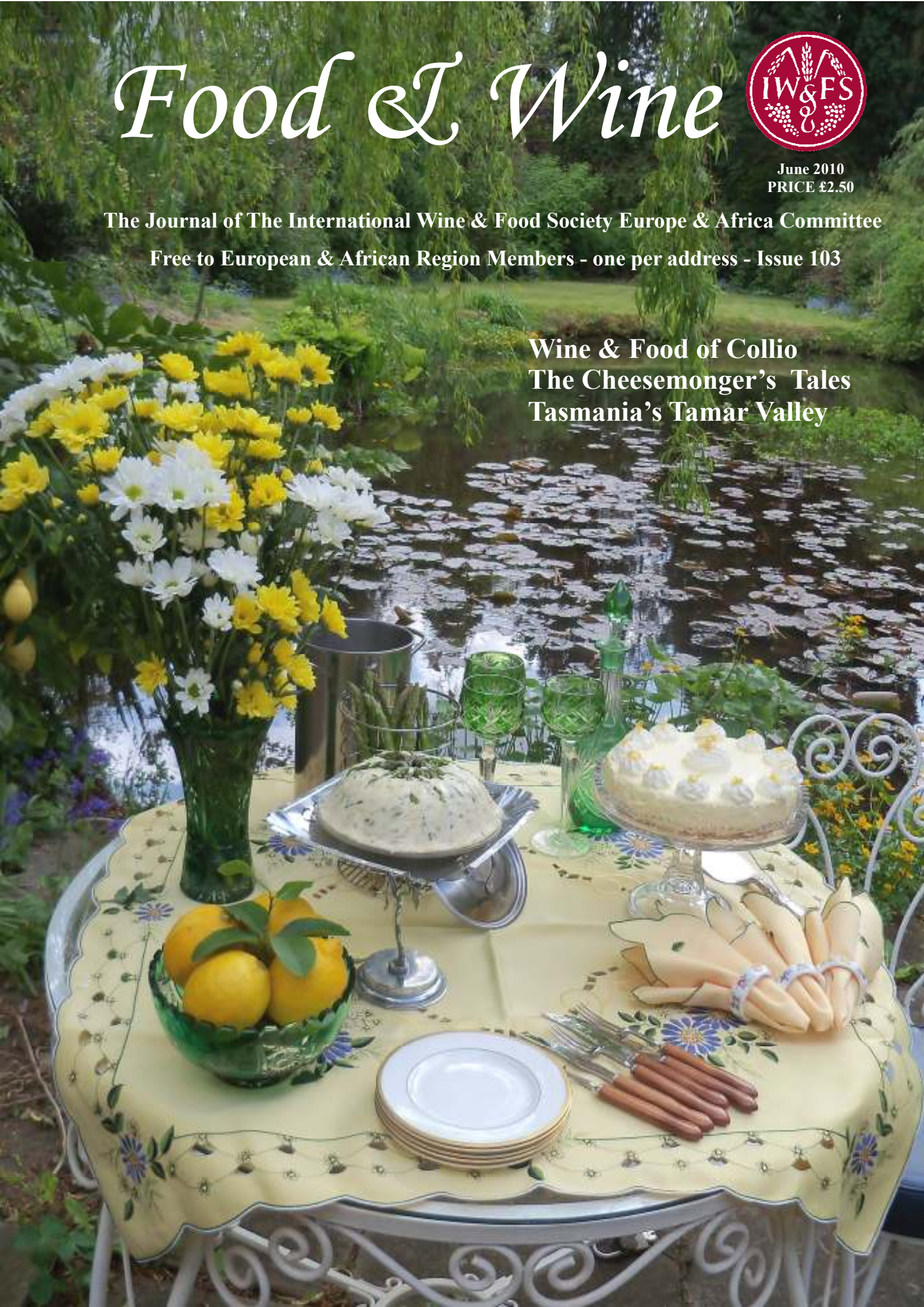


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Free to European & African Region Members - one per address - Issue 103

**Wine & Food of Collio
The Cheesemonger's Tales
Tasmania's Tamar Valley**





CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

Dear Members

Those members who were fortunate enough to attend the Annual Branch Representatives Meeting and/or the Asparagus Event in Broadway will have heard much of this report before. The EAC (European & African Committee) annual report recorded a one percent drop in membership between 2009 and 2010 and a very small loss on the Income & Expenditure Account after accruing money for Marketing and the new Website. The International Council of the Society have not yet asked for us to forward any of our money towards the website but the first phase is lacking some features we desire. It is therefore prudent to maintain the reserve.

The composition of the EAC remains unchanged. I am grateful to all my colleagues for the help that they have given me in my first year as your Chairman. I still believe we are too UK dominant and would like to encourage more involvement from Africa and the election of a member from Continental Europe. We have reduced costs by holding some EAC meetings in member's homes. EAC members, of course, pay their own travelling expenses.

We do need to reverse the loss in membership and to recruit younger members. The new website is vital but I am sure it will be many months before it delivers all of the desired features. In the meantime I hope all branches will continue to look for new recruits. If you have any ideas about areas within Europe or Africa where we could establish a branch and you have ideas about whom would join please let our Secretary Chris Redman know. There is good membership news to report. Our new branch in Dubai, despite the economic problems, has increased its membership from 30 to 50. And in September (Icelandic ash allowing) I will journey with Society Chairman Chris Bonsall to present Lisbon branch with their Charter.

The International Secretariat function has moved to a smaller office space within the In & Out club, which has further reduced the cost of administration. The office is not really big enough to entertain members but we do have the use of the Club's public rooms for this purpose and for members when staying at the Club. If any member would like to use the facilities of the Club a simple advance communication to our Administrator, Andrea Warren, preferably by email at sec@iwfs.org would be a good idea and will facilitate use of the Club. The Club does have a pool, a small gym and some sporting facilities as well as normal social facilities. My wife and I are using it as our base when we celebrate our wedding anniversary this August. I would remind members that we still have a stock of Society ties (£20), cuff links (£7.50) and lapel badges (£1) for sale. These can be purchased from the Administrator.

Some members have queried being able to ask questions about, for example, wine & food matching or visits to vineyards. Our Administrator is not expected or qualified to answer those sorts of questions. In fact it is doubtful whether any one individual (member or employee) would have the knowledge to answer all queries! But I hope that, in time, we will be able to recruit a number of experts to act as 'ambassadors' who may be able to help through the website.

We have been successful in selling all the places on the June 2011 Merseyside Festival. Most of them have gone to members from the Americas and Australasia. We are now completing arrangements for a Post Festival event in the Lake District. This will be sold firstly to Festival participants but if there is space it will be opened to other members. Similarly a number of the events within the Festival will be offered to members nearer the date of the Festival and will give members the opportunity to meet without attending the whole Festival.

The success of EAC Awaydays means that we will continue to search for less expensive events (in the UK, Europe and Africa) where members from different branches can meet and enjoy each others company.

Ron Barker

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Philip Clark was Executive Director of the IWFS from 1998 until his retirement in 2008. He had previously worked in book publishing for over 30 years, eventually forming his own company, which produced the long-running *Traveller's Wine Guides* series. A member of the Circle of Wine Writers, he now lives in Devon.



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Editorial

Summer is here at last, it is still cold but at least the sun is shining. Our woodpeckers, that nest in the willow outside my office window, were late arriving this year and found some squatters in the tree. Two nuthatches had taken up residence in the woodpeckers' hole and were building their nest. Any attempt to come near the tree was met with an attack by two very stropky little birds. After a morning of being dive bombed the woodpeckers gave up and went off in a noisy huff. The nuthatches brought off a brood and the woodpeckers have had the sense to keep well away. Our moorhens brought off eight babies but only three have survived - two can be seen staring on the cover.

It was a beautiful day when we drove up to Broadway for the EAC and ABRM meetings. Unfortunately we were not able to stay for the 'Asparagus Awayday' but I have heard glowing reports and judging by the account of Berkshire Branch Chairman Pat Curtis on page 8 & 9 it was an outstanding event. I am sure André would have been proud, it contained all the ethos of the Society thanks to Michael Messent our new events organiser who did such a sterling job.

The other big project which has kept several members of the committee glued to their computers for the past few months is of course our new international website. It has been a massive project for the EAC website team under the leadership of John Valentine. They are slowly ironing out all the wrinkles and you will find a progress report on the back cover.

This time we have ten pages of branch activities which I know members find very interesting. Ron reports that the Dubai branch is going from strength to strength but still no report, come on Dubai we would love to hear about your events. Also from other branches that don't regularly submit, I am only an e mail away.

Once again we have a wide range of articles including two wine reports and the tales of a cheesemonger. An article on the history of asparagus links up with our Awayday report and there is also a delicious asparagus mousse (see cover photo) recipe from Ikka Boyd's fascinating book 'Recipes for my Daughter'.

I do hope you all enjoy a long pleasant summer with, as our American cousins say -

Best in Wine, Food and Friendship.

Pam Brunning

6 May 2010

Dear Members

Vintage Card 2010 – The IS calendar once again turns its attention to the production of the Vintage Card. Submissions are coming in as I write, from our specialist consultants around the globe. They include a number of respected members of the trade including your Hon President, John Avery MW who, as well as being a key member of the Wines Committee, also provides us with his opinion on the vintages in Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne. While overseas we have Peter Bell in New York, Sid Cross in Canada, John Livingstone-Learmonth in the Rhone Valley and Michael Schmidt in Germany, to name but a few.

The vintages are unsurprisingly varied around the world - and quite a relief that is. I would hate homogeny in the wine world how dull would that be?! Countries/wines/regions, on our Vintage Card, which are scoring top marks from our consultants this year are Bordeaux, Northern Rhone, Loire (red) and Ribera del Duero for their 2009s. Early ripening varieties like Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were the best performers for 2009 in California. Looking to the 2010s in the Southern Hemisphere James Halliday says that excellent wines have been made in the Barossa Valley and Western Australia. New Zealand has produced some spectacular reds on the North Island according to our man on the ground in Auckland, Bob Campbell MW. I was really excited to read about the success of the 2009 vintage in Germany and now include below the report from Michael Schmidt. Michael is a wine writer, based in Germany, and has kindly provided us with his opinion on the vintages for Germany and Austria for the past two years.

In addition to working on this year's Vintage Card (your 2011 membership card) the Wines Committee is also considering extending the card at some future date. The Committee's idea is to add an extra "drop-down" to the card itself making it a four - fold, rather than a triple fold. With once emerging regions now becoming established in their own right, we do feel that it would make the card more valuable to you by including some of these extras. One concern is that the extra "drop-down" would make the card too bulky. We are having some samples produced so we can make a decision on that.

However assuming that it is agreed that this will work, we then need to consider the extra regions and/or wines to add. This will be a matter discussed by the Wines Committee and was also touched upon last year. Nothing is cast in stone but regions/wines in the melting pot include us expanding the Americas to include Santa Barbara, Central Coast and Washington Riesling together with Adelaide Hills, McLaren Vale and Tasmanian Pinots and Rieslings. It was also thought that New Zealand, North Island Red might be replaced by Martinborough in future. We would much appreciate your thoughts on this proposal too. I cannot guarantee that we will be able to include all suggestions but would welcome your feedback. Please email me on sec@iwfs.org.

I look forward to hearing from you.

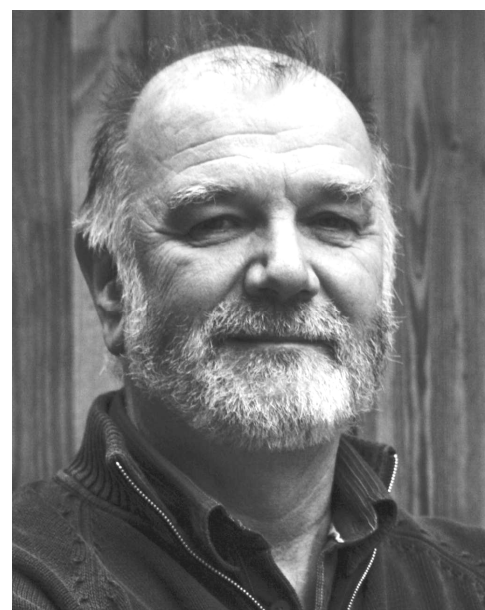
Best wishes

Andrea Warren

Top 2009 Vintage for Germany – by Michael Schmidt, Germany

Vintage rating: 7 not ready yet (as per IWFS Vintage Card)

Rarely has there been a year when grapes were as healthy, ripe and aromatic as in 2009, a vintage ideal for the production of Rieslings with great concentration of fruit and of compact reds. The only fly in the ointment was the below average yield of 8.8 million hectolitres, down some 15% on 2008, the reduction mainly attributable to irregular flowering and severe winter frosts in some regions. With all signs up to the snowy end of March pointing to a delay in the breaking of the buds, an unusually warm April brought about an almost explosive development of vegetation and by the end of that month vines had surged two weeks ahead of the annual average growing cycle. The early flowering was punished by another bout of frost, causing the already mentioned partial coulure. In the end this turned out a blessing, leading to looser bunches and smaller berries, perfect conditions for the development of healthy grapes and longer hang-times. Véraison began towards the middle of August and from there on the weather remained on the side of the growers to produce continuous gains in sugar levels. An old but true cliché says that only in the autumn is the quality of a vintage finally decided, and the warm sunny days and cool nights from late August to mid-October put the stamp of excellence on Germany's 2009 vintage. The late arrival of a very fine botrytis resulted in some high calibre BAs and TBAs, and severe December frosts literally put the icing on the cake with perfect Eiswein conditions in all regions.



Dear Editor

I have been meaning to write for ages concerning Alan Shepherd's article about tasting wines.

By and large I find that wines are best assessed by themselves without food, even biscuits can alter the flavour at times, and ones senses are even more acute when tasting blind which seems to concentrate the mind even more.

This does not mean that some wines taste 'better' by themselves, on the contrary some taste better with food but food seems to blunt the analytical assessment which is not to be confused with 'enjoyment'.

Some wines do not go well with food or certain foods, others are the complete opposite. Fashion often dictates what should be drunk and I have just finished reading a fascinating book about the French wine trade in the last war written by the Kladstrups which recounts the story of how Mr Ribaud wrote *Le Maitre de Maison de Sa Cave et Sa Table* which is a huge list of what goes with what.

My own tastes change with time, my gustatory faculties decline with time as well as olfactory, I am male so inherently worse at tasting than females ----- so many things come into the equation.

There are so many factors, both physical and philosophical that need to be considered, a fascinating subject in all.

Christopher Davenport Jones
London Branch

Alan Shepherd replies:

Dear Chris

Thank you so much for replying to my letter - I was delighted to have some response.

Actually, I agree with a lot of what you say - I guess I just have different objectives. I can see that tasting wine on its own allows a purer analytical process, and that some people find that more satisfying. But for those of us whose ultimate objective is to choose wines to drink with food, surely the process is inherently flawed, for all the reasons that you state? Equally, when planning events for members, I should not regard enjoyment as irrelevant. It all depends upon what we are trying to achieve.

Whilst appreciating that pure wine tasting will continue, I would suggest that, as the International Wine and Food Society, we should be more prepared to offer those members who prefer it, the opportunity to taste wine with food as well as on its own.

Alan Shepherd London Branch

Readers' Letters



Dear Editor

I am certain that I am going to upset some people but perhaps please others.

When I read Alan Shepherd's article again in the December Food & Wine I realized how much I was agreeing with him. Tasting twelve (!) wines with just dry crackers in between is not my idea of a good evening out. Wine with food was advocated and indeed recommended by André Simon - I do wish I had met him!

All events that I have attended with the wine matching the food have been successful and enjoyable and I have always tried to put that ethos into practice in Surrey Hills. I have to admit perhaps that I am not a true wine connoisseur or wine buff, however I admire, but do not wish to emulate a MW. I have great admiration for those who have that skill and I have met quite a few of them in my many years with the IWFS. Like Alan I am not saying there isn't a place for fine wine tasting but let's keep it in proportion!

Comments? 'Let's 'be 'aving you' as they say in the vernacular!

Helen Mills - Surrey Hills

Dear Editor

May I say how much I enjoyed Derek Hawe's article, The Language of Wine, in December Food & Wine.

It was refreshing to get away from all the hackneyed clichés thrown around by wine buffs, petrolly, gooseberry, lemony, earthy, old boots, farm yards etc.

We drink an eclectic range of wines with dinner so decided to try describing them the Hawe's way. I must say each night the descriptions got more colourful as the evening went on!

Sunday - roast beef tonight, so I opened a 1999 Tim Adams Fergus. Listed as - 'A fascinating wine, dominated by Grenache fermented on Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Shiraz marc.' She was not so forward as some we have enjoyed. A complex lady attesting that she is of mixed parentage. Reaching her peak now, entrancing, soft and smooth as velvet.

Monday - Casillero del Diablo 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon. A fresh, fruity youngster, enjoyable in her lack of complexity.

Tuesday - 1973 Chinon - an elderly lady fading but with still a hint of her former self, probably at her peak a decade ago but agreeable in her dotage.

Wednesday - 1988 Chablis, Chiquet - still showing a little of the acidity of her youth in old age, with just a hint of honey softening her edges.

Thursday - Lategan Touriga Nacional 2005 - this Boer lady has hidden depths - vibrant, sweet but not cloying, with a slight acidity that lightly titillates and enthralls.

Friday - 1989 Don Melchor, Maipo, Chile - a full bodied South American girl, uncomplicated, soft and rounded, a very enjoyable experience, now in her full prime.

Saturday - Bethany 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot. Oh dear, this fruity lady was probably at her peak five years ago. She is nowhere near as desirable as she was in her full flush of youth.

Sunday - La Picherie 1970 - a classic example of how, when a lady is looked after in her youth, she can blossom and be much more attractive and show elegance and style in her dotage.

Monday - Beaune Bressandes 1971 - fading a little now. Unfortunately these ladies have never been as desirable as when they were liaising with the Moroccan gigolos from across the Med!

That week we also opened a 1982 Croft, it was light in colour, amazingly fruity with good staying power and was still very desirable after four days of indulgence.

I have been taken to task for not considering any wines to be masculine. Strange as it maybe I always think of wine as feminine, spirits are masculine- what do you think?

Sid Brunning - Capital

Asparagus



Liliaceae – Asparagaceae

by Pam Brunning

Emperor Caesar Augustus coined the phrase

'Velocius quam asparagi conquantur'

meaning

'As quick as cooking asparagus'

Something accomplished rapidly

Asparagus - *Liliaceae-Asparagaceae* - this perennial herbaceous plant, is a member of the lily family and a distant cousin of the leek and onion.

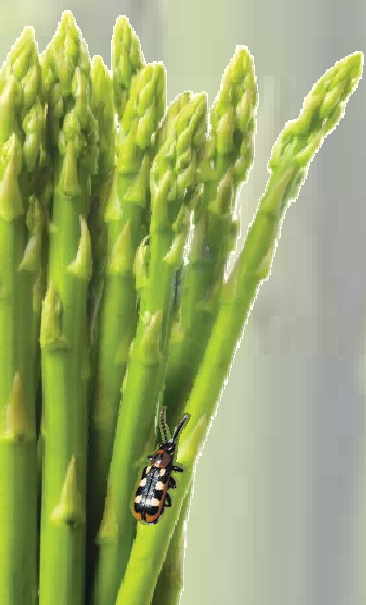
It was the Greeks and Romans who used the Persian word 'asparagi' which translates to signify "the first sprig or sprout of every plant, especially when it be tender". The term sperage became popular for many years

and the word 'sparagus' was used in many English speaking countries. It first appears in English print around 1000 A.D. and the peasants would often refer to it as 'sparrow grass'. The ancient Egyptians cultivated it and as early as 200 BC. Cato, the Roman statesman, gave excellent growing instructions for 'asparagi'. The Romans were the first to preserve it by freezing, as early as the 1st Century AD, when fast chariots would take the fresh asparagus from the Tiber River area to the Alps, where it kept for six months until the Feast of Epicurus. Pliny, Julius Caesar and Augustus were so enamoured of it that they kept special boats, known as the 'Asparagus Fleet' for its transport. It was also first cultivated by the Macedonians around 200 BC and was grown in Syria and Spain in ancient times. Charred plant remains, discovered at a group of Late Palaeolithic sites near Aswan, Egypt, included wild asparagus seeds which suggests that asparagus was being used as a food in the Nile Valley 20,000 years ago.

Mythological mention of the vegetable occurs during the hazardous journey of Theseus via the Saronic Gulf, wearing his father's sword and sandals, to claim the heirdom of the Athenian throne. At the Isthmus of Corinth he was accosted by the marauder Sinis but managed to outwit and kill him. He then discovered the brigand's daughter, Perigune, hiding in a dense clump of sperage. She vowed never to burn or uproot the plant if it would protect her. Alas, it didn't and she bore Theseus a son, Melanippus, whose descendants, the Ionians inhabiting Caria, protected the plant by severe laws out of respect for their ancestors.

Samuel Pepys recorded, in his diary, in 1677 that he bought a bundle of 'sparrow grass' in Fenchurch Street, London for 1s.6p. Battersea village outside the city was prime land for growing asparagus and bunches sold in the city were known as "Battersea bundles". Production expanded and soon asparagus beds could be seen as far out as Fulham, Gravesend, Isleworth and Deptford. By the 19th century demand was so great that new asparagus fields were established in The Vale of Evesham, Worcestershire, these are still regarded today as the 'home' of English asparagus.

Asparagus is prone to rust and the deprivations of the asparagus beetle but when planted close, tomato plants are known to repel the beetle. It is also thought that asparagus may repel some harmful root nematodes that affect tomato plants.



The four types popular today are:

- **Green:** The type most often seen in supermarkets.
- **White:** This is the same variety as the green but because it is sunlight that turns the stalks green about six inches of dirt is piled on top of the plants so that the stalks can grow underground. They will grow at the same rate as an uncovered stalk and when the tip breaks the soil surface, the gatherer probes under ground with his special knife to cut the all white stalk. White asparagus is preferred in Europe, the stalks are a little milder and more delicate. It is difficult to find it fresh in the United States, but is widely available preserved in jars.
- **Violet or Purple:** This variety is most commonly found in Italy and has a thick and substantial stalk. It originated in a region around Albenga, Italy and is known as Violetto d'Albenga. The spears are a deep purple colour but the actual ferns are green. It is much sweeter and more tender than green asparagus making it is very suitable for use in salads. It retains its colour after brief cooking such as quick sautéing but loses its purple and changes to green if subjected to prolonged heat.
- **Wild:** This thin stemmed asparagus grows wild throughout Europe and is often seen in the markets of Italy and the South of France. It can sometimes be found in UK markets.

There is much written about the beneficial properties of this vegetable. Low in calories, it contains no cholesterol and is very low in sodium. It is also a good source of vitamin A, C, E, K, B6, calcium, magnesium and zinc, thiamin, riboflavin, rutin, niacin, folic acid, iron, phosphorus, potassium, copper, manganese and selenium. The amino acid 'asparagine' gets its name from asparagus, as the plant is rich in this compound. It is a diuretic and has detoxifying effects but, being high in purines, which break down and form uric acid, contrary to popular belief, it is not recommended for those with arthritis and gout problems.

In the 18th century reports linking its ingestion with the production of odorous urine began to emerge. John Arbuthnot (1667–1735), a Scottish mathematician and physician to Queen Anne, noted in a book on foods first published in 1731 that, "asparagus... affects the urine with a foetid smell," This is especially apparent if the spears are cut when they are white, as they grow older, and begin to ramify, they lose this quality. For this reason it has been suspected in the past, by some physicians, that consuming large amounts can be harmful to the kidneys.

It is interesting that the odour-producing phenomenon was not observed until after the commencement of the use of sulphur, sulphate, and organic sulphur materials as fertilizers, to improve asparagus flavour, this became prevalent from the late 17th century onwards. It is probable, therefore, that the urine odour is associated with a sulphur-containing component of asparagus. Studies have found that in the United Kingdom about 50% of those eating the vegetable produced the odour, whereas the frequency in the US is far greater.

There are old beliefs that asparagus could increase feelings of love and promote fertility. The shape is certainly a reason for it being considered an aphrodisiac. An Arabian love manual written in the 16th century provided an asparagus recipe 'to stimulate erotic desires', with directions to, 'consume over three consecutive days for the most powerful effect'.



EAC Asparagus Awayday

Words by Pat Curtis - Berkshire Branch

Photographs by Derek Fletcher - Manchester Branch

Members were invited to join an EAC "Awayday" to recreate history. In 1938 André Simon organised a trip to the Lygon Arms in the Cotswold village of Broadway for participants to enjoy a luncheon based on the new season's asparagus.

In May 2010 members had the pleasure of staying at the Lygon Arms, one of the oldest and most famous hotels in England. The earliest mention of it is 1532 and it has been noted as an Inn for about 470 years.

In the evening, 51 members from 12 branches and four 'Members at Large', attended a black tie reception and a Celebration of Asparagus Dinner in the Russell Room – the name associated with former owners of the hotel and the furniture designer Gordon Russell. Our Society Chairman, Chris Bonsall, most generously provided us with an apéritif of Jaquesson et Fils Blanc de Blancs Champagne from the 1990 vintage – an exceptional year. The mousse was lively and persistent, the wine light gold in colour and refreshingly dry with a good length

MENU

Asparagus mousse & char-grilled asparagus

With air-dried ham, toasted pine nuts, spring onion rings
& 10 year old balsamic dressing.

Muscat Réserve, Trimbach 2008

Asparagus & watercress soup

Wither Hills Sauvignon Blanc 2007

Lemon-scented salmon fillet

With Jersey Royal new potatoes, roasted asparagus, sweet carrots & sorrel Hollandaise

Wither Hills Sauvignon Blanc 2007

Rhubarb & apple crumble

With vanilla pod ice cream

Clos L'Abeilly, Sauternes 2007

Freshly brewed tea or coffee with Florentines

Overall it was a splendid meal although some members felt that the asparagus mousse was a little bland. The char-grilled asparagus lifted the flavour but the air-dried ham probably won the competition. The Trimbach wine was a fine example of Alsace muscat, full aroma, dry and long. While the Wither Hills wine was not as punchy as some Marlborough sauvignon blancs, it adequately partnered both the well-flavoured soup and the salmon dish. The Sauternes that accompanied the dessert was light in style with a delicate richness.

How fortunate we were to have Henry Sandon MBE, the Antiques Road Show's china expert, to be our after dinner speaker. During his talk he passed around items from the Worcester Porcelain Museum to illustrate porcelain used in the service of Asparagus, including an 18th century sauce boat. There were also pieces associated with the Lygon family and the Worcester College for the Blind. It was a most interesting and amusing presentation.





The next morning, a coach drive through the beautiful Vale of Evesham with a lively guide from the Tourist Board was a good start to our day. Our first stop was the Fleece Inn in Bretforton. Nigel Smith, the landlord, encouraged us to view the building originally built as a Longhouse in Chaucer's time. It was built by the Byrd family and occupied by them until 1977 when the lady owner (the last surviving member) bequeathed it with all its treasures including a pewter collection and a cock-fighting pen to the National Trust. It is an integral part of the Asparagus festival which lasts from Shakespeare's birthday to Mid-Summer's day. Their main event is the asparagus auction at the end of May which attracts a thousand people and raises money for the Bretforton Silver Band which is the only one in Worcestershire.

After refreshment we moved on to Red Star growers and Revill's farm shop. At the growers, under the guidance of James Revill, we donned Health & Safety protective clothing, removed watches and earrings and walked through two refrigerated areas at 2°C into the grading & packaging area kept at 12°C. The asparagus arrives in cases holding about 11kg. After washing the spears are placed on a corrugated conveyer belt and each spear slips into an individual trough on the belt. The belt passes through a light box where *each* spear is photographically analysed for colour and size. Further down the line the spears are cut to the desired length and, according to their analysis, they drop into one of about 40 grading chutes and are counted into bundles – the magic of computers. In contrast, in another part of the area adhesive labels were being stuck on by hand to packages of organic asparagus. We also had a brief look in one of the greenhouses where different varieties of asparagus are grown to test quality and yield and also to provide a token output for the early part of the season.

At the farm shop we saw a demonstration of assembly of salad ingredients including the purple asparagus and we had the opportunity to taste it. This variety is only grown in this area. It is perfectly good raw with a slight sweet taste reminiscent of fresh peas. After the visit, most of us seemed to have more bags on the coach than earlier in the day!

Our last visit was to the Round of Gras pub at Badsey for - guess what - a lunch featuring asparagus. The starter choices were Traditional Asparagus with brown bread & butter, Asparagus soup or Asparagus & cheese pancakes. The four main courses listed were all served with new potatoes and Asparagus. The asparagus was the very thick kind - grade 3 or 4. However the spear tips were delicious and substantial – good pub grub. The inn is alleged to be the only one in the world named for asparagus - "Round" = 20 spears, "Gras" = asparagus.

On the way back to the Lygon Arms, our tour guide Helen added a little post-script to the day – it was reported in a local newspaper that, in the middle of the English asparagus season, a well-known supermarket was selling asparagus from Peru!



I have been a member for more years than I wish to admit and have attended many great events but this one certainly upheld all the aims of the Society – "the promotion of the knowledge of good food and wine". I would add in good company. We are very grateful to our EAC Events coordinator Michael Messent and congratulate him for the excellent organisation of a splendid "Awayday"



The Wine & Food of Collio

by Carla Capalbo



Ferdinando Polencic – one of Collio’s first producers to bottle under his own name in 1974

Italian white wines tend to be known for their grape variety rather than their provenance. Think of Pinot Grigio: it’s by far the most popular Italian white, yet few British drinkers can pinpoint exactly where it comes from. That helps to explain why the small hilly area called the Collio, which produces some of the country’s best white wines, is still relatively unknown outside of Italy. Within Italy, however, the *vini bianchi* of this part of Friuli Venezia Giulia are legendary.

The Collio is situated in the very top right-hand corner of Italy, a hundred kilometres north-east of Venice and forty north of Trieste. It’s a tiny crescent-shaped stretch of land in the province of Gorizia, fifteen kilometres long and just a few wide, but it is one of Europe’s great terroirs for white wines. That’s thanks to its soil: known locally as *ponca*, it was formed 56 million years ago from underwater coral reefs. I’ve seen miniscule sea-shells in the vineyards to prove it. These and centuries worth of silt deposits translate into minerality in wine, giving them character, depth and definition. Of course the Collio also produces reds, but it is primarily the whites which drive the area’s markets and reputation. The Collio hills are situated between the Giulian Alps to the north and the Adriatic sea to the south, with a microclimate that protects from any excesses. Their gentle slopes are covered by terraced vineyards, thick patches of woods, fields and fruit orchards: a model of biodiversity.

The Collio is interesting too because it borders on another country and its culture: Slovenia, in what was formerly Yugoslavia. The whole area was formerly the southernmost part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. What I find fascinating about today’s Collio – on the Italian side, and this book is limited to Italy – is the mix between Italian and Slovenian, west and east, Latin and Slavic. I learned a lot about the cross-cultural aspect of the Collio’s heritage when I lived in the Collio for the year it took me to research, photograph and write the book. I stayed in rural *agriturismi* on family run wineries. As in Piedmont’s Langhe hills, the Collio estates are mostly small and I was welcomed into their homes. Indeed, I was practically adopted!

Renato and Savina Keber, who were my hosts for part of my stay, speak both languages. Renato was born on the Italian side of the border, while Savina grew up less than a kilometre away, at Medana, in Slovenia. In between, the aggressively patrolled borderline ran through the middle of Renato’s vineyards. Prior to the ending of the cold war he was allowed to work the vines on both sides during the day, but had to return to Italy at night. “Even our courtship was determined by these politics,” says Savina. “Renato cycled the short distance to my house in daytime but after the nightly curfew shut our local checkpoint, he had to travel fifteen kilometres to Gorizia to regain Italy.” That has changed since Slovenia joined Schengen in late 2007. The border crossings have been torn down and the area’s winemaking is now beginning to expand across the political divide.

At harvest time, several generations of a family pick and press the grapes; their intimate relationship with the vineyards is reflected in the many approaches to making wine you find in the Collio. Here, in an unusual rainbow of styles, white wines go from pale and ephemeral to amber-orange liquids whose structures are closer to red wines. This diversity extends to grape varieties too: from Sauvignon Blanc and the ubiquitous Pinot Grigio – which can take on real territorial character in these hills, through Friulano (formerly called Tocai here) to native grapes Malvasia Istriana and Ribolla Gialla. Collio winemakers take their pick of the tools of the trade: stainless steel vats for crisp, fresh whites, barrels small and large for more structured wines, and lengthy macerations on the skins or ageing in amphors for additional character.

As for the food, it's cross-cultural too. Eat in the local trattorie, and you're more likely to be served large, plum-filled potato gnocchi sprinkled with cinnamon than pasta. Strudels and other Austrian pastries end every meal. The Friulian staple is polenta, white or yellow, which grows in vast swathes on the nearby Isonzo plain. At Trattoria alla Subida, near Cormons, the Sirk family stir it daily over an open fireplace before serving it with their exceptional *stinco*, slow-roasted veal shin. Gulasch and hearty game stews reflect the area's Austro-Hungarian history.

This was once the southernmost part of the empire, and the Collio supplied Vienna with wine, cherries and other warmer-climate fruits. Fish were sent up by train from the coast at Grado, which still maintains its character of picturesque fishing village and 19th-century spa, as it does its links to a colourful history under the Romans, Byzantines, and Venetians. Indeed, the whole area has been at the heart – often cruelly so – of European history. In the 20th century alone, it was the frontline in both world wars, and the Collio hills still turn up relics, human and non, from the battles played out on them.

As in every part of Italy the Collio and its surrounding towns, from Udine to Gorizia and Trieste, have their share of artisan foods. San Daniele prosciutto is considered finer than Parma ham for the delicacy of its salting, and is made in the town of the same name, just west of Udine. There are cheesemakers too, working mainly on higher ground where the cows graze in summer pastures. The Carso hills, near Trieste, are made of very hard limestone whose underground caves make ideal ageing cellars for the local cheeses. Dario Zidarich uses a harness and mountain ropes to lower himself 80 metres down to his. The resulting cheese he calls Jamar: it takes twenty kilos of his Friesian cows' milk to produce each four-kilo round of it.

The Collio's a perfect place to spend a week's visit, or tack a few days onto a trip to Venice. It offers the quintessential Italian experience: beautiful landscapes, delicious food and wine and, most of all, warm hospitable people to make it all come alive.



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Plum-filled potato gnocchi



Carla Capalbo was born in New York, brought up in Paris and London, and has lived in Italy for 20 years. She is the author and photographer of numerous books about Italian food and wine, including **Collio: Fine Wines and Foods from Italy's Northeast** (winner of the André Simon Award 2009 for Best Wine Book, and shortlisted for Le Cordon Bleu World Food Media Award); **The Food and Wine Guide to Naples and Campania**; **The Food and Wine Lover's Companion to Tuscany** (shortlisted for GFW Food Book of the Year). She is a regular contributor to Decanter, BBC Olive magazine, winenews.it, the Independent as well as countless other publications on both sides of the Atlantic; she often illustrates her articles with her photographs. She is co-organizer of Cook it Raw, an ecologically aware, high-gastronomy event that features the work of the world's top chefs.

In 2006 Capalbo won a prestigious gold medal at the Chelsea Flower Show for a garden on the horticulture of the Amalfi Coast; she was awarded the Luigi Veronelli Prize in 2007 for Best Food and Wine Writer in Italy in a foreign language. She gives food and wine tours in France and Italy, including for Martin Randall Travel. She has a BA in History of Art from Sussex University and a post-graduate degree from St Martin's School of Art in Sculpture. She is a long-standing member of Slow Food in Italy and the Guild of Food Writers, and Circle of Wine Writers in the UK. She is currently also setting up a photo archive. Capalbo's consultancy clients include the EU's Agricultural Committee and top UK supermarkets.

