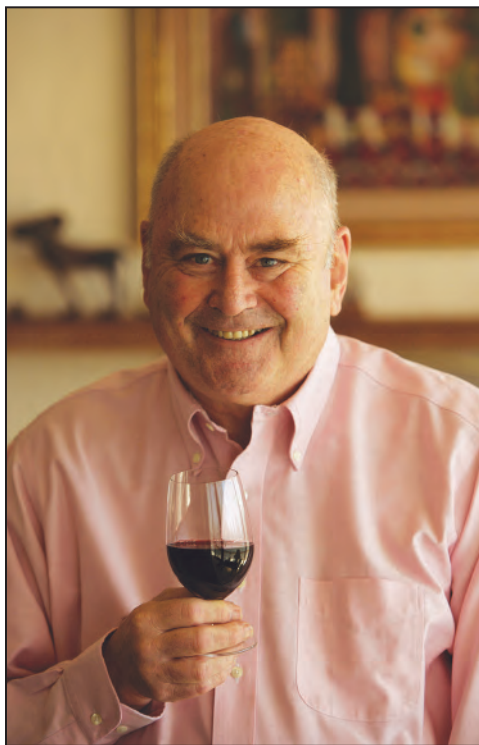


A tasting of European greats in Melbourne with James Halliday

A charity dinner held in one of Melbourne's top restaurants, the Estelle Restaurant, took place in August 2013. The event was attended by James Halliday (one of our longest standing vintage card consultants and an Australian wine expert), and 13 others, to raise funds for the Len Evans Foundation. The dinner was held on Len Evans' birthday, who was a great friend of the Society. James thought that Len would have approved, many members would probably also agree.

The wines donated for the event were some truly fine wines which covered top champagnes, Burgundies, a Bordeaux sweetie and a Madeira. Think of the best, some of them were there to be savoured and enjoyed. We hope that you enjoy reading James's most fascinating tasting notes and comparisons of these wonderful wines.

- Andrea Warren, IW&FS Executive Administrator



James Halliday

1996 Krug and 1996 Salon, stylistically at the extremes of champagne, had been the original selections, bolstered by two bottles of Piper Heidsieck Sauvage 1982, one disgorged in 1989, the other in 2013 (both flown to Australia for the dinner). If properly cellared, it is hard to imagine when the Krug or the Salon will near the end of their lives.

In both instances the very high acidity of the vintage was matched by higher than usual Baumé levels, resulting in exceptional concentration in the base wine. Getting it right wasn't as easy as it

might seem, but Krug (majestically complex) and Salon (ravishingly pure) made it seem easy.

Murphy struck with what should have been a seriously interesting comparison of the '82 (itself a top vintage) Pipers: the '89 disgorgement was corked, and the '13 disgorgement was somewhat aldehydic. But the dish which accompanied the champagnes got the food underway in spectacular fashion: beetroot and horseradish bavarois, king salmon, shaved calamari, oyster, squid ink and saffron, sounding fussy and contrived, but came together in the mouth in brilliant fashion. And the presentation on the plate was a work of art.

La Belle Voisine Montrachet 2008 (under screwcap) and Bouchard Père et Fils Montrachet 2004 were matched with John Dory, pickled shimeji and bonito, the crisp-skinned fish stacked with flavour, an (unspecified) broth added at the table likewise. The '08 Montrachet was still very, very tight, pure, intense and long, with a touch of Émile Peynaud's 'pleasant reduction'.

The '04 demonstrated that a good cork can do the job: fresh as a daisy, precise and detailed. There were a few murmurs of Socratean dissatisfaction about the oak treatment and/or the lean mouthfeel, but life is never perfect, and - besides - the real point of being at the dinner was about to arrive: 12 vintages of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (DRC) La Tâche from 2009 to 1942.

The first bracket of four - 2009, '05, '01 and '99 - were served with an appropriately rich dish of Rangers Valley beef cheek, celeriac and jamon. Ever since chefs discovered that beef cheek had a higher and better use than pet food, it has become something of a cliché, waygu most clichéd (and suspect) of all.

This version, by contrast, restored my faith, splendidly unctuous, its flavours leisurely uncoiling with each mouthful.

The '09 had very good colour, the bouquet and palate full to the gills with plum and black cherry primary fruit, still to move to the first phase of development, but exceedingly long on the palate. The '09 vintage has already been rated and re-rated several times, but this wine shows no hint of being too friendly. The '05 was controversial: I loved its satin texture, beautiful line and length, but the majority were put off to a greater or lesser degree by Brett (Brettanomyces, a non-spore forming genus of yeast). Once upon a time (1990), I was a hound dog with Brett, now I wear an eye patch. The good thing is I am easily satisfied.

There has long been a view that if you were to buy '01 red Burgundies, restrict yourself to grand crus. Why? Because it is a terroir vintage, restrained rather than flattering. As the '01 developed and changed in the glass, it became obvious that this was the wine to drink tonight (of this flight). The '99 was, if anything, even more controversial than the '05. As ever, deeper in colour than any DRC in living memory, lauded to the skies when first tasted in barrel and when first released. Now some question whether it was picked too ripe. I don't believe so, but I do think it's going through a change of life, and should be left alone until it comes out the other side.

The next flight was of '95, '86, '85 and '72, the chosen dish the most tender venison I have ever eaten, and amazing beetroot reduction (I don't like beetroot much, but this was something else), a ball of depth-charged flavour of shredded venison wrapped in caul, and sprouting broccoli. A perfect match for some magnificent wines, starting with the '95. How, I wondered, could a wine be so calm and soothing when it is so charged with the perfume of violets, just starting to reveal its effortless beauty? Perhaps because there was no need for even the slightest makeup.

The surprise of the flight was the '86, theoretically the least vintage of the whole night. Instead, it took a leaf out of the '01's book, saying I am DRC first, La Tâche second. Its savoury/forestry/stemmy palate had unbridled power and length, standing resolutely against the reputation of the vintage. The '85 shares some things in common with the '09: the early suspicion was of being too perfect too soon, seemingly falling off a cliff in the early '90s. The trouble is great Burgundy is the ultimate unknowable, and by the late '90s, the '85s had been redeemed. The totally delicious, perfectly balanced La Tâche presented in this flight was that, and then some.

The '72 vintage has long been one of my favourites, partly because it has a poor reputation with Bordeaux lovers, and partly because it has a savoury, wild edge stemming from its high acidity. Against all the odds, it has (or had) elements in common with the sublime '78, which was to start the final bracket of '78, '69, '66 and '42.

Indeed, I managed to keep an extra glass so I could compare the two directly and managed a gracious retreat in the face of the sheer blissful perfection of the younger wine. Its spiced fragrance is of extraordinary complexity, the silky palate of unbelievable length. Only '78 Romanée-Conti stands in front of it.

... Burgundies to be sipped and savoured

The opulence of the wines - in the best possible sense, and which none of the other wines had - was tempered by its complexity, and ultimately morphing into finesse. The 1966 has always been a great wine, its bouquet exuding a rainbow of spices, with a subtext of some foresty notes; the texture was sheer perfection, languorous yet riveting.

And if you wanted proof that La Tâche can prosper for over 70 years, the '42 (not a great vintage in Burgundy) provided it in spades, a heavenly cocktail of earth, truffle, spice and berry in a finest-spun web of flavours. The bracket was perfectly matched by one of Estelle's signature dishes, Grimaud duck with mandarin and pumpkin, the accompaniment sounding contrived, but Brian Flaherty and Scott Pickett are culinary magicians.

Two Château d'Yquem were next, the '03 starting to come around, but still very youthful, needing another decade or two. The other was a '38, donated by Daryl Somers, not youthful, but doing every bit as well, if not better than I am - it celebrated my 75th birthday, 17 days earlier than the dinner. Deep walnut-brown, but healthy, it filled the mouth with cumquat and brandy snap, a great match for the pineapple, coriander and white chocolate dessert. If I had seen that description on a menu, it would have been dismissed with a shudder, and I would have missed a blissful dish.

And so to an infinitely complex Madeira, 1853 Tarquinio Camara Lomelino Solera, quality coffee was all that was needed. Well, not for some (not including myself), who went on to investigate some very expensive champagnes at a Melbourne wine bar.



La Tâche

Publisher's Note: James Halliday is an award-winning observer and wine commentator on the Australian wine scene. His writings are featured in *The Australian* and in *Gourmet Traveller Wine Magazine*.