

In Review...

The Fine Wine Experience Half Bottle Dinner

The Aberdeen Marina Club, Hong Kong, 10th April 2014 © Linden Wilkie



A few years ago I attended a lunch where some older half bottles of wine were pulled out for a bit of a laugh. The logic goes that the larger the bottle format, the better the wine will age. A good friend talks about “the magnum factor”. He’s right, in my experience – magnums so often seem to impress more than bottles we have had of the same wine. The rational explanation is that the interplay of air and wine through the cork (a miniscule exchange that helps wine develop very slowly) has a greater ratio of wine to cork than a bottle does, so its action in wine ageing is slower. Right? I’m not sure actually. There’s still dissolved oxygen actually in the wine anyway, and other biological things going on behind the seal, that help even wines that are hermetically sealed (e.g. screwcap) develop “bottle age” characteristics.

Ummm.... Let’s not get too bogged down! If you want a scientific explanation for wine chemistry, and like me you are not a scientist, then [Jamie Goode](#) is your man.

Let’s just say for now that conventional wisdom has that bigger is better....

So half bottles must be worse. And not age very well.

But at the lunch I mentioned at the start we sat there drinking 1928 Château Haut-Brion (a famous long-keeper), and 1945 Château Ausone from half bottles. They were delicious, and not a lot different to bottles I’d had of the same wines. Hmmmm I thought. Seems like a good theme for an event!

Slowly slowly catch the monkey, and after a few years, the line up was assembled. The challenge was to convince a small group of not apparently insane wine enthusiasts to part with serious wine-serious money, to sit down and open them all. Mike gave me one of those you-know-there-are-perhaps-limits-to-what-we-might-do-with-your-ideas kind of looks. But ultimately, adventure prevailed, and our mini-me (“half bottles: double the fun” as we billed it optimistically) dinner took place. Phew no.1.

Phew no.2 was that all but one of the bottles was in great condition, and showed the character we might expect from 750ml bottles of the same wine (though perhaps not magnums). The duffer was a Trimbach ’89 that showed a little

oxidation on the finish, and we replaced it with a '93 of the same wine. Everything else was fine. Better than fine. Bacchus was smiling on our little table at the Aberdeen Marina Club. As one pointed out toward the end "all these bottles show such different characteristics and nuances". I agreed. If I was to be super critical I would say that some of the wines were a touch further along their evolution than 750s of the same wine have been, but only a little, and some of them seemingly not at all.

As one guest concluded, "most of these halves taste better than some bottles I've had. It goes to show that provenance is more important than bottle size."

True dat.

Here's how they went down...



1993 F.E. Trimbach Riesling 'Cuvée Frédéric Emile'

From old vines in the Ribeauvillé grands crus vineyards Geisberg and Osterberg, this is Trimbach's penultimate label for Riesling and a strong tradition for excellence in the dry style in its own right.

Reassuringly bright and pale in the glass; a mineral-led nose with lime and cream, this is complex and open and mature, but still vibrant; fine, elegant on the palate, lime citrus and a hint of cream echoed here. Good tension. From a good but largely forgotten Alsace vintage. Good now, no rush. 90



1988 F.E. Trimbach Riesling 'Clos Ste. Hune'

From a small parcel of old vines in the Rosacker grand cru at Hunawihr, one of the very greatest dry Rieslings, and therefore one of the greatest white wines on Earth, Clos Ste Hune is Trimbach's – and Alsace's – flagship wines. '88 was classic.

Mid yellow gold; discrete mineral nose that took an hour or more to get going, stony; fine, elegant, dry, velvety phenolics with a generous mid palate, and a precise, tapered finish. Some would say austere, but there is sufficient generosity here, it is just a very structured, mineral-intense style. Just what the Riesling lover wants. Perfectly clear and expressive bottle in mid evolution. 94



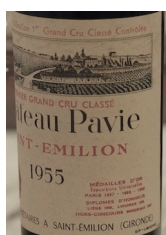
1986 F.E. Trimbach Riesling 'Clos Ste. Hune'

From a trickier growing season.

Mid yellow gold; a more ample, expressive and open aroma, citrus with a touch of tropical fruit; very focused on the palate, mineral, citrus, cream, lots of energy, and a bit more fat than the '88. Less elegant, but more potent. 93

Those two divided the room on preference, with a couple opting for the Emile. Seldom is Clos Ste. Hune a 'friendly' style of wine. The dry style accentuates the already mineral-driven style. I love the details, intensity and understatement they offer. Production is tiny (about 8000 bottles a year), so I am glad (for my own sake!) that this has not caught on in the fine wine mainstream. Its expensive,

but with that scarcity, and having the track record and acclamation as one of the world's best wines, it could so easily cost a lot lot more if it became fashionable in Asia.



1955 Château Pavie

Fine garnet, quite mature appearance with a brown but healthy rim; quite sweet on the nose – candied plum and cassis, but also classic, leafy, with a note of old furniture wood, this is St.-Emilion old school through and through; elegant, fragrant on the palate, nice fruit, rounded texture, fine acidity with complex notes of cigar tobacco and 'hot stones' on the finish. One of the better old Pavies I've tasted. 91



1955 Château Canon

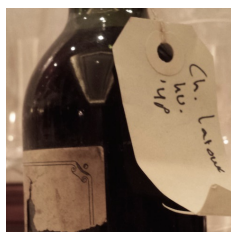
Bright, clean, a fresher, more vibrantly zingy, fruity nose than the Pavie '55; sweet on the attack, fresh, more linear, long, juicy and racy in style. Candied red cherry note and a fresh finish. This is very attractive, and very Canon of this period, minus perhaps the fireworks and sheer hedonism of some in this period. 90



1955 Château Mouton-Rothschild

Mature garnet, evolved mature rim; fragrant and perfumed, slightly smoky. This has that classic old school Mouton allure on the nose; fleshy on the palate with notes of leather, iodine, and that seductive Mouton perfume again which is sensationally amplified on the long long finish. This is very finely balanced, and especially nuanced, with gently sweet fruit, and an overall impression that is very fragrance driven. 96

Those who love old Burgundy but decry Bordeaux's lack of fragrance, tenderness and grace need to try Mouton '55 and then get off their high horses! ;-)



1948 Château Latour

Mature tawny garnet. When I decanted it there was an absence of any obvious fault or bottle age flaw. When that's the case, I'm usually optimistic, but there was that familiar smell of an old claret struggling a bit as it sloshed into the decanter. '48 was supreme at the leading properties of the Right Bank (where they are a bit less shouty than the '47s, and a bit more nuanced, but still just as dense), but less successful in the Médoc. But as a seasoned Latour aficionado pointed out as we turned to it "they never made a bad Latour". We needn't have worried at all. A bit like the long shot at Happy

Valley coming up from behind, this turned out to be one of the top wines of the night – and therefore the biggest surprise.

With time in the decanter (and then wine glass) this opened up to reveal an archetypically Latour nose of mint, blackcurrant, and blackcurrant leaf, mixed with a hint of iodine. The aromatics are bright, and a little lifted by a whiff of volatile acidity; vibrant on the palate, laden with fruit, piqued and driven a little again by VA, but not excessively so, the ripe tannins bringing in the slightly chewy finish are super flavor-laden and perfectly ripe. This Latour is both concentrated and transparent in that totally classic way. Really, very good. 94



1961 Château Léoville Las-Cases

Clear mature garnet, bricked mature tone; old school leafy St-Julien nose, plum, currant, mineral and a bit of bretty barnyard in the background; ripe, rounded, with lovely racy acidity, some iodine and barnyard – classic old LLC – but there is good flow here, probably once robustly tannic (and bottles and larger still can be) but now silky right through to the finish – which is a little pinched. Fragrant

aftertaste. 91

'59, '62 and '66 LLC are all superior to their '61, so in that sense, they produced a below par '61. But that said, I think the '61 LLC is a bit overlooked and under-appreciated. It's really very good, and this half bottle was no exception.



1961 Château Canon

Bright clear and still deep, still so fresh in colour; sweet on the nose, with dark cherry and a coffee grounds / mocha note – sweet and decadent and slightly singed; intense and fleshy on the palate, cherry-like fruit, vibrant, juicy, and a little glossy, there are no hard edges here. It's complex and direct, and shows what a thrill Canon was in this period (this is the tail end of that era). Not too dissimilar to a good

bottle of mature Le Pin. 94



1961 Château Palmer

Mature and quite bricked in appearance; sweet nose, VA-lifted, perfumed and sweet with a slightly mulchy sweet vegetal note; very silky in texture, glycerin carried with bright lifted acidity, like the Mouton '55, but silkier, lighter and even more seductive. Notes of moss and bark and undergrowth that put me more in Morey than Margaux. A touch of plums on the

finish, but the fragrance is more about "other". This half bottle is less intense, and less ethereally thrilling than some bottles I've had, but still a wonderful experience, and the upper end of tonight's line up. It has, of course, the disadvantage (unlike that '48 Latour) of heightened expectations. I'd say on that basis it crept through, but it was still a thrill as a fine wine experience. 95



1961 Château Latour

Fairly solid in appearance in this line up, still some real freshness of colour and depth; sweet cassis, mint and earth on the nose, more straight, low key and quietly potent than the '48; very concentrated, juicy, cassis, mint, and a touch of hot summer 'scorching' in the fruit flavor. Clearly a well preserved half bottle. Notes of leather. Laden with tannin, but it is breathing and yielding. Immortal wines. Sweet. A real mouthful. More awe and respect-inducing than seducing. 95



1990 Paul Jaboulet Aîné Hermitage 'La Chapelle'

In any line up this look deep, almost opaque and brooding, but in this line up it looks so solid. Touch of garnet appearing toward the rim the only clue to any age; molasses, dark chocolate, dark fruit and a hint of earth on the nose; this is so glycerin buffered that it feels somewhere between oily and silky in texture, belying a serious densely tannic structure below. Absolutely laden with blackberry fruit and bright balancing acidity. There is a hint of very slightly jammy, overripe fruit about the '90 and this half bottle is revealing more than some bottles will show. It's terrific Hermitage, but I don't think it holds a candle to the amazing, and more classically aromatic '78. 94



1989 Château Pichon Longueville Baron

Deep colour, still fresh; sweet, cassis, leather and spices on the nose, touch of sweet mulch; glossy, ripe and fruit-laden, this is ample and round. Superb depth. Lacked some of the extraordinary aromatic detail some bottles and magnums have shown on other occasions, but still superb. 93



1986 Château Gruaud Larose

Deep garnet; intense brooding nose, some barnyard, this really smells in the same vein as the '50s wines it is so old school; concentrated fruit, round, dense and rather chewy in style. Still tannic and youthful, but not especially austere as there is so much fruit and aroma. Still, a classically '86-like solidity. A lot of classic Bordeaux for the money. 93



1975 Château La Mission Haut-Brion

Deep garnet; a smoky, stony, earthy, leathery nose, dark fruit, earth and iodine; dense, with sweet piquant, with loads of glycerin-buffered extract, tannin, the fruit has a ripe candied edge and attention grabbing concentration, but the overall impression is very savoury. Earthy, and cigar-like in aromatics. Hedgerow, and leafiness. Still a bit of a bruiser. More cerebral than charming. 94+



1966 Château Cheval Blanc

Mature, quite a bit of browning tone to the garnet; lovely aromas here – the best of the night, perfume, fruit, cigar and earth; so sweet and silky on the palate, wonderful energy and flow, caressing the palate with gorgeous flavours, sweet plum, smoke, cigar tobacco and a whiff of candied ginger at the end. Pretty thrilling actually. '66 Cheval has never failed to do so, which makes it a total bargain. Wine of the night. 97



1966 Château Mouton-Rothschild

Bright clear garnet, good colour and clarity; sweet leather, gingernut biscuits and leafy fragrant nose; bright a lively, elegant moderate weight, streamlined and svelte in style, gently sweet with cool leafy savouriness and a very faint whiff of musk. Flows beautifully. Impresses more for its low key elegance, than for anything attention-grabbing. Very much a St James's claret. 93



2001 Fritz Haag Brauneberger-Juffer-Sonnenuhr Beerenauslese

Still fairly pale; so classic and immediate on the nose – freshness of aroma with precise notes of talcum powder, green citrus and floral bouquet; bright and lively, delivering BA intensely with a more auslese-like lightness and freshness of style – very top Mosel impression. Great intensity and freshness, with a creamy, pillowy middle, cut like a Saville Row suit with fine acidity. Long. Just gorgeous. 97



2006 Willi Schaefer Graacher Domprobst Beerenauslese nr.8

Quite a contrast here, but as much to do with vintage as producer and vineyard. 2006 was the year botrytis went on a rampage in the Mosel producing an abundance of late picked intensely rich and botrytic wines. Full yellow gold; sweet, bright, with nose-flaring botrytis and a touch of VA-lift – very intense nose; marmalade flavours with intense waxy botrytis, jellied fruit intensity, quite a decadent style. Underlying minerality, but this is all about show in '06. Delicious now. 94



Our next event is an extraordinary 35-vintage vertical of Spain's "first growth" Vega Sicilia Unico. For more details, please contact us – sales@finewineexperience.com, or on +852 2230 4288.