The WINE ALMANAC

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JANUARY

'This bread I break was once the oat,
This wine upon a foreign tree
Plunged in its fruit'
DYLAN THOMAS

The coming of a new year to the vineyards is not really a turning point for the winegrower because the 'wine year' rather begins with the vintage and the making of the new wine, all the excitement and agitation of creation during September, October and November. Then just before Christmas comes the time to start pruning the vines and this hard labour continues into February, through the iciest months of the year.

Of course the very first wines of any vintage are released even before the year turns. Beaujolais Nouveau, Vino Novello, Muscadet Nouveau and even New Zinfandel are all bottled and sold before Christmas as fresh and fruity young wines with the savour of an alcoholic fruit juice. But it is in January that the sampling of a full-blooded red or white wine may commence and the winemaker will invite friends and business associates to assess the young wines as they develop in cask, vat or giant steel tank.

On the basis of this sampling many fledgling wines will go forward for blending in the months to come. With the exception of certain areas such as Burgundy, the northern Rhône Valley and others which make 'varietal' wine, including Australia and California, a very high proportion of the world's wines are blends. Contrary to the popular view of a blend, some of the finest wines are the product of skilful blending; take fine claret, for example (see *September*). The art of the blender is forged over many years, even generations, and it may have to meet all types of different requirements. In certain areas such as Champagne, the purpose of the blend is to maintain a particular style from year to year. In others, the blend reflects the characteristics of an individual vintage: in Bordeaux, for example, an 'assemblage' of the recognised grape varieties is made according to tradition and to the weather conditions at the vintage. If the Cabernet Sauvignon has performed poorly in that particular year, then the blender might have to add more Merlot grapes within certain limits laid down by fine wine regulations.

For table wines, of course, there is more latitude and a blend is made according to consumer requirements. If the vintage has been poor, then

wine from previous years may be added; alternatively the blend may be improved with small amounts of perfectly legal flavourings such as citric acid or concentrated grape juice.

It is convenient to blend wines when the weather is cool outside because low temperatures mean that the wine will be easy to handle, unlikely to begin a new fermentation or chemical change. A second fermentation is very common after the first which transforms the sugar to alcohol. This is often described as the malolactic fermentation as the malic (appley) acid is broken down into a softer lactic (milky) acid. (See *September* for a more detailed explanation.) The end result is a smoother wine and one more likely to behave itself once bottled. Secondary fermentation of this type may begin directly after the first, or may start up after the cold weather, after the blending of various vats. Most winemakers have no objection to this taking place as the wine is usually improved, but if it has been made with grapes grown in a hot climate then the adjustment in acidity may be too noticeable and mean the wine is soft-tasting – 'flabby' as it is known in the trade. In this case the winemaker will add sulphur dioxide (SO_2) to avoid secondary fermentation occurring.

So the month of January sees the start of activity in the cellar, the making of plans for the new wine. Some will be sold in the year to come, notably the white and rosé styles; the rest will be laid down in cask or bottle for a period of ageing which may be months or years. Wines which have gone through all these stages are now ready for bottling and labelling – the cold weather is an ideal time for these essential activities, although shipment has to be delayed if conditions are very icy. Wine can deteriorate while waiting on a frozen quayside, quickly negating all the effort which has gone into its production.

In the vineyard itself, pruning can be a very slow and laborious process. Each vine must be dealt with separately: most of the growth from the previous year is trimmed back leaving only one or two shoots to develop during the months to come. Such radical cutting back is essential to maintain quality in the grapes produced. If the wine is officially classified as a top-quality style – eg, Appellation Contrôlée or Denominazione di Origine Controllata – then pruning standards are also laid down.

Taste new wines in the Roman surrounds of Orange

Yet all this work does have some lighter moments. In France this is the season of the St Vincent festivities. After the overeating of the reveillon on New Year's Eve (St Sylvestre) comes the celebration of the patron saint of wine on 22 January (in certain districts the Saturday prior to this date is the important day).

In various districts in Bordeaux, including the Médoc and the Graves, in Burgundy and in Champagne as well as the Loire Valley,

there are special masses organised in honour of the new wine, and after it has been blessed samples are carried in procession through the streets. Banquets are arranged and there is singing and folk dancing to end the day. In the little Loire village of Vouvray there is a wine festival held on 14–16 January and another in Angers at about the same time. The local châteaux are at their most impressive in this frozen season with the formal gardens a sculpture in frost. And moving further south to the warmer climes of Provence, the weekend closest to St Vincent is the occasion for a special tasting of new wines held in the grotto of the Roman amphitheatre at Orange.

St Vincent festivities

Other countries may have fewer formal celebrations but the new wine does not go unrecognised. In Austria the small wine bars called *Heurigen* are centres for sampling the fresh green-tasting young wine direct from the cask, and of course winegrowers everywhere enjoy any opportunity to show their wines to visitors with an educated interest.

WINE AS AN INVESTMENT

With the arrival of a New Year comes an inevitable look forward and perhaps a review of life in general. Relating this to wine, this is an appropriate moment to review your own cellar, if you have one, and to take stock of wines you may have bought as an investment. This concept may sound rather grand, yet investment in wine can be a very sensible and enjoyable way of using spare funds. And where once wine investment was seen as a game for the professional – with the possible exception of the odd case of port for a grandchild's birthday – today any amateur can go to auction or to a wine merchant and buy wines which are bound to increase in value.

There are two ways of playing the investment game. You may choose to keep the wines you buy until they are fully mature and ready to drink, by which time you will be able to realise a good price for them at auction or in a private sale to another collector or perhaps a restaurant. With this profit in mind you can gain in two directions – sell some of the wine and drink the rest – but of course all this involves considerable patience.

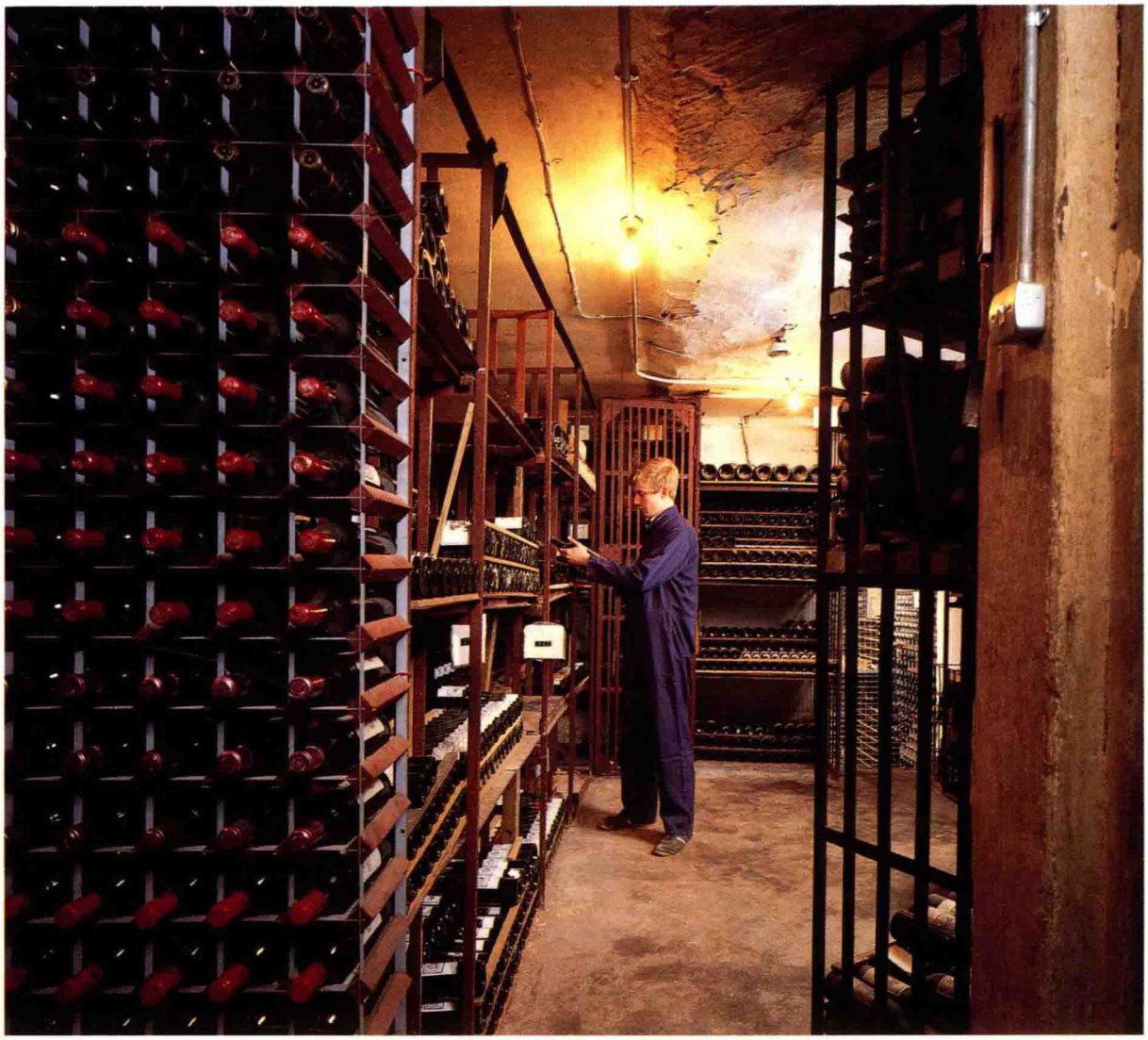
Alternatively, you may go into wine 'futures' – buying very young wines direct from the cellar and keeping them for no more than three years, then exchanging them for younger bottles and making a tidy profit in the process. This is a strategy for the purist as you may never even see the wine you own, yet any profit can go towards the purchase of wine to drink at home every day.

So, which wines are you to choose? Obviously your purse will dictate your choice to some extent, but it is worth buying the most famous name you can manage, providing the vintage is a reliable one. Take advice on all sides, using your wine merchant and the major auction houses (see Appendix 00). Attend tastings and listen to wine gossip, ask about release dates for fine wines and how to buy '*en primeur*'.

The safest styles to go for are the top clarets. Any fine red Bordeaux which is classified in the 1855 listing will prove its worth over the years, but try to acquire a name you have seen on wine lists and auction tables rather than a wine from one of the more obscure châteaux, some of which are not absolutely consistent in quality. If you subscribe to an auctioneer's mailing list you will soon learn which wines are most popular.

Beyond claret there is vintage port, a fairly long-term investment as ten years must elapse before it even begins to realise a good price at auction. But it is relatively inexpensive to buy when young, and demand is steady thanks to all those traditional clubs and restaurants in this country. Notable shippers include Cockburn, Croft, Dow, Quinta da Noval, Sandeman, Taylor and Warre. Those with a Portuguese

name may be excellent in quality yet somehow never realise as much over the years as the familiar English names. And remember it is only *vintage* port you should buy, not tawny or late-bottled; those are for home consumption only.



The traditional cellar – Berry Bros & Rudd in London

Beyond this tried and trusted wine selection you should tread warily. Burgundy is now so pricey to buy *en primeur* that it makes subsequent profits look uncertain, and many buyers are now suspicious of quality. Also you need specialist knowledge of shippers to be sure of success. Other French wine regions have very little investment potential, with

certain exceptions such as fine red Rhône wines (eg, Côte Rôtie, Châteauneuf-du-Pape) and the rare white wines of this area (eg, Château-Grillet, white Hermitage).

White wines in general are to be avoided, unless your budget runs to the very finest and sweetest such as Château d'Yquem or Schloss Johannisberg Trockenbeerenauslese. German wines represent marvellous value relative to quality at auction; a Kabinett or Spätlese wine is often underpriced. But do not make the mistake of thinking that you might resell these wines at a profit – fairly few people appreciate the difference between an ordinary German Qualitätswein and a QmP (Qualitätswein mit Prädikat), and fewer still are willing to pay the true market value of the latter.

Buying Ahead

If you plan to purchase some wine at source and keep it there until it can be resold, consult a reliable wine merchant. If the wine is mainly for personal drinking then go for the bargain, such as a *cru bourgeois* claret, as opposed to one of the big names. But if you are looking for a cash return on your investment, stick to familiar names. Even the most notable wines have to be better value when first released than later in the day, although the great problem for the amateur is to obtain wines like these. Production from a great château or estate is never substantial, due to the immense attention to detail given to a great wine, so rationing has had to be introduced – sharing the wine between Britain, the USA, Japan and all the other collectors, investors and drinkers all over the world! Befriend your wine merchant and make sure he realises you are serious about forward buying.

In the first instance you will commit yourself to a certain number of cases and pay a deposit of between twenty and fifty per cent. The balance will be due when the wine is shipped to you, plus duty and VAT charges. If you plan to resell and reinvest this can be done in Bordeaux after two years have elapsed, but you must ensure your wine is not accidentally despatched to you, otherwise you will be liable for customs duties when it arrives in the country.

All of this may sound intimidating, and it can be complex. Forward buying in particular can pose problems. You must be very careful to deal only with a reputable broker and you will have to calculate all your extra expenses at the time of shipment, as well as delivery to your home when it arrives or payment of storage charges. One answer is to hand over responsibility to your wine merchant; the other is to start on a very small scale, committing yourself to just one or two cases of a well-known wine you have *tasted*. Keep both for a year or two, then sell one and drink the other.

ENTERTAINING

WINTER FORTIFICATIONS: Fortified Wines

Chill winter weather often means a retreat indoors and a search for something warming to drink by the fire. After spending time out in the snow and ice the thought of, say, a cool crisp white Muscadet somehow lacks charm. Even a good sturdy red wine might seem lacking in body at such moments. The best answer has to be wine with something extra – fortified wine to be precise.

The concept of a fortified wine has overtones of the medicinal; these are the wines our ancestors sipped or swigged in days before central heating and fitted carpets. Many an English cold has been warded off with the aid of a good glass of port or sherry. But make no mistake – these are not simply tonic wines concocted from grape juices, sugar and spirit; the making of a true fortified wine requires at least as much art as any fine table wine. Sadly, the glory days of Madeira, Málaga and Marsala are now history. But this is all to the good: such fortified wines as still exist are remarkable value.

In the days of long sea voyages wines used to spend long periods on board ship before the eventual consumer sampled them. This often meant that while the wine was perfectly palatable when it set out, it was remarkably unappealing on arrival. Those days or months of varying temperatures and constant movement led to oxidation and chemical change in the wine resulting in a sour taste.

Most wine was shipped in wooden casks and the sailors noted how some of it took on a 'burnt' taste. This is the origin of the word brandy – *brandewijn* or burnt wine. The 'burnt wine' was found to keep well, although the taste still left something to be desired. One solution was to heat wine to the point where it began to evaporate. Once condensed, it became a primitive brandy. This raw product of distillation benefited from keeping in wooden casks and even from sea voyages.

But this did not solve the problem of transporting table wine whose alcohol level was too low for it to survive a long journey. The British came up with an answer early in the eighteenth century when the signing of an important trade treaty with the Portuguese (the Methuen Treaty, 1703) meant that French wines would in future be challenged by newcomers from Portugal. This was considered quite acceptable as French-British relations were uneasy at the time, but the problem was the quality of the alternative. It was decided to experiment by adding grape brandy to ordinary Portuguese *consumo* wine so that it would have improved keeping qualities. This new idea also brought other benefits. The addition of brandy during fermentation curbed the action of the

yeast so that the wine tasted quite sweet and was naturally also higher in alcohol. This style of rich wine was soon to become a British favourite.

Styles of Fortified Wine

PORT Today port is available in many versions, ranging from the humble pub ruby, aged briefly in wood then blended and bottled, to the subtle tawny, which has seen quite a long period in wood and hence has a pale golden colour and a genteel, faded flavour, to the hefty, mouth-filling vintage ports which are not made every year and need at least ten years in the cellar once they are bottled (two years after the vintage). Finally there are hybrids developed to please certain tastes such as the late-bottled vintage (LBV), sounding like part of a cricket commentary, which all dates from one year but can be sold sooner than the vintage varieties; and crusted port, a blend that throws an impressive sediment once decanted.

MADEIRA Madeira is also made under the Portuguese flag and also derives from the days of sailing vessels. On long voyages to the East Indies it was discovered that the casks of Madeira wine were much improved by being exposed to the sun, so they were often used as ballast on ships heading off to fetch cargoes of spices and other exotica. This effect of natural heat was then artificially created in Madeira using a specially heated room called an *estufa*. The resulting 'baked' wine was also fortified with grape brandy and sometimes aged in bottle for many decades before drinking. Madeira was the great favourite of the early American gentry in the eighteenth century and of course became the excuse for that famous phrase in Britain, 'I must have one by eleven, else I'll have eleven by one', referring to the practice of offering a glass of Madeira and some plain (or Madeira) cake at around eleven in the morning. A very civilised custom that might bear revival.

SHERRY Sherry has its place in the sun too. The so-called *solera* system uses the very word (in Spanish) to remind the drinker that this full-flavoured wine has been stored in barrels which have been warmed by the sun. Sherry is only drawn off from the bottom layer; the other layers are subsequently and regularly topped up with a subtle blend of wines (already fortified) so that some of the sherry which is drawn from the bottom may well be quite old. The Tio Pepe *solera* for instance was started about a century ago and traces of that ancient wine will still remain in the barrels.

The flavour of sherry comes not only from sun, wine, brandy and wood but also from a curious floating yeast which forms daisy-like patterns on the surface of certain barrels during fermentation; this is

called *flor* (flower). It gives a sharp pungency to sherry and is most noticeable in fino, which is not actually fortified when consumed in Spain. The sweeter varieties, which mask the taste of the *flor*, are fortified to suit the demands of the export market.

Rest assured that the sherries sold in Britain are normally fortified (just check the alcohol content if you are not certain – it will be around 18–20°). Fino is the lightest style, very dry on the palate and pale in colour. Amontillado is a fino which has been aged in wood for some time and also has added sweetness. An oloroso has not developed *flor* so has less sharpness and is full and round, although not always very sweet. In fact the flavour of a dry oloroso (quite a rare creature) has a curious hint of burnt rubber. Sweeter olorosos may be referred to as amorosos or, if very rich, they are cream sherries, the most popular commercial style in the world.

New variations of sherry include a pale cream which has had its colour quite literally 'bleached' away by a special process designed to give it a light appearance yet at the same time retaining its rich taste, and the latest cocktail sherries which are low in alcohol and intended as mixers. Finally there are two extremes of character: the bone-dry, salty manzanilla which is a fino made by the sea, and the nutty dark sweet brown sherry which is now quite rare but once graced many a vicarage table.

MARSALA This is a relation of sherry in style, although it has a shorter history; sherry was the 'sack' of Shakespeare's plays. ('If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked!' *King Henry IV, Part II.*) An Englishman named John Woodhouse, who lived in Sicily for a while, was responsible for turning the production of Marsala into a commercial venture and this sweet, rich wine was stocked by Nelson and contributed to his victories in the following decades. There are various grades of Marsala named *fine* (very sweet); *superiore* (caramel in taste); *vergine* (something like a dry oloroso); and several *speciali* including Marsala flavoured with eggs, coffee or bitter almond extract. This last smells like cyanide and seems a rather appropriate creation from the home of the Mafia. A great deal of Marsala is used in cooking, for *sauce Madère* and for the light dessert made with egg yolks called zabaglione. The Germans love it and import a great deal.

OTHER FORTIFIEDS There are quite a few wines made with the Muscat grape which have brandy added to them. These may be called Moscato in Italy or California. In France such sweet Muscat wines are often known as *vins doux naturels*, though they are not entirely natural as the brandy is added to give a richer flavour and more sweetness. Examples are Banyuls, Muscat de Beaumes de Venise (which tastes of fresh