

Exploring the Wines of France with Vernon Vine

This article originally appeared in the Brittany Mag. and various websites. It includes an IOW section which is found at the very end.

The tale is about the trials and tribulations of being an English wine lover, living in France with aspirations to become a connoisseur of French Wines. These amusing ditties build into a comprehensive French wine guide, following the many and varied French wine tasting sessions Vernon Vine has with his friends. I only hope his liver is up to it!

Forward

Once our daughters, Sherry and Champagne, had flown the nest and we had obtained early retirement, one wondered what to do next. We always had lovely holidays in France so living in that country appealed to us. I would be nearer the source of the wine and Mrs Vine was lured by the music, art and sunning herself on the beach.

We sold our house, rented here for 3 months, bought a place, returned to England to stay with friends and eventually moved to Brittany and into our old farmhouse. We had some DIY skills but they were stretched to the limit. Back ache, arm ache, you name it... we have had them all. With DIY, double the time you think it will take and then double it again. The house had the usual dead mice and rats, a mummified cat, a live wild cat, strange poisons, odd farm machinery and piles and piles of rubbish.

The people in the village have been wonderful and a stick of bread was on our doorstep the first day we arrived. They have helped us find out about so many things. We have had little difficulty with the necessary paperwork that had to be done; Mrs Vine's patience saw us through. Mrs Vine already had some French, which has now come on a treat. I had nothing, so before moving here I took an evening class for a term with a charming French lady and on arriving I had lessons with a lovely French Madame for about 2 years. Eventually I am at foundation level and can start reading the backs of wine bottles and talking about wine to our French friends. Others have noticed that I seem to flow better after a good glass of wine.

My one main challenge has been setting up the wine cellar/cave in the house. So many good wines to choose from and so many good ones to drink. Mrs Vine and myself are struggling with the idea that you may have to wait 4 years or more before you can actually drink a certain bottle of wine. The wine fairs held by the supermarkets around Oct/Nov are particularly good. Whilst visiting one in Pontivy we noticed that half the people were on mobile phones discussing the purchases to make. The first time I followed them round and bought the same boxes as they did. They proved to be all good buys. My brother Vincent comes over now once a year just to collect the boxes of wines I have bought for him, which are much appreciated by all his friends.

We spend our holidays in the south of France, as just passing through the Bordeaux wine area is enough to lift our spirits. Mrs Vine has written about surfing around Biarritz and we hope to include that area in our next holiday. The biggest influence on my life has been Mrs Vine with her eternal optimism and her bright sunny disposition, so many years of bliss.

We have never had one thought about going back. Recently we heard about one couple that had returned as they could not find clotted cream and because the French used a different word for America. If I won the lottery, no I would not buy a vineyard, I would stay here with all our friends but get someone to mow our grass. The cellar would become better stocked with wine and Mrs Vine and myself would be visiting more wine areas to taste the wines in the place of their birth.

Our daughters will be flying in soon for a visit and we will hear all their tittle-tattle. I will tempt them with a few bottles of wine I have recently discovered such as lovely sparkling white from the Loire; nearly as good as champagne in my view.

We have a wonderful new life here and at this moment I am sitting in our beautiful garden cradling the two loves of my life: a good Bordeaux Red, which has a fine body, and also Mrs Vine, who has similar.

Introduction

My interest in wine started when I was a child and my father produced a variety of home grown wines, his most vicious cocktail being a mix made from dried raisins and rice. These strange brews would bubble away high up on a shelf in the kitchen. Sampling took place at regular intervals and everyone who visited was offered a nip. At times I have tried the odd home wine from scratch or from a kit but now I rely on others to make it. The closest I get to wine making now is in our garden, which is surrounded by vines, and I have to prune them.

I am going to take you on a tour round France sampling the various wines, investigating how vines are grown and how wine is produced. You will need a corkscrew, wine glass, armchair and a reasonably well-stocked local supermarket or wine shop. Each time we meet I will home in on a particular area to see what wines are there, how they are produced and most importantly how they look, taste, feel, smell and talk to us. I will also be discussing many other varied topics related to wine.

Loire Wines France

We will start with our closest wine-growing region of Nantes and the Loire Valley. Have you got your corkscrew at the ready? I prefer a strongly made metal corkscrew that has wings and lifts up the cork gently, but each to their own. At one party someone had a real fancy job but the only trouble was everyone wanted a go, so dozens of bottles of wine were all opened at the same time.

I have invited two of my chums around for a wine tasting session; they are Bernadette Bouquet and her lover Stephane Le Spit. Bernadette is a fine elegant woman who flits from glass to glass like a butterfly and Stephane is a comfortably built gentleman with a face that reflects his knowledge of wines. There is also my wife, Mrs Vine, who is not only beautiful but also full of charm and has an interest in everything and everybody around her.

In front of us first we had a Muscadet. This was an inexpensive bottle of white wine produced in the region just south of Nantes. This lively and refreshing Muscadet goes well with seafoods; marinated moule, shell fish, Cancale oysters, buttered sole (using white Nantes butter).

Horror oh horror! I put the white wine in the fridge at the bottom about five hours ago and all present say it was just too cold. It has also been a cool day and freezing white wine was not what was wanted. The tasting continues and all the usual adjectives come out but an interesting new one was when Stephane said that it tasted like chestnut husks. He also explained that Muscadet was the AC (Appellation Contrôlée) for the whole region right down the Loire. An AC or AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) it seems, guarantees origin and style of wine but interestingly not the quality! AC, the best, is followed by VDQS (Vin D'Élimité De Qualité Supérieure), Vin de Pays and lastly, Vin de Table.

We quickly moved on to the Anjou Rosé but this again was far too cold and brought a strange metallic sort of taste to the mouth. Stephane splurged out 'It's sparkling wine that had lost its sparkle' and Bernadette continued 'it has an after taste of fag ash' - strange as she does not smoke. We put the bottle on one side. This wine goes extremely well with the contrasting sweet and sour tastes of exotic cooking,

couscous, curry, caramelised pork, duck with peaches and plum cake, (tarte aux pruneaux). On sampling it the next day when it was at room temperature it was a light, refreshing, sweet, jolly wine. I have learnt my lesson not to over chill a wine, how the Anjou Rosé must have suffered! I tried a joker rosé wine with them next; it came from Provence. This was quickly spotted but again was far too cold.

We now needed a drink so I opened a bottle of Saumur red wine. It goes well with white/red meats and cheese. It was delightful and Stephane made it slip down easily. He told us of the days he used to dance at 'guinguettes'. They were on Sunday afternoons, lovely occasions, with every one of all ages joining in the tango and waltzes or just sitting around talking and listening to the musette sound. The wine was usually white, which was light and refreshing for the dancers, but sometimes they drank young red wines. He was pleased to hear that such dances, made famous by painters, were now returning and very popular.

We next tried Anjou red. Excellent with red meats, small game, and it says it is full of mischief to accompany regional cheeses. We think it must have been a rogue bottle because everyone immediately poured it down the sink. We will try Anjou red another time.

Lastly we had a Saumur Champigny red which was double the price of the earlier Saumur but we thought they were both very good. It was from the Cabernet Franc vine. They were both lovely wines and we will all be visiting that section of the supermarket again.

We did not sample the more expensive Loire wines but thoroughly enjoyed our visit. We will be returning many more times in the future.

Our visit to the Nantes and the Loire area had been memorable, any errors or omissions you may spot will need to be discussed at length over a glass of wine from this lovely area. See you all next time when we venture further south. I can feel the sun, see the sunflowers and taste the wine. Stephane, Bernadette and Mrs Vine fulsomely say 'farewell', 'au revoir', 'bien arrosé'.

Raising glasses, till next time.

Bordeaux Wines France

'Bottoms up' to everyone again. This time we will be looking at the red wines from the Bordeaux Region but before we get there let us stop off and try a Pineau des Charentes. It is a fortified wine / vin de liqueur – a sweet aperitif, which is made by adding grape spirit to the grape juice before fermentation. There are Blanc and Rosé versions but note the alcohol content is 17.5%. Once, whilst in the Charente, we were invited for an early evening drink and we were all offered Pineau. One or two of the guests spoke very loudly after the event, so remember it is a vin de liqueur. We used Pineau Blanc to clear our palettes before the wine tasting. It agreeably accompanies melon and pâté and it is drunk very chilled as an aperitif or as a sweet wine.

I must admit the wine tasting has already started with our old chums Stephane, Bernadette and Mrs Vine sampling the joys of the red wines from the Bordeaux region. Our daughter Champagne has also joined us but she has decided to drink white Bordeaux. We have bought a selection from the supermarket so I hope you have your glass at the ready. A Bordeaux red wine glass is a plain large tulip shaped glass in which you can throw the wine around and put your nose right in to sample the various flavours. I was pleased to see that Stephane was not filling it up to the top and that he had a natty swirl and sniff movement. Something I will try and copy.

Bernadette, who looked just stunning in an off-the-shoulder tight, shimmering gold dress, reminded us that Bordeaux red wines or clarets, as they are often called, are considered by many to be the best red wines in the world. There are over a nine thousand named wines from this region so it becomes difficult to remember which ones you have had. I used to save the labels of those I particularly liked but now I take the risk and try something new.

Bernadette told us that Cabernet Sauvignon is the classic red grape variety for making red Bordeaux but other grapes are commonly used as well. Bordeaux red is a combination of grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon mixed with Merlot and Cabernet Franc in varying proportions. The Bordeaux area is centred around the Gironde River plus the Dordogne and Garonne Rias. You will see areas such as Medoc, Haut Medoc, Cotes de Blaye, Cotes de Bourg, Fronsac, St Emilion and Pomerol marked on the bottle.

It is the tiny changes in the landscape that make all the difference with regard to who makes the best wines. In the midst of the low level vineyards you can find Château Lafite-Rothschild. I wondered if Stephane had ever tasted one of the rare 'classified wines' such as Lafite, Mouton, Margaux or Latour. His eyes began to glaze over and we all thought he was going to collapse. After a minute or so he gathered his composure and said that his cousin had sometimes taken him for a meal with one of the major producers and he had sampled the delights of these wines. We had to quickly get him back to discussing our supermarket wines but a certain look remained with him all evening. Here are the wines we tasted:-

Médoc: This was a very cheap bottle but Bernadette thought it drinkable and good on a long winter evening with stuffed vegetables and casseroles. Stephane totally disagreed remarking that it was not warm enough for winter, it did not have enough weight. This wine had a discrete bouquet giving a pleasing and very flavourful impression. Drink at about 16° -18°.

Côtes de Blaye: We next moved across the Gironde to the Côtes de Blaye. Often the bottles have a little map on the back which helps sometimes. Bernadette thought it smelt nice, like over ripe mango. Stephane snorted that it was straight out of a fruit market and made from what was left lying on the floor and not highly rated. He then changed his mind and remarked that it was highly gluggable, a good opener and quite a tidy little wine.

La vérité est dans le vin. (In wine is truth.)

Fronsac: This wine growing area is situated to the north-east of Bordeaux. These hillsides dominate the right banks of the Dordogne. One of the characteristics of this region is the proximity to the mother rock. The layer of cultivatable land, clay-limestone or clay-sand is sometimes so thin that they have to plant the vines with the aid of a mine bar. The grapes are the Merlot, the Cabernet Franc and the Cabernet Sauvignon. The wines from here present themselves under a beautiful garnet-red colour. The taste is a thin, aristocratic wine with a pure attack and well-balanced construction. Its aromas are powerful and complex with hints of red fruits. It is good to drink with red meats, roasts, grills. After a few years of aging it goes well with game, meats with sauces and cheeses. Drink between 18° and 20°. Conserve on its side, in the shade, at a constant temperature.

Vayres: The map on the back of the bottle was very unclear and seemed to show a completely different region altogether. Stephane sniffed that it did not send him a sign nose-wise. "I might as well lose my proboscis, the body and palette are well rounded. It is almost a non-descript Blaye." he chuckled. The second glass we found warmer on the tongue and had a hint of life. This wine needed time to wake up. The third glass could be remarkable.

Côtes de Bordeaux: The Côtes de Bordeaux extends over sixty kilometres along the length of the right bank of the Garonne hugging the meanders. The spring and summer of 2003 will stay in our memories as the hottest and driest that have been known for a long time. The good weather, which continued during all the grape harvest, allowed the vating of the healthy and ripe grapes of good quality. It is a powerful wine, well structured and constructed.

Saint-Émilion: Stephane said “There’s a Saint Emilion and a Saint Emilion. Which one is this?” Stephane was right to ask as Puisseguin is one of the many villages surrounding the true Saint Emilion region. Bernadette quite liked it and so did I. There was a smoother, pleasant taste the more one drunk of it. On ageing it would harmonise with roast meats and subtle sauces.

Stephane then recounted a tale that when he was driving to visit a wine grower in the Saint Emilion area he saw ahead of him a whole set of bicycles crash into each other in very slow motion. He stopped his car to see if anyone needed help. It turned out that they were on a cycling holiday having their bags taken ahead to the next hotel. They had seen working in the vineyards close to the road a group of young ladies with no tops on and tiny shorts. One cyclist had wobbled and then another until all crashed gently into each other. Stephane said he did not look and continued on to his wine tasting.

Thank you Bordeaux for an exciting, mouth watering visit. Next time we will be going yet further south encountering Bordeaux white wines, lovely with a peach, and deep rich southern wines; who knows we may even venture as far as the Mediterranean Sea.

Thank you for all the kind comments you have sent me and remember I am always available for your local wine tasting evenings.

‘Down the hatch’ till next time. Santé!

Southern Wines France

We sat out in the garden on a lovely summer’s evening sampling wines from the south of France with our friends, Stephane Le Spit and Bernadette Bouquet. Bernadette and Mrs Vine wore exceptionally beautiful dresses, showing metres of lightly tanned skin upon which the wine reflected magnificently. Then suddenly almost in harmony, Stephane and Bernadette said that they would tell us a bit about how wine was made. I was immediately taken aback when they said that making wine is easy. Turning grape juice into wine is an entirely natural process. The yeasts, which create fermentation, the changing of sugar into alcohol, are on the skins of the grapes and in the air. All you have to do is break the skins and voilà you have wine.

I asked Stephane what all the fuss was about if it was so easy to make wine. ‘Ah, well’, he said, ‘there is a great deal of difference between making wine, making good wine and making great wine. It is not only the differences in the grape variety, the type of soil and the climate but also in the skill of the wine-maker.’ He then went on to explain the very basics of wine making.

To make red wine the red grapes are picked and then crushed. Then together with their skins they go into a fermentation vat. The wine draws out the colour from the skins and fermentation goes on for up to 14 days. The wine is then run off, put through a press to remove the skins and then goes into barrels, later to be bottled.

To make white wine, remarkably you can use either white or red grapes. The grapes are crushed and the stalks removed. A revolving press cleverly separates the juice from the skins and it is then put in the

fermenting vat. It is white even from red grapes because it has no time to take the colour from the skins. To make sweet wine, the fermentation is stopped as it still contains sugar. It can also be bottled before fermentation is finished to make sparkling wine, or it can be fully fermented, all the sugar used up, to make dry wine. Rosé, as you may have guessed, has contact with the red grape skins for a short while, but it is almost immediately run off into another vat and ferments without the skins.

My head was spinning by now, I needed to sample some wines. Stephane and Bernadette agreed and said he would tell me more about wine making next time.

This time we were tasting wines from the south of France. This is a vast area with such a mix of wines. We started with a bottle of wine from the Languedoc. It was an avenging red and Stephane said it would be better served in a plastic bottle! Talking of plastic containers and wine boxes, I am told it is possible to decant the wine from these and then have something that is drinkable. I am a bottle man myself and Bernadette mentioned that it is said that the deeper the indent in the bottom of a bottle of wine, the better the wine. It is used by wine waiters to put their thumb in and serve customers. I must admit this theory did not serve the test this evening. Not a good start.

The Languedoc Roussillon area stretches from the Spanish border along the Med to Montpellier. This area is well known for vin ordinaire. It includes names such as Minervois, Fitou, Limoux, St. Chinian, Herault, Frontignan, Gard and our next sampling, a Corbières. This Corbières had a flat bottom and no sediment catcher. A rounded top to a bottle allows the sediment to be caught before it flows out of the neck. We were not hopeful, but it was a light, fluffy wine, ideal for picnics. It had generous sun-kissed aromas and a spicy bottom. It would be ideal with rabbit such as 'lapin à la moutarde'.

Our next wines were from regions situated between Bordeaux and the Med., Cahors and Gaillac.

The Cahors we sampled needed airing but seemed excellent to me about halfway down the bottle. Mrs Vine said that it was taking her teeth off and her tongue was turning to sandpaper. Stephane said that it was best tried with a nicotine tasting sweetie. The bottle described it as powerful wine with heady aromatic nuances. I was now wondering what my head would feel like in the morning.

The Gaillac was delightfully fruity with a hint of rum. It looked like port from a distance. It was a lively wine with its own particular personality. We all agreed it had a good plateau and was very likeable.

Our own visit to the south of France this year was most strange. It was very cold and we had to wear cardigans the whole time. The wine, however, was excellent. What a variety to choose from! We have hardly touched on them and will need to make a return visit. Some of you may be wondering what happened to the white wines around Bordeaux, such as the sumptuous Sauternes. They have not been forgotten, that is impossible; they will have a special place soon. We, however, must move on to the Rhone for our next tasting, see you there.

Bon courage with your wine tasting

Rhône Wines France

We have gathered together round a lovely roaring fire to taste and discuss Rhône wines. Stephane and Bernadette are in excellent form after selecting some fine wines for laying down after a wine tasting earlier in the week. Madame Bouquet and Mrs Vine are wearing similar dresses in a deep red with a wine glass cut, most appealing.

The Rhône valley produces mainly red wines, which usually have to be laid down for a long time to bring out all the subtleties. Stephane stepped in to explain about caring for your wine. If you have a cellar (cave) this is an ideal place to lay down wine, as wine likes to be kept in a cool dark place. It is worth remembering that wine likes a steady temperature. It does not have to be cool. Obviously freezing and very high temperatures are not what are wanted. If you have no cellar, you can either dig one, a back number of a DIY magazine will show you how, or you can also build one above ground in a spare cool corner that you may have. A brick floor with brick bins is ideal but you can now buy racks to put your wine on. You will need to have a cellar book to record the name of the wine, vintage, price etc.

Laying down prevents the cork from drying out and letting in the air. Even cheap wines can be greatly improved if you lay them down for even a few months, preferably a year. So I popped the question in about why do some wines improve with age? Stephane was in playful mood and said that it was because they had longer to talk to other bottles and therefore were much more contented. It seems that many wines like time for all the various elements, acids, sugar, minerals, tannins etc to reach maturity. They form together into a harmonious whole over differing lengths of time. Advice about how long to lay down a bottle is sometimes given on the bottle and the wine fair leaflets give this information.

Stephane recalled when he met Gérard Jaboulet one of the great wine tasters of all time. He remembered once when Gérard was tasting in London he was presented with two very obscure bottles from the Americas. Gérard said he remembered tasting the first one before when he was in America and gave it its name, year and further details about the vineyard. The second one he said he had in his own cellar in the village of Hermitage in the Rhône valley. He could recall wines from all round the world and say the number of hectares of each vineyard, the soil type and its height above sea level. Stephane joked that he even knew the exact day when the label was put on the bottle and in which direction the bottle was laid down. What hope for me, but I will keep going at it.

Rhône vineyards stretch from Vienne in the north through Roussillon, Tournon, Valence and right down to Avignon. Wine areas include Côte Rôtie (the roasted hillside), Condrieu (a white wine!), Hermitage and Châteauneuf-du-Pape (this is named after Pope John XII who having established himself in Avignon built his 'château neuf', summer residence near the village) and Beaumes de Venise. Rhône wines are often described as 'manly'; they usually have a higher alcohol content, great intensity and a mouthfilling fruity blackberry taste.

The bottle we sampled first was a Beaumes de Venise. The back of bottle addressed us as Madame, Monsieur before telling us about itself. Who said bottles could not talk? It was a very dark wine with an alcohol content of 14.5%. Plenty of sugar and sunshine must have made this wine, which is typical of the region. To me it had a definite vanilla flavour and we all thought it was an enjoyable start.

The next wine was a Hermitage with an alcohol content of 12.5%. It was not a very cheap bottle but on first tasting it one would have thought so. It was rather tart and thin tasting. Bernadette jested that it had little bouquet and she would not spoil her stews with it. We decided to let it rest and try it later, maybe it will have something to tell us.

Our next bottle was a cheap bottle. In fact the bottle itself looked as if it had been sat on. It was with 13% alcohol and from the Saint Ronain. We all went 'Oh yes that is a' and stopped. There was something that did not taste right. It left a strong after taste on the tongue. Maybe this an example of a wine that would taste far better if laid down for a bit. On the back of the bottle it did say to its credit that its presence would remain long in the mouth. We moved on.

The final bottle we tasted was a Côtes du Rhône Village, alcohol 13.5%. This was a much smoother wine with more body. The taste of the last two wines still hung in our mouths so we fully cleared our palettes before re-sampling this wine. The wine consisted of a mix of Grenache grape (55%) and Syrah (45%). We

all agreed that it would be excellent served with grills and also cheese. To prove the point Stephane brought out a tray of the most delicious cheeses, which were just at the right moment for eating. He said he would tell me all about cheese another time. How many lifetimes do I have? We did return to the Hermitage and what a difference an hour makes. It was had a fuller body with a clearly distinctive taste of its own. I must decant my wine in future but I am usually too keen to try a sip.

What a lovely visit to the Rhône valley. Next time we will venture further north and sample some Beaujolais and Burgundy. As a parting thought I have had a whisper from Stephane that many people in England prefer the higher alcohol, richer red wines that come from California, Chile and other such places. The French do not usually take much notice of such things but are going on the offensive this time. They are going to produce similar red wines in small bottles like Alco-pops for sale to the young of England. It will be served ice cold, a trend I have noticed creeping into bars local to us. Maybe someone out there would like to join the bandwagon and make a fortune.

Santé, Chin-chin, tinkety-tonk, till next time

Seasonal Drinks France

We went to a number of lovely parties over the festive season. At one such occasion, where I had not been formally presented, I could sense a group whispering and looking in our direction. Eventually a pretty young lady in a delightful backless dress came over and in a revered tone said, ‘Are you Vernon Vine?’ When I replied, ‘Yes’, she charmingly asked me for my autograph. This celebrity status I must admit went to my head and I gave a slight bow and raised my glass and there was spontaneous applause from the assembled throng. I would like to thank all of you for your kind emails and cards. Some of the questions you have asked I will attempt to answer in the reviews that follow.

I had been reserving a bottle of Sauternes especially to have on Christmas day. Sauternes is a white sweet wine that comes from the south of Bordeaux. Stephane, who popped round several times during the festivities, remarked that buying true Sauternes can be very difficult as it varies so much from year to year and only the famous chateaux really make Sauternes. In fact my wine was an expensive disappointment and it was really just an ordinary sweet white wine. Every Christmas when I was young, my father would receive a present from his company of a bottle of Sauternes. This was the real stuff and those little sips that I had then still linger with me now. Sauternes is made from mouldy grapes. Starting in September and through to December the wizened looking grapes are used to make the wine. They may pick eight or nine times and this therefore makes the wine very expensive. The blighted grapes produce the particular Sauternes flavour with its intensity of scent and taste and the Sauternes oil-like texture. Good bottles can cost hundreds or even thousands of euros and I would be pleased to taste one with you.

At two of the parties this year there was a punch. As the song goes:

What more diversion can a man desire
Than to be seated by a snug coal fire
And on his knee a pretty wench
And on the table a Jug of Punch.

Mrs Vine says that on cold winter evenings there is nothing like a jug of punch to warm the cockles of the heart. Punch can be made in a number of ways. It is essential to tell guests what is in the punch. A punch laced with vodka may give you a good party but you can also lose a number of friends. The hot poker in the glass to warm the punch should only be attempted by those with a very steady hand.

Here are some punch ideas you may like to try.

Fruit Punch

Red wine, chopped apples, 4 tablespoons of honey, 6 cloves, 2 sticks of cinnamon bark, pineapple juice, orange juice, mint, seedless grapes.

Cider Punch

2 bottles of sweet cider, 1 large orange with 4 pressed cloves in it, juice of 2 lemons with the rinds as well, 50g (2 oz) sugar, 1 teaspoon of ginger and nutmeg. Heat slowly to bring out the flavour, serve hot.

Mulled Wine

1 bottle of claret (Bordeaux Red), 1 glass of brandy or rum, 1 tablespoon of sugar, pinch of ground cloves, pinch of powdered ginger. Heat all the ingredients and serve hot.

And for the summer a White Wine Punch

1 bottle white wine, cherries, pineapple cubes, 125 ml (4 fl oz) kirsch, 50g (2 oz) castor sugar, 6 dashes of Angostura bitters, half a litre of fresh pineapple juice, crushed ice. Marinate cherries and pineapple in kirsch overnight. Mix everything together and place marinated fruit and crushed ice on the top.

It is wonderful to experiment and find out the combinations that you like best. I always check how much I have made by using the punch ladle to see how many glasses it fills and at the same time the chef's perk allows one to check the quality of the punch.

Oh well, back to the wine tasting next time. Burgundy beckons. Have a wonderful wineful year,

Votre Santé

Burgundy Wines France

Burgundy mmmm.... Just the word conjures up lovely flavours and the best in food and wine. I am sure other regions would object to this but it was one of the most famous wine growing areas in ancient France.

Would you believe it, Stephane and Madame Bernadette Bouquet have called in for a coffee. It must be serious. Yes we do drink coffee, but I note that no discussion takes place about this beverage, not like wine. Mrs Vine appreciates the gravity of this occasion by only giving a small grin instead of her all enveloping adorable smile. Stephane has his arm in a sling after a slight fall that hurt his shoulder. Both ladies are wearing fetching long burgundy coloured skirts that make their shapes look very appetising and tempting. Stephane has come to speak about Burgundy (Bourgogne) wines and the various types of grapes that go into making wines.

Burgundy stretches along the River Saône from Lyon north to Dijon and then northwest to Chablis. Burgundy is made up of a number of wine growing areas. There is the Côte d'or in the centre, comprising Côte de Nuits and Côte de Beaune, Beaujolais and Mâconnais to the south and then Chablis. It grows both red and white wines.

Wine growing in Burgundy is broken up into very small parcels of land so the wine is not usually sold by a single grower, but by the area, so do not expect to see so many Châteaux wines such as in Bordeaux region. It is the shipper of the wine who blends the wines to get a standard product. Why is Burgundy

wine so good? A combination of the vines, local climate and the soil are the main factors but why is there sheer excellence in some of the wines? I am afraid we will never know the reason why.

Burgundy is the most northern of the red wine producing areas in the world and mainly produces from Pinot Noir grape. Stephane explained that the Pinot Noir grape, that is so typical of Burgundy, can be difficult to handle. Even a very expensive bottle can be average but a good one is sublime. Remarkably this grape goes into champagne where it is used without the skins. It has all the tastes you can possibly think of: sweet and bitter cherry, chocolate, liquorice, smoke, vanilla, earth, ham etc. It just goes on and on.

In England it seems that wines are known more by the grape variety than the region from which they come. You will ask for a Cabernet Sauvignon or Shiraz which could be from anywhere in the world. Stephane definitely likes to know from where his wine comes and I have seen him enjoying a good Australian Chardonnay. Stephane then took a little swallow of his coffee and explained a little about a few other grape varieties.

He said that Cabernet Sauvignon is found all round the world not just in the Bordeaux region where it makes the traditional claret. Cabernet is best mixed with other grapes such as Merlot and Cabernet Franc. It ages well and has a good balance of acidity, richness and fruit flavour.

Merlot is very popular as it is the main grape in Bordeaux communes of Pomerol and Saint Emilion. It has a dark cherry, blackberry flavour and is often wood aged to give it an oaky, smoky flavour. Interestingly Mrs Vine dislikes the wine that is aged in oak and actively returns bottles that mention this back to the shelf.

Finally for this time Stephane mentions Syrah which is grown in the Rhône and produces wines such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Hermitage. It has a taste of damsons, blackberry and creamy oak. Fascinatingly, in the southern hemisphere it is called Shiraz where, although really the same grape, it does have a somewhat different flavour.

Here are the classifications of Burgundy wines:

- 1 Basic Burgundy is AC Bourgogne.
- 2 ACs that take the name of a district e.g. AC Côte de Beaune.
- 3 Classification of Village or commune
- 4 Premiers Crus – good village sites
- 5 Grands Crus – best sites.

Now to the wines that we tasted. I have to admit that none of them were expensive and if anyone has a cellar of good Burgundy we would be delighted to taste some of it with you.

Beaujolais Village

Light quite nice, fruity after taste with a light nose. Stephane at this point came out with one of the oldest wine taster's jokes. "I do not know what sort of fruit it reminds me of, it could be a grape!"

It was made from the Gamay vine (cépage), in fact Beaujolais is always Gamay. The bottle said it has a beautiful ruby colour (robe) with an aroma hinting of little fresh red fruits. It is supple and fruity to taste.

Mâcon

Bit more body than the one above. Very good we all said in chorus. It was beginning to help Stephane's arm – a good painkiller. With a violet colour, this subtle and agreeable wine has a floral bouquet.

Bourgogne

Very fruity and it caused Stephane's right wrist to gyrate. It was a bit sharper. The aroma came and went

very quickly. Stephane interjected with “Homemade bramble wine can be good”. That seemed to sum this one up for us. The bottle said it keeps well. Good with red meats, game (gibiers) and cheese.

Bourgogne Côtes de Beaune Nuits

Stephane had a great deal of thinking time before he came out with the comment ‘It’s nice!’ Other comments were, “A gluggable wine even for a white wine drinker, nothing special.” The bottle said colour like brick red. (brique), aroma of cooked fruits and leather, fruity and fresh to taste, full and supple. Ready to drink with red meats and grills but also with poultry (volailles)

Bourgogne Beaune

I kept this one for myself and I was glad I did. It was thoroughly enjoyable and I wished there had been a second bottle. The bottle said a good garnet (grenet) colour, lightly ambered, tasting of ripened small red fruits. Goes with red meat and cheese.

What a splendid time we had in Burgundy and we never tasted any of the white wines, maybe next time. So much wine to taste and so few decades left to do it in.

Oh well, as Mrs Vine and Bernadette always say, “bottoms up” “cul sec!”.

Boxed Wines France

I know that I have been snubbed. Stephane and Bernadette are lying out in the sun on my loungers sampling a delicious bottle of cool Sancerre white wine. I have not been offered any. Bernadette has on her skimpy bikini with a see-through shirt over the top; she is just delightful. A glass of cool wine would go down a treat but no luck. Mrs Vine is staying out of my way and I think I can hear her pulling a cork on a bottle of cool Alsace. I now realise why everybody, like the wine, is cool towards me. I have decided to investigate boxes of wine this time.

Stephane has refused to help me with this venture. I have had to call on various other friends to find out their feelings about wine boxes. The tasting of wine boxes has proved very difficult as I did not feel the urge to taste six different boxes at the same time, so this information has been gathered over a period of time.

I have just been to a summer party and there on the side were six 10-litre boxes of red wine for the 60 or so guests. The host had poured some of the wine into jugs. The white wine came from bottles. Looking at all this wine it made me think that there are a number of plus points for having wine in boxes and a number of problems. On the plus side it was very easy for the hosts as they did not have to be constantly opening bottles and people felt at ease helping themselves. Once the bar was set up the host left it. By the way the wine in the jugs tasted completely different from the wine that came direct from the box. A good tip therefore is to decant the wine into jugs to obtain the better flavour. I struggled to think of any more plus points until of course I realised it must be cheaper. I worked out the cost of the more common 5-litre box compared to buying the equivalent wine in bottles and the price came out usually considerably cheaper, sometimes as low as 1.3 euros a bottle. If you want to try this yourself the following may help. A box of wine is usually 3, 5 or 10 litres and a wine bottle is 75cl so a 3-litre box holds 4 bottles, a 5-litre box holds just over 6.6 bottles and a 10-litre box holds just over 13.3 bottles. For the party above of 60 people, they had bought the equivalent of 80 bottles of red wine. One lady did crash into the stage during a dance, a gentleman was covered completely in dust when he just fell to the floor and the noise level was definitely disturbing the chickens nearby.

One problem was plain to see, what if all the wine was not drunk and you were left with large amounts of opened boxed wine? It is true that the wine in boxes keeps for a considerable time especially if kept cool. However, would you want to drink boxed wine for weeks later? The next problem is what if the wine is not good? A bottle holds 75cl, three quarters of a litre, and a box holds usually 5 litres or sometimes 10 litres. Could you struggle through litres of poor wine? If the boxes were not opened would it be possible to return the unopened boxes or would they make good presents? Another difficulty is that your guests only have one type of red to choose from. Some people I know are closet wine box drinkers. They do say that because the box is always there and ready for use they can be tempted to drink more than they would if they stuck to bottles. 'Wine is first a friend and then an enemy', George Herbert.

Here is a hint about opening wine boxes. The usual instructions go something like this:- lay box flat, lift perforated flap, tear off circular bit, pull out dispenser and refit flap, remove ring fastener to put into operation, press tap to pour wine, enjoy. The part to watch is tearing the perforated flap. I saw someone just rip a hole in the cardboard and pull out the tap. It had nowhere to keep it steady so those trying to use the tap sprayed it everywhere. It worth taking a little time to go exactly along where the perforations are.

At this moment Champagne, our eldest daughter, entered the room. She has just returned from working 6 months in India where she sampled a Goan wine that tasted like spiced wine. Her Indian friends seemed not to like it but Champagne was well up to the task. She also tried the local toddy. They cut into a palm tree to collect the sap, added some sugar, fermented it and voilà a lovely drink at 14%. She told us about a Catholic priest who said the toddy was not alcoholic as it was not a spirit. He swore by it and sampled it any time day or night. He then took Champagne elephant hunting, not the gun type, but with a camera.

Oh well back to the boxes and the key question - what did they taste like? Well nobody I spoke to really enthused about the actual taste. They were more concerned with it as a commodity just to glug. My own tasting seemed to confirm this. Over the past year at various parties I have tasted the following:- 5L Cabernet Sauvignon Pay d'Oc , 5L Cepage Merlot, 5L Cepage Sauvignon Blanc, 3L Chenet Cabernet-Syrah, 5L Merlot Colours du Sud, 5L Merlot Rosé, 5L Gamay Jardin de la France, 3L Muscadet , 10L Red (label hidden under cloth)

I wish Stephane had at least tried a few and given me a few ideas but no lovely words came to mind about boxed wines other than gluggable. I prefer to sip. I call out to Stephane, Bernadette and Mrs Vine that I have finished studying boxed wines. There is a sudden release of tension in the air and I am beckoned into the garden. Both Stephane and Mrs Vine have a bottle of cool wine at the ready to fill my glass. I am back amongst friends again.

Have a joyous summer with water, food and wine.

Champagne Wines France

With a daughter called Champagne it was inevitable that one day we would be discussing Champagne and sparkling wines. Champagne is limited to an area in northern France and is made by a special process. Nothing else should be called Champagne although some of the sparkling wines from other areas are delicious, as we shall find out. The Champagne region is 90 miles to the north-east of Paris around the Marne River, south of Reims.

Our friends, Stephane and Bernadette were very excited that this time the tasting was going to be Champagne. However, when I told them it was just sparkling wine I thought they would be very

disappointed, but nothing of the sort – they were keen to start. Madame Bouquet had on a gorgeous low cut white and brown figure hugging dress that made one look over everything many times. The summer showed Mrs Vine at her most beautiful and sparkling wine was going to make it a delightful occasion.

Champagne is usually made from a blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and occasionally Pinot Meunier. The red varieties are pressed without damaging the skins so that there is no red colouration. As the grapes are grown in the most northerly region of France, they have difficulty in ripening fully and have a high acid content.

I asked Stephane to tell me what makes champagne. To my amazing surprise he said it started with the English. I had to sit down, was he saying that the English made champagne first? It seems that in the 17th century, England liked the delicate rather sharp wine and bottled it on arrival and found that it created sparkling wine. The fermentation is not completed before the winter and it is the second resumed fermentation that makes the sparkling wine. It is the early bottling that changes it from a basic vin du pays into glorious Champagne.

The cellar-master, Dom Pérignon of the Abbey Hautvillers at the end of the 17th century, is said to have developed the method of tying down the cork with string. Champagne is processed in Reims, Epernay and Ay in immense cellars. They even use a train to travel the 15 miles of tunnels.

Why is it so expensive? Stephane explained, “Making champagne is a delicate art and it can take many years for it to reach maturity and be ready for drinking. To ensure that the deposit, formed in the champagne bottle during the fermentation process, is completely removed, the bottle has to be turned or “riddled” on a regular basis – once a day for six to eight weeks. Although much of the “riddling” is now done by mechanical means, some is still done manually. A good riddler can turn 40,000 bottles a day and it takes three years to become learn the art.”

This is what to look for when buying champagne:-

Non-vintage – a blend of different years

Vintage – single year

Blanc de blanc – chardonnay only

Prestige cuvée – top of the range (cuvée means blended)

There are many good producers but be ready to put your hands deep in your pockets if you intend to have a Champagne party. Here are some excellent ones: Henriot, Bollinger, Joseph Perrier, Veuve Clicquot, Taittinger, Pol Roger, Billecart-Salmon, Gossett, Krug, Ruinart, Moët and Chandon (Dom Pérignon) and Laurent Perrier. Cheaper Champagne or lesser Champagnes may come from vineyards with poorer soil or less sunshine. They can be from the third pressing of the grapes but still they have the gaiety and light heartedness for a party.

The label will tell you about the sweetness of the champagne: Brut – bone dry, Extra Sec – dry, Sec – slightly sweet, Demi-sec – sweet, Doux – very sweet. Brut is when every bit of sugar has been used up in the fermentation process.

Stephane explained that the full flavour of champagne is lost if you serve it very cold. It should be cool, but not icy. Be careful opening the bottle to avoid getting the metal cap, which now holds the cork down, caught in your fingers. If you do not want to lose half the bottle always turn the bottle, not the cork, to open it. When opening a can of beer, give the top a few hard taps, do the same with Champagne to stop it frothing over. Serve in a Champagne flute glass.

‘Champagne Charlie is my name.’ Mrs Vine explained that for delightfully obvious reasons Champagne has sexual connotations and can set a party off with a real swing. Champagne makes an ideal aperitif and

of course is delicious with caviar, oysters and demi-sec with strawberries. Great for a barbeque on a hot day.

I wondered if my friends would miss the structure, complexity, richness and the fresh lemon, apple and toasty aroma, combined with freshly baked dough, of the real champagne. If you are not buying Champagne, do not pretend it is. Just say this is delicious sparkling wine or fizz from the Loire or wherever. As for the price, 5-10 euros will buy good sparkling wine, above that you might as well buy real Champagne. It seems now that many regions such as Australia, California, France Loire, are copying the Champagne making techniques.

Here is what we tasted:

Val de Loire Saumur, Brut, 12%. We tasted this one at a wonderful garden party on a very hot afternoon. Very pleasant and it vanished quickly.

Loire Saumur, Demi-sec, 12%. Produced by traditional methods. 'Tasted sweet, rather like magnolia emulsion and mayonnaise,' bubbles Stephane. I thought it great for a smart 'do'.

Touran, Demi-sec Vin mousseux, 10.5%. A very popular bottle to take from the shelf in your local supermarket. This has a slight dryness to it. Very refreshing, nice on a hot day and lovely with a bowl of strawberries. It has the sparkle of a freshly opened bottle of fizzy water. It has a hint of light white fruit with a touch of pear. 'Very nice – I could drink it like lemonade,' exclaims Bernadette.

Vallée de la Drôme, Brut, 11.5%. Another very popular bottle for your parties. 'This is quite pleasant but loses its cool rapidly. It has a zero nose. I can smell more of the environment, the garden perfumes, than wine on the rim of the glass. It is quite bitter, more like champagne. It tastes of apricots (bitter apricot with an element of effervescence),' exudes Stephane.

Incidentally, the Champagne region does make a local red wine, which is like a light Burgundy, and it has the lovely name of Bouzy!

'I was in a champagne bath with two handmaidens, Bernadette and Mrs Vine, looking after my every need. Bottles of champagne were popping and the whole world was frothing around me.' Was it a dream?

Ladies and gentlemen raise your glasses, the toast is Champagne.

French Wine and Barbecues in France

Well, what a summer. Mrs Vine and I are completely barbecued out. We would like to thank everyone for their warmth, humour, marvellous food and glorious wine. Bernadette and Stephane have also been doing the rounds and have come back, like us, with many a tale to tell. Bernadette has had a lovely wardrobe this summer. My favourite was a very loose fitting multi-coloured top that kept one guessing as she opened a bottle or laughed as the bubbles went up her nose. Mrs Vine has just been wonderful especially around siesta time.

Here are a few reminiscences to get us started. We were sitting in a beautiful garden sampling champagne when a cuckoo started up. It was very near so half the assembled throng went to investigate. Everybody was searching but could not pinpoint the cuckoo. Every time they moved away up it would start again and they would all gather round the spot from which the noise came. The cuckoo was never found. Later on we discovered it was a remote door chime controlled by our host. A great wheeze on that lovely sunny afternoon.

Well, what about the wine you may ask. Rosé was very popular. It now seems that you can buy it in enormous quantities and bottle it yourself. My favourite is still the Anjou; lovely as the summer sun is setting. Gorgeous sparkling wine was evident on many occasions and an occasional champagne bottle. The red wine boxes now seem compulsory at BBQs and can, if one glugs too much, cause that not-so-good feeling the next day especially if it is mixed with white or rosé. I sat next to a wine loving nurse at one BBQ who explained that two days off a week without drinking is really healthy for you. The 'two and one' method is also good, that is two wine to one water. The 'good host' is not necessarily someone who has bottles in hand and is constantly topping up your glass. Stephane saw a lady with a third of a glass putting her hand over the top, in a motion saying no more thank you, but still got the wine poured through her fingers. Thankfully everyone we saw was delightful and we had time to savour the wonders of the various wines.

The live music was just lovely this summer. Traditional Breton, Celtic, Rock and Roll, Pop, Café Music you name it, we had it. It is just wonderful that so many people are dusting off instruments, learning songs or just starting on the musical road. Music is the food of love and mixed with a good bottle of wine on a warm evening there is nothing better.

I should not be really talking about the food, but there was one trick Mrs Vine and I noticed. Many people were having some of the meat cooked on the Barbie and other meats came from the oven or slow cookers. This meant there was no pressure on the person doing the Barbie and all the meat was well cooked. Vegetarian separate barbecues were also in evidence. Many people brought food and this reminded me of marvellous 'pot luck' meals we had in Canada. It also made the barbecues not expensive to arrange, very exciting and mouth watering.

The wine fairs will be upon us soon in September / October so it is time to look out for all those wines you will be laying down, and of course some to drink in the year to come. Stephane remarkably is really looking forward to investigating wines of the world. I am going to enjoy the Alsace region, but I just must visit Beaujolais soon and return to the Loire. So much to do! It is a tough life!

Many of you have asked how my book 'Spending Time with Wine' by Vernon Vine is progressing. Much of the text has been written but they want us to go on a tour of France for an extensive photographic session. Mrs Vine and Bernadette are already investigating clothes to wear for the shooting.

Marvellous, marvellous, marvellous, merveilleux. Let next summer taste of wine and roses like this one has.

French wines of the Alsace Region of France

There has been a bubbling of Vernon Vine wine quizzes taking place recently. There are the usual questions about wine but also some interesting questions about us. For instance, the 'prénom' of Bernadette is naturally Bernadette, but what is her 'nom'? To help resolve some of these issues and to allay any arguments I have placed all my articles on the Internet. Just type in 'Vernon Vine' into a search engine, such as Google, on your computer and up I come top of the list, 'fantastique!'

Well everybody is here, Bernadette in a sumptuously, radiant, long, low-cut, close-fitting white dress, which is splendid for the white wines we are about to taste. Stephane is in great form, making a group of other guests we have invited split their sides with laughing. He has a splendid range of jokes, tales and tid bits of information. Here are a couple of bits of information. Why is the host always asked to taste a little of the wine first in a restaurant? Well, it is to smell the wine to check that it is not off but the main reason is so that the host drinks any bits of cork that are floating on the top. They do not harm you and your

guests will not have cork in their glasses. What is 'bottle stink'? Well you are very blessed if you have it. It is found in old wines and is the tiny amount of air between the wine and the cork. So, lucky you if you smell it, as hopefully you should be up for a fine vintage wine. Mrs Vine has on a mysterious smile, something is afoot, but maybe I will have to wait to find out later.

This time we are looking into the white wines of the Alsace region, that most picturesque area with lovely half timbered houses and you will see a stork carrying a baby at every turn. Stephane explains that Riesling and Gewürztraminer are the main grape and are of German origin. Alsace makes German wine in the French way. The white wines are relatively high in acidity, have a higher alcohol content compared to the German white and have an aromatic flavour. Other grapes are Sylvaner, Muscat, Pinot Gris, Chasselas and Knipperlé. Gewürz means spice in German and this taste stays with you for several minutes after you have swallowed. Riesling, on the other hand, is subtler and is considered by Alsations as their best. The Muscat, which is usually sweet everywhere else, makes a lovely grapey dry wine here. Sylvaner is light and should be tart and is often used as a first wine at a dinner. This area does actually produce red wine, but only in miniscule amounts. The wines are produced naturally in huge wooden casks. They then fill the tall green bottles as full as possible and an especially long cork is used to protect it from the air.

The Alsace wine region is in the north-east of France and stretches about 70km between Mulhouse and Strasbourg. It lies on the east facing side of the Vosges mountains in a thin ribbon. Interestingly, Alsace has only one Appellation Contrôlée and is the only place in France where you can ask for a bottle by its grape name Sylvaner, Riesling, instead of saying a village or region. A growing trend I notice for other regions.

The smile on Mrs Vine's face is even broader now and she seems to be winking at me in a knowing way. I think we had better taste the wine before something happens. As so many people were at this wine tasting we passed around the bottles. I had chilled them exactly to the right temperature to bring out the best in the wine and I just hoped the handling would not raise the temperature too much.

This French wine tasting proved to be the most difficult we have undertaken. One member of the group refused to taste white wines and clung to a bottle of red. The Alsace wines were not expensive ones. We had comments from some such as flavourless, horrible, not much nose, a bit bland, we need a bucket, if I had no red around I could cope with it, no bouquet, it could become an acquired taste and so on. From others they said it smells of pears and elderflower, gooseberries mmm, interesting bouquet with a lingering after taste, like elderflower wine, gluggable, 'more body, more flavour, more spunkier'. Many said there was little distinction between each one and that they were all much of a muchness.

Stephane remarked that many people are used to having fish, cheese, sea food or a cold buffet with a French white wine and the comments may have been different as they would have appreciated the tart flavour contrasting with the food. He also noted that there was no Gewürztraminer in the selection. I really need to have asked Stephane first before purchasing the bottles. Here are the wines we tasted.

Jean Marie Strubler Reisling

Arthur Metz Edelzwicker

Jean Marie Strubler Sylvaner

Klipfel Sylvaner

Alsace Riesling 2005 Durenmeyer

And finally the only one we agreed on with comments such as very nice, smooth, lot more body, more mature, got depth, complexity and flavour was the Charles Kellner Pinot Blanc

We must not forget the Jura and Savoy mountain regions. The Jura is noted for its pink wines and for a sparkling wine, vin fou (mad wine). The sparkling wines of Savoy (Seyssel) are like champagne. There is also a very dry Vermouth called Chambéry which is excellent for dry Martinis. Stephane dryly splutters that a Vermouth tasting would be just the tops.

I have been asked many times what books are best to look at with regard to French wine. Well there are just so many but there is a lovely very inexpensive book, 1.90 euros, called 'Le petit gisserot du vin' by Marcel Donzenac. It has some exquisite maps of the wine areas. I can see I have opened a 'frelons' nest here. Someone has given me a computer wine disc, more on all this next time.

Mrs Vine still has an even broader grin. What is happening? Bernadette and Stephane now also have that knowing look. Maybe all will be revealed before we meet again.

Enjoy the festivities, enjoy the company, enjoy the food and of course enjoy the French wine.

Vernon Vine and his chums visit The Isle of Wight

Vernon has decided to return to the Isle of Wight, his old stomping ground. Stephane had said that in his wine circles English wines had been mentioned. Something in the "the land of wine" that I thought would be impossible. I have yet to see such a wine on the shelves here but it is time to investigate.

Stephane and Bernadette had both only visited England once before and that was when they were children on a school trip. They remembered the strange houses, wonderful cake shops and everyone staring at them.

From the moment Stephane Le Spit and his lady-love Bernadette stepped on to the island they fell in love with the place. It was a glorious summer day and thankfully Bernadette had not dressed herself in winter tweeds. She was in a stunning top that oozed all of her charms. They immediately fitted into the free loving feel of the island.

At our small bijou hotel we had arranged with the owner to have a wine tasting evening. Stephane had no interest in visiting a vineyard, he said he had seen plenty. The owner had invited the other guests and a few of his friends. Various island wines were to be tasted. It became quite a party out on their terrace. Bernadette looked stunning but to her surprise so did all the other ladies. Mrs Vine had slipped into something rather skimpy in my view but everyone else seemed to admire it. Stephane was in his element and his English improved with every sip of wine. He had a group pressing round him all evening.

Every so often our host would open a couple more bottles for tasting. At intervals I asked Stephane and Bernadette what they thought. They both just answered "Fine" and went back to their animated conversations. The owner had somehow found us an accordionist and before you could say "cork" the dancing had started. We did Breton dances, waltzes, bourrées and polkas all ably assisted by Bernadette. Stephane sang songs about wine.

Ah! Le petit vin blanc....

And then the famous wine drinking song:

Chevaliers de la Table Ronde with its chorus:

Goûtons voir si vin est bon

Goûtons voir (oui, oui, oui)
Goûtons voir (non, non, non)
Goûtons voir si le vin est bon.

I replied by singing “Bottle of Wine” and he returned by singing the French version “Jolie Bouteille”.

This magic evening had to come to close and we wandered back to our rooms talking about all sorts of things but not wine.

Stephane had been doing some background reading and one afternoon he chatted about wine and food on the island. We knew that the Romans had grown vines but he said much of their wine came over from France. The growing of wine is mentioned in the Domesday book and continued on until the 19th century. A change in taxation made it cheaper to buy wines from abroad than grow it in England so wine growing stopped. Stephane noted that the vines grown on the island are now hybrids such as Seyval, Phoenix and Rondo. These hybrids are better suited to northern climes such as in England. From these can be made white, rose, sparkling and even a red which usually requires a warmer climate.

Stephane was more interested in special island foods that could go with these wines. He had heard that the first place to produce doughnuts was the island and that they contained plum. He thought it would be delicious with island ice cream and a glass of a more rich white wine. We looked but could not find any special island doughnuts. He then mentioned what he thought was the world’s hardest cheese that was made on the island, choc cheese. He said it would be lovely with warm island bread, island pickle and an island glass of beer or wine. No luck again finding this special island cheese. Finally he mentioned the island pancakes. Were they as popular as the galettes and crêpes of Brittany? Savoury ones with cheese, egg, sausage and sweet ones with honey, ice cream and so on. Lovely with a glass of island cider or wine. Sadly we had no luck again in finding pancakes. He stopped looking for island food specialities.

Our time on the island had come to end. We said goodbye to our hosts and I noticed Stephane had stowed in the car a crate of wine. He said I am taking them back as a joke. He uttered again his catch phrase of the week, “Of course we have better wines in France”. I thought why take back a whole crate? Emm.

Bon Voyage. What a fab time, thank you Isle of Wight.