

SACAVIN



COURIER

COMMANDERIE DE GRANDE BRETAGNE DE LA CONFRIERIE DES CHEVALIERS DU SACAVIN D'ANJOU

No. 28

Summer 1994

Our 25th Anniversary Year began, as all our years, with the Annual General Meeting held on Saturday 16th April at the Bleeding Heart Restaurant, Bleeding Heart Yard, London EC1. Fifty-four members and their guests attended and, by common consent, agreed that this was one of the best AGMs ever and with one of the best menus we have enjoyed at any of our events, for which the Commanderie's eternal thanks to Chef de Cuisine Newton Grant.

Before we got down to the serious business of savouring such a menu, the equally serious business usual at AGMs - of adopting the reports and accounts, electing the Officers for the forthcoming year and deciding future programmes was attended to thoroughly and meticulously, under the chairmanship of Senechal Malcolm Harris. Our members will have realised this, however, from the copies of the AGM Minutes sent out to them at the end of April.

Although it may be an extravagance to wonder whether the warmth of comradely feeling suffusing the AGM inspired our weather but what a summer we are experiencing - Mediterranean temperatures, grass coloured golden, like a magnificent dessert wine, mild evenings that are almost the pleasantest part of the day - yet not quite replacing the joy of the long, lovely, languorous summer days, almost perfect for the:-

VISIT TO DENBIES

and this account by Treasurer Robert Wills:-

"Our planned return visit to the Denbies Vineyard near Dorking duly took place on a typically English early summer morning - cloudy with a hint of sun and showers but promising a good day nevertheless. Well supported by twenty-nine Chevaliers and guests, we met at 11.15 am under the glass roof of the atrium in the newly built flint-clad chateau complex for a welcome pot of coffee and a chance to chat with old friends.

The tour of the winery began with a visit to the first of two 'state of the art' educational theatres where our guide for the visit - Lynette Felton - introduced us to the 'Denbies Experience' - an

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eight minute film of a short history of the vineyard and an atmospherically presented set of views of the 250 acre estate through the four seasons. The pride and enthusiasm of those running the estate was evident in accompanying commentaries by Adrian White, the owner; Hans Schlier, wine maker; Bert Martyn vineyard manager and Michael Trull, marketing manager.

Then it was off to the second theatre where, with the aid of special spectacles, we saw a 3D time lapse film showing the growth of the vine from bud burst to the picking of the grapes. Entitled 'The secrets of the vine', it condensed the whole four months life cycle of a vine into just four extraordinary minutes. Denbies claim that this film is a world's first and it certainly is quite stunningly made.

Denbies are also to the forefront of modern wineries in having a 'people mover', a tracked, electrified transporter system in the form of open seated carriages to take people quickly and smoothly along two sides of the winery - past presses, stainless steel tanks, bottling plants, et al. An informative commentary is available in four languages, but I thought the whole thing a bit glib and somewhat cursory in its approach to the marvel of wine making. The Denbies handout blurb has it that 'you will be transported in total comfort around this vast complex'. The expressions 'total comfort' and 'vast complex' are, to this recent visitor, a trifle 'OTT'.

Following this, to me, disappointing tour of the actual winery, the people mover descended to the cellars where Denbies have set aside part of their bottle store for a tasting area. By far the most interesting part of the tour took place in front of a large scale map that showed the various planting areas set aside for the eighteen different varieties of vines grown on the estate. As we learnt on our earlier visit to Denbies, in 1992, the first planting of vines on the estate commenced in 1986 so the winery is still very much in a development stage in its selection and blend of the many grape varieties. Currently the estate has plantings of:-

Auxerrois	Optima	Red Elbling
Bacchus	Ortega	Reisling
Chardonnay	Muller Thurgau	Reichensteiner
Dornfelder	Pinot Blanc	Schoenburger
Ehrenfelser	Pinot Gris	Seyval Blanc
Huxelruber	Pinot Noir	White Elbling

The estate has some 300,000 vines spread across its 250 acres and the aim is to produce a million bottles of wine per year, with an alcohol level of 10.5 to 11.5% as against the average of 8 to 9% for English wines. Denbies claim to represent over 10% of the planting of vines in the whole of the UK and it really is astonishing to see such a large and technically advanced winery here in Surrey.

Our guide, Lynette, happily illustrated her talk on wine making, Denbies style, with a tasting of six wines. Starting with a 1991 Denbies Dry, a blend of 80% Muller Thurgau and 10% Ortega with the balance from other varieties for added acidity, this compared well with the 1990 Dry we tasted on our visit in 1992. Then this particular wine was a 50:50 blend of Muller Thurgau and the Elbling - a good example of Denbies continuing search for a successful blend.

It was quickly followed by a 1992 Rosé. Made from the Pinot Noir.

dry with a pleasant fruity and lengthy finish, this was a well made and very acceptable rosé. A tasting of Surrey Gold showed a well balanced off dry wine. The main grape in the blend is Reichensteiner plus the cultivar Bacchus which, in a good year, provides a strong, almost Muscat, flavour.

It was noticeable hereabouts that the general noise level had gradually increased as the wine circulated and more people arrived in the tasting area via the dread people mover! Happily, the area is quite spacious and can accommodate a large number of people without any feeling of overcrowding.

Next we tried a Pinot Gris matured in Nevers oak barrels imported from Bordeaux to give a distinctly vanilla-like bouquet. It was apparent that this combination of grape and oak was not to everyone's taste, it being a wine you took to or not, according to your own particular taste. I liked it.

The penultimate wine was a red Dornfelder 1992. A cultivar first produced in 1956 it was derived from a crossing of Helfensteiner and Heroldrebe, this grape produces wine of a relatively deep colour with a fine flowery nose and a good balance of acidity. Naturally healthy, the vine ripens well and does not rot easily. Probably more important, it gives a high yield per acre. This particular example had good colour but seemed a little thin in body although quite smooth to drink.

The tasting ended with a dessert wine, a 1992 blend of Optima and Ortega grapes, a sweet wine with a pleasant, clean finish.

All the wines were well produced and, to my mind, are now less English in style than those tasted in 1992. They are certainly more 'bodied' than one would expect with a good balance of fruit in taste and bouquet. Unfortunately, bottle prices continue to be on the high side and this could well be a problem in their aim to produce and sell in bottles of wine per year. Hence, perhaps, the importance they pay to attracting visitors to the winery complex. The vineyard itself looks as splendid as it did in 1992. The only change to the panorama of neat, orderly rows of vines is the sight of three or four wind machines standing as sentinels. Apparently they have a two-fold function. In early spring their movement of air helps to set the flowers and also limits any damage by frost.

Denbies say that, in line with many other growers, the 1993 harvest was low in yield although quality is considered to be good.

Those of us who visited this estate in 1992 could not help but notice the attention that has gone into presenting the complex as an interesting, friendly and attractive place to visit. One has the feeling of looking at a winery through the glass of a tourist coach - well presented but a bit clinical. I missed that lovely heady, fruity, oaky smell that tells me this is where wine is made. Denbies is, for sure, a modern winery and maybe I'm guilty of nostalgia in my hankering for the more traditional cellars.

It remained for Derek Sheen to thank Lynette Felton for her informative description of the wines and her good humour in answering the usual barrage of questions before a happy party repaired to the atrium again to partake of a very pleasant set lunch. In excellent company and helped by further educational sips of wine, one reflected

what better way could one spend a Saturday!"

And it remains to the Commanderie to thank our former Senechal Derek Sheen very much indeed for organising yet another superb summer event.

Whilst Robert explains to us how big is not, in every way, always that beautiful, Chef de Protocole George Wilks describes how small may be really beautiful at:-

THE VINEYARD IN BRIGHTLINGSEA

"This year's Summer Event, described by Robert, was a most enjoyable occasion; a leisurely tour of Denbies, the largest and newest vineyard in England and already receiving European acclaim. Eighteen different grape variety cultivated on around 250 acres of rolling country producing a million or so bottles of wine annually.

The following day (26th June), again brilliantly sunny, was Brightlingsea's annual 'open gardens' day to help a local hospice. Part of one of the gardens was Brightlingsea's Vineyard.

Immaculately kept and managed by one man with occasional help from his wife, the vineyard of less than an acre is planted with two varieties - the ubiquitous Müller Thurgau and Bacchus. The yield is not sufficient for the owner to produce his own vintage and the excellent yield is harvested and is sent as quickly as possible to a cooperative in Kent. The owner is an enthusiastic vigneron and, despite a not very favourable aspect, maintains his miniscule vineyard as sumptuously as do Denbies - and with the enthusiasm and verve of a good Chevalier of Anjou. I have been invited to help in the next harvest!"

As a postscript to our enjoyment of vines growing, wine being made and savoured, those Chevaliers and friends who visited the attractive:-

PENSHURST VINEYARDS

in June last year may be interested to hear how the 1993 vendange prospered. Our good friend and guide that day - David Westphal - has written to say:

"The 1993 harvest had both it's plus and minus points. We had a warm spring which produced good growth and early flowering. The summer, although pleasant, did not have enough rain, although there was good sunshine and the autumn was wet - very wet! As soon as the rain finished in early October, there was an immediate frost mixed with cool sunshine. The resulting harvest was of good quality although it would have been better had there been a little less Autumnal rain - but it was short on quantity. To a certain extent, the quantity was also reduced because of intentional pruning earlier in the year.

To summarise, I would say the harvest was better than average in quality but slightly below average in quantity, especially with the late varieties. Most vineyards in England had a reduced crop compared to 1992 which was exceptional and, speaking to other wine-makers they, like me, are optimistic for the resultant wines.

More of a problem for most of us in the English wine trade will be the selling of the wine with the present tax differential between the UK and Europe - but that is another story!

Wishing you and your fellow Sacavins well - David WESTPHAL."

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A 25th Anniversary is always a cause for celebration - simply to have survived so long and in one piece is an achievement for any organisation or institution these days! What a wonderful excuse and opportunity we have, then, to make this year's Induction Ceremony and Dinner something very special. We are not only commemorating the first 25 years of the British Commanderie of Sacavin, we are also marking the five hundred years since the birth of the illustrious Founder of our Order - the great Renaissance philosopher, scientist, author, scholar, bon viveur - the accolades are extensive and formidable - and we can only be referring to the great humanist François Rabelais. These two auspicious events are therefore being celebrated together at:-

LE CHAPITRE DES DEUX ANNIVERSAIRES

which is taking place on SATURDAY 29TH OCTOBER at The Butchers Company, 87 Bartholomew Close, E.C.1. for which Barbican is the nearest underground station, turn right into Long Lane. The programme commences with the Vin d'Honneur at 6 p.m., the Induction Ceremony when the new Chevaliers are being elected is at 6.30 p.m. with Dinner served at around 7.30 p.m. A truly magnificent menu - in keeping with the grandeur of the occasion - has been organised by Chef de Cuisine Newton Grant. Details are given with the Booking Form for the 'Anniversary Chapter' which is enclosed with this 'Courier'.

A really outstanding evening is promised by the sub-committee set up specially to concentrate on the arrangements. They, in turn, look for the approval and support of our members - best expressed by their attendance at such an important event in our history.

The Grand Maitre - M. Pierre Gatè is expected accompanied by others of our French colleagues. The attendance of our 'Founding Fathers' - John Addey, John Braun and Charles Whitfield - is also promised - so do come on 29th October and add to the occasion by taking your part in our history.

Time and history move on, however, and continuity is everything if we are to achieve more significant anniversaries so now is a good opportunity to remind ourselves of our:-

CALENDAR FOR 1995

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| Spring | ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING - with a return to the Bleeding Heart Restaurant, London EC1, by popular request as the 1994 AGM held there proved so satisfactory |
| Summer | WINE TASTING and LUNCHEON. The view has been expressed it would be pleasant to go back to our former practice of having the Summer Wine Tastings and luncheon being hosted by a member. Every consideration is being given to this in the hope a volunteer may come forward. |
| AUTUMN | BIENNIAL VISIT TO FRANCE plans are already under way for our next return to the beautiful country of our Order. |
| WINTER | INDUCTION CEREMONY and DINNER - in the Crypt of the Guildhall, City of London. |
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OBITUARY

It is always a sad duty to report the passing of a member and no more so than to record the death, last Autumn, of James Kennerley Banks at the untimely age of 58.

James Kennerley Banks had a very distinguished career as an opthalmic surgeon of great renown. Since his induction in 1977, he was an enthusiastic supporter of our activities and, with his wife, was a familiar and always welcome figure at our events. He will be sadly missed by all who knew him and we send our sincerest condolences to his widow and family upon their very sad loss.

SECRETARIAT

Chevaliers with queries regarding payment of the annual subscription or bookings for events should contact the Treasurer:-

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Chevaliers wishing to report an address change or with any other query should contact the Chef d'Historiographe:-

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