

SACAVIN



COURIER

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

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Since the spring, 1997 has proved to be quite a golden year for the Commanderie. June perhaps had its sharper moments but these only set into relief the very sweet memory of this year's summer wine tasting and luncheon as described by Chevalier Brenda Collins.

A summer wine tasting at Syon Park

The English weather has smiled upon us for many past summer luncheons and wine tastings. June 1997 will not be remembered for its gentle warmth, but looking back on the 14th brings only recollections of yet another, most enjoyable gathering of Chevaliers and friends.

Chevalier John Brooks was our host at Syon Park. He arranged a comfortable, spacious room for the tasting and an excellent luncheon to complement our choice of the previously tasted wines.

Our Tresorier Robert Wills conducted the tasting from a central table with his 'pupils' seated behind their desks around three sides of the room. If Robert felt at all isolated, he did not allow it to show and his well known skills at voice projection were equal to the size of room and the occasionally noisy audience.

Robert's skills were not restricted to the manner of his address but also to its content as he took us through four wines supplied by Chevalier Robin Yapp, of Yapp Bros. It soon became evident that Robert had researched these (and no doubt some others) Yapp Bros wines in order to become thoroughly conversant with their qualities.

First we tasted a white Menetou Salon 1996. The Menetou Salon hills close to the more famous Sancerre, was classified as an AOC in 1953. Here the Sauvignon Blanc grape leads to a wine of green gold colour and a delightful 'vegital' aroma. Except for the very finest examples of this wine, we were advised to drink it young - hence the 1996.

Robert's suggestion that it be cooled in a handy stream and drunk with a picnic, perfectly summed up this wine. Next came a Savennieres - Domaine du Closel 1995. Many of us have visited Madame Joly and know particularly of her son Nicholas' extreme devotion to 'culture biologique'. This Savennieres although not from their Coulee de Serrant, held similar (although less expensive) distinctive qualities of the Chenin Blanc grape grown in the Loire valley. Robert suggested this to be a "quaffable wine in its own right". We found it even more enjoyable with the luncheon which followed.

Then to a red wine, Chinon - Arpenty 1996. The Chinon from the Cabernet Franc grape is, as Robert reminded us, regarded as the most classic of reds of the Loire and asked why they are somewhat looked down upon? Perhaps the youth of those which we are prepared to buy (this a yearling at £7.75) has something to do with it.

The final tasting was of a red, the Saumur Champigny - Jeunes Givnes 1996. Another wine from the Cabernet Blanc but quite different to the Chinon. Since achieving its AOC in 1957 the light red wines from Champigny have become increasingly fashionable. Most of us agreed with Robert who finds this wine delicious and a good accompaniment to game and red meat - we later

enjoyed it with Guinea Fowl.

Thank you Robert for a most enjoyable, entertaining and instructive occasion.

Thank you also John for organising an equally enjoyable luncheon in a delightful setting with a family of peas - hen, cock and chicks to entertain us.

After this summer, Summer waxed long and hot, well into September making it an extra bonus, as Sénéchal Roy Clements recalls:-

The Biennial Visit to Anjou 1997

Hands up!! No, this is not a bank raid - it was the response given to my outline at the AGM of our thoughts for the then forthcoming visit to the Loire. During the Vin d'Honneur and at the dining table I collected thirty-six names of interested Chevaliers and their partners, together with six who would already be in France and would like to join us for the French Chapitre.

In other years the early promising response has dwindled away; not so this time. Our visit took place with thirty-eight on board and four others attending the Chapitre in Angers. Our hotel, the Clos des Benedictins in the village of St Hilaire St Florent (home to several of the famous names of Saumur sparkling) has twenty-two rooms and we filled twenty-one of them! So I think a new record has been established both for Sacavin attendance and the single largest group gathered in the hotel.

As we have experienced in visits past, the hotel lived up to its reputation in providing friendly and professional service and, I would suggest, an unparalleled view over Saumur and the Loire.

There were bonuses too - the weather was remarkable. Talk about an Indian Summer, not one but several bodies were seen on a daily basis in the outdoor pool and many others stretched out on the sun loungers (maybe recovering from a 'tasting' hangover!). Also, from the time of the AGM announcement, the pound kept getting stronger which meant the visit for a couple ended up almost £100 cheaper. Another knock-on effect of the strong pound could be witnessed as our cars left the hotel for the journey home; each and every one

was visibly loaded down to their axle stops with cases of sparkling and variations of the Chenin Blanc and Cabernet Franc grown and bottled at source by the viticulteurs that we had visited. The months between the AGM and the visit were not without their anxious moments as our Grand Maitre in Angers was taken ill and had to relinquish his position, not only as head of Sacavin but as the person who almost singularly puts together the Chapitre. Several months passed before a new Grand Maitre was appointed and the Committee agreed to go ahead with the Chapitre. Sighs of relief all round as many of the elements of our visit had been confirmed and individuals had booked their travel arrangements. Your Committee in 'Grand Bretagne' had various ideas up their sleeves, including an away-from-home mock Chapitre in Saumur, a daunting task if taken from a distance of 500 kms. Fortunately, as we now all know, the contingencies were not required.

For those who were not in Saumur we can report that the past Grand Maitre, Camille Besnier, is well on the road to recovery and indeed brought along to the hotel on Thursday evening his successor to introduce him to us, and at the same time joined us for our Vin d'Honneur that officially kicked off our 1997 visit.

So it was, with thirty-eight participants safely arriving in Saumur excited in anticipation of the days to follow. As is our wont, we began by consuming several bottles of Cremant de Loire as our Vin d'Honneur followed by a delicious dinner and then for most, an early night after a day's drive from the various channel ports of disembarkation.

We awoke on Friday to another glorious sunrise, a hearty breakfast and the sight of our familiar 'transporteur', the coach of Voyages L'Oiseau. But where was Jean-Marie, our chauffeur of many previous visits? Soon our concerns were put at rest - Jean-Marie had not returned from an away trip but definitely would be with us the next day and for the remainder of our visit. We arrived at the Troglodyte Village of Louresse Rochemenier and spent a most interesting visit to an underground network of farms or, to be more correct, farm buildings and farmers' dwellings from the 17th and 18th centuries. This unique way of establishing a farm came about purely for economic reasons. The subterranean is limestone which, when quarried and burnt, made fertiliser for liming the acid soils of nearby land. A farmer could thereby buy a plot of land, dig out his and his animals' dwellings, sell off the 'spoil', and thus pay for the purchase of the land and the wages of the diggers employed. Such is the extent of limestone around the village that there are about forty underground farms, many today used as private homes.

The morning was enjoyably spent exploring these underground wonders and also the local church built on top of what was an underground chapel which served its purpose well during the religious war of the 16th century.

A short coach journey took us into more caves, this time to a restaurant established in some of the mushroom caves that run alongside the Loire about five miles west of Saumur. These caves like those in St Hilaire St Florent are man-made. Excavations started in the 10th century when the local stone 'Tuffeau' was dug out for the construction of buildings including many of the great chateaux and, of course, Westminster Abbey in London.

As most of us Sacavins know, thanks to these caves and their resultant all-year-round temperature of 10 degrees centigrade they are ideal for storing wine, especially the sparkling wines synonymous with this area. At the beginning of this century their use was also turned to the production of mushrooms and, much later, snails.

It came as no surprise that our lunch then contained mushrooms! The restaurant, several hundred metres within the network of caves, was aglow with the flames of the woodburning 'open' ovens used for cooking the superb meal, washed down with an acceptable quantity and quality of

Anjou Rouge. We have photographic evidence of certain of our members secreting away the unfinished bottles to be consumed, one knows not where, later in the day!!

Having now become experienced cave dwellers and fortified with an excellent lunch, it will not surprise readers to realise that we felt completely at home in the caves of Langlois-Chateau which was to be our 'tasting destination' for the remainder of the afternoon. Our host, the Domestic Sales Manager for France Michel Launay, took us through their caves and processing departments, all carved out of the 'Tuffeau', and on to the tasting where we were introduced to four of their sparkling wines all carrying the appellation 'Cremant'. These were followed by an example of their Saumur Rouge made from the Cabernet Franc (85%) and Sauvignon (15%) grapes. Whereas almost all thought the sparkling of this maison was, regardless of the labelled description, a little sweet, the red was pronounced remarkable.

With the afternoon wearing on and the assembled bodies tiring after such a fulfilling day it was time to return to the hotel. The really exhausted returned by coach and the fit and foolish elected to climb through the vineyards of Langlois Chateau to search out a path that we were told led to the hotel. It was worth it - magnificent views, surrounded by vines and a chance to walk off some of the day's indulgence.

A departure from the routine of previous visits lead us to leaving the dinner table early and setting out on a guided tour of Saumur by night - no, not the night-clubbing sort but a serious insight into the heart of old Saumur steeped in the history of the religious squabbles that took place all those centuries ago and, would you believe it, our guide turned out to be a modern-day dweller in a Troglodyte cave in the village that we had visited that morning. And so to bed.

Saturday, and another brilliant sunrise, clear skies and maybe a few not-so-clear heads but everyone, like a well-drilled platoon, were on parade for the arrival of the coach, destination the village of Parnay in the heart of Saumur Champagne and thence to Varraine where we were welcomed by Mr and Madame Daheuille, fellow Chevaliers of Sacavin. We were shown around their extensive caves and modern 'Winery'.

The description 'Winery' smacks more of California which here could not be further from the truth, as we found ourselves in the heart of a family business where no doubt M. Daheuiller was the wine maker but we're sure that Madame 'called a lot of the shots'. Daughter and son-in-law were actively engaged in this family affair. I choose the description 'Winery' as the investment in the latest stainless steel tanks and their attendant equipment were much in evidence and so too were the computers and the link-up to the Internet. However, as is often the case in France, the Daheuiller family are to be found in a small village street where the big gate leads past the house with its hanging baskets of geraniums, washing on the line, to the 'showroom' where our tasting took place. Most of us were so impressed at the quality of these wines that more purchases were made of Cremant and Vin Blanc to take home.

Lunch was taken at the restaurant Croix Blanche in Fontevraud where we were joined by our friends who were joining us for the Chapitre in the evening. The afternoon programme was a visit to the Moulin de la Herpinierre, said to be the oldest windmill of the Loire region. This visit continued the Troglodyte theme of the previous day as the actual windmill was the only structure above ground, all other services being built (or dug out) as we had seen the day previously.

En route to the windmill we were met by Jean-Pierre Charruau, a local wine-maker and active member of Sacavin. Many may remember Jean-Pierre and his wife who joined us at our Chapitre at Butchers' Hall in 1996 and provided the beautiful Saumur Champigny that we enjoyed with our main course that year.

At the conclusion of the visit to the windmill Jean-Pierre invited us 'home for a drink' (all forty-two of us). This turned out to be an ad hoc tasting of his excellent Cremant and Vin Blanc. By now (more than well fortified!), we were fast running out of time to enable us to prepare for the Chapitre in Angers.

Despite the rigours of the day, all bodies were ready and waiting for the coach to Angers. On arrival we were received at L'Hopital Saint-Jean in the Salle des Malades, a vast hall some 60 metres long and 22 metres wide (no-one told me the height of the ceiling), the walls of which are now covered

with ten modern tapestries entitled 'Chant de Monde', a truly wonderful spectacle.

So followed the induction of new members in the traditional cellars. Happily this year the restoration work was almost complete and we had doors closing out the early evening draughts! Another short walk took us to Les Greniers where at last we were able to enjoy a Vin d'Honneur and meet up with many of our fellow Chevaliers who we have befriended on previous visits. We soon realised that we, the British party resplendent in our dinner jackets and evening dresses, were making up at least thirty percent of the entire gathering, such was the local reaction to the period of many months of uncertainty regarding the Chapitre of 1997 actually happening. Several hours of wining, dining and dancing followed and despite the depleted numbers (by Sacavin standards) everyone had a wonderful time. *(See below for a transcript of The Grand Commandeur's speech following dinner)

Bed arrived too late and Sunday morning arrived too soon for many. However, following our experience of previous Loire visits, no morning programme was arranged this year. Thirty bodies then made it to the coach for lunch to be taken in a restaurant at Montreuil-Bellay.

Our programme for the afternoon said, 'Visit to the Chateau and tasting of the wine made by Monsieur and Madame de Thuy'. Little did we know what surprises were in store.

By this time, the last afternoon of four days of fairly strenuous activity, our group was getting, should one say, just a little straggled and it took some time to get everyone assembled within the grounds of the Chateau - or rather Chateaux, as there are two side by side in Montreuil-Bellay. Before we were all gathered our 'mystery' guides had begun talking and many of us missed their introduction. Man and wife, they led us into the magnificent interior of the oldest Chateau and it soon became obvious that they knew a lot about what we were being shown. In fact they clearly appeared and behaved as if they were more than at home within the living rooms of the Chateau. Yes, you've guessed it - they were indeed the owners and, more to the point, were the mysterious Monsieur and Madame de Thuy whose name had been given to us by our French colleagues with no

explanation as to who they were other than we would taste their wines.

We felt very privileged to be shown around such a piece of French history by the descendants of one of the Loire's oldest families and a response from Madame de Thuy, standing in the middle of a huge room surrounded by furniture and artifacts that the 'Antiques Roadshow' would drool over, will, I'm sure, go down in our folklore. She was asked, "Do you live here?". Her reply was, "Only when we have the family around, otherwise we live in our other Chateau". How does one top that!

And so to yet another surprise. We left the magnificence of the apartments to visit the cellars below which at first glance were just the ordinary sort one would expect to find under a castle. But no - not where we in Sacavin are concerned as we found ourselves standing on the very spot where Madame de Thuy's grandfather had founded the modern Commanderie of Sacavin in 1904, a large panel on the wall depicting the event and those that followed. The original Commanderie had faded into 'history' until Madame de Thuy's grandfather resurrected it at the beginning of this century. He then presided over dinners and wine-tasting, or a more liberal translation, get-togethers of like-minded people who ate and drank well.

The cellars are accessed by a steep winding stairway which on entering are difficult enough to navigate in descending. Imagine then the initiation ceremony for membership of Sacavin at the beginning of the century when the inductee, who had by then dined well and even wine'd better, was required to leave the cellar ascending the winding staircase backwards with arms folded so that no support could be used or direction felt! The successful - shall we call them navigators? - were

greeted at the top with the well-known Sacavin chant of "Optime, Optime, ils sont des nous".

So we learnt a lot of our history. Several of our 'sober' fellows tried to leave in reverse. I'll leave it to your imagination to picture the spectacle. Remaining true to our programme a tasting of the wine of Monsieur and Madame de Thuy took place in the heart of a refurbished medieval kitchen. The wine grown around the 'castles' was the traditional Rose d'Anjou presenting all the fine values of this beautiful wine that was so maligned by the cheap sweet stuff that invaded our shores in the swinging sixties

To say "an afternoon to remember" may be an understatement consideringthe modest 'normal' Monsieur and Madame de Thuy who actually owned both castles the breathtaking contents of the rooms..... and the discovery of the place of our founding which really "put the icing on" our biennial visit to the homeland of Sacavin.

As the organiser of the trip and the writer of this article, I feel constrained to say it was a success. However, from the remarks made and letters since received it appears that all who took part thought it was. And it would not have been but for the help and guidance of many of our French friends, in particular Michel Fleur, Camille Besnier, the girls at CIVAS, and of course, our many hosts at the visits and tastings.

No trip can be a success without the 'gelling' of its participants. It was very rewarding, therefore, to observe and experience the special fellowship that exists in Sacavin - so many different people living so closely together for several days without the hint of dissension demonstrates the bonhomie that is the basis of and raison d'être of SACAVIN.

Roy is far too modest in describing the very major part he played in the organisation of this year's visit to France. The Management Committee extends its most grateful thanks and warmest congratulations to him for his arrangements. We have had some very memorable visits to France, but this one was, undoubtedly, one of the best! The Grand Commandeur addressed the Chevaliers of France in their language....

"Monsieur le Grand Maître etc.

We are delighted to be here with you in Angers this evening in this marvellous venue and we bring you the greetings of the Commanderie de Grand Bretagne.

We thank you for your warm welcome and have particularly appreciated your greeting at our hotel on the evening of our arrival. You know, we English are always happy to return to the beautiful garden of France and the original home of our Plantagenet Kings.

At one time, however, we were very concerned that there might not be a Chapitre this year and we were very sorry to learn the news of the retirement of Grande Maitre Camille Besnier. Camille has been a very good friend to us and we all wish him well with a complete recovery.

So it was with some relief and pleasurable anticipation that we heard that all was well for this year. Of course the Chapitre has always been regarded as the highlight of our visit and I am particularly pleased that this time we have a number of newly inducted Chevaliers with us. You know our last visit two years ago was so enjoyable, and as a result our favourable reports so convincing, that our party is a record number of forty this evening. Whilst we are pleased to introduce new Chevaliers to Anjou and its pleasures we are also proud and delighted that in our party we have our own recently retired Chef de Protocol George Wilks. George, whom many of you will know, has worked so hard for our Confrerie for very many years and recently celebrated his 91st birthday. A truly remarkable man.

I am pleased to report that our Commanderie is in extremely good heart and we have completed another successful year of events and celebrations. Later in November our own Chapitre 'Des Noces d'Or Royales' will be held in Butchers' Hall London, and of course, we should be delighted if any of you were able to join us. Please remember the date is Saturday the 15th November, when we will be celebrating the Golden Wedding Anniversary of our Queen and Prince Philip.

Before closing I must express our sincere thanks to Michel Fleur and also, in particular Claire Duchesne of CIVAS who have worked so hard in making the arrangements for our very interesting programme of visits. Thank you again.

Finally, I leave you with a thought; our next visit should occur in two year's time in 1999. However, should you have any special plans to celebrate the millenium, perhaps we should postpone our visit for a further year. We must keep in touch. Thank you for your attention and forbearance with my bad French accent!"

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 ur travellers returned to enjoy, as we all did, a beautiful golden Autumn event - The Chapitre des Noces d'Or Royales, in which we commemorated in our way, the Golden Wedding of the Queen and Prince Philip.