



Sacavin Courier

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Chapitre 2004 at Bakers' Hall



CHAPITRE 2004 at the BAKERS' HALL

Bread and wine. A combination that goes back into the depths of time and one which readily found endorsement from Our Lord at the Last Supper. So we must have been doing something right when, for our 2005 Chapitre, we returned for the third time in succession to the Hall of the Worshipful Company of Bakers. And given events of 100 years ago, this was to be something of an Anglo-French celebration, "Le Chapitre de l'Entente Cordiale".

A fine, if cold evening allowed many to arrive on foot from nearby railway stations, the prospect of getting lost in the alleyways off Lower Thames Street notwithstanding. And for those that finally made it, the cheerful glow of light and the hubbub emanating from the doorway of the Hall offered as warm a welcome as any baking bread. A welcome enhanced by our Vin d'honneur, that steadfast sparkling Saumur, Les Celliers du Prieuré Prestige.

For many, it was only six weeks or so since they'd last met, at the Centenary celebrations in Angers and, with the foyer full of familiar faces, the conversation was soon at fever-pitch. Sufficiently, it was hoped, to distract attention from what was going on in the robing room. Anyone who has had to get dressed in a broom cupboard will understand the problem and in this one an entire committee was struggling with each other in the attempt to fix bow-ties, don white gloves and heavy velvet robes and gather together such artefacts as the portrait of Rabelais and the Sacavin Halberds. Cries the like of "Who's got the flogger?", "That's on back to front" and "You're standing on my cloak" were fortunately drowned by the general chatter outside, only the bulging curtain over the doorway betraying the scrum taking place within.

Nevertheless, by the appointed time all was ready. With the membership now seated in the Court Room, the Grand Commandeur

and his entourage entered in procession, accompanied by the traditional trumpet fanfare, and the 2004 Chapitre could begin.

We welcomed three new members. An already familiar face, Tessa, wife of Chevalier David Hollingsworth, was proposed by school-friend Brenda Collins. Tessa's citation painted a picture of a very full life, with opera singing, Girl Guiding and sailing a 36-foot yacht accompanying the demands of being mother and grandmother. Recently retired banker Graham Macfarlane was introduced by Geoffrey Wheal. Graham, as treasurer of the Nat West Wine Society and a member of the Jurade de Saint-Emilion, had a long standing interest in wine. French holidays were therefore a passion, particularly in Alsace, Champagne, Burgundy, the Rhone, Bordeaux and, of course, the Loire! Another preoccupation was as President of the Old Haberdashers Association. Then from France came Dominique Testud with a citation read by Shirley Zangwill. Not only a highly-qualified fellow dental surgeon, but one specialising in repairing damage done by gunshot. Ironically, her many sporting interests included pistol-shooting! An involvement in poetry and music embraced, inter alia, 20 years as a classical pianist, while responsibility for reciprocal links with Louisiana was a key element in her social life. A welcome addition to our number too, given her connection with several other Confréries.

The inductions continued with each candidate enduring the customary “test” of suitability. All passed! Dubbed Chevalier by Grand Commandeur Derek Sheen, serenaded with the vigorous singing of “Optimé” and rewarded with a hanap of Anjou rosé, they concluded the ceremony by reciting the oath in unison.

Promotions followed. The Grand Commandeur had sanctioned three. To Echanson Audrey Thompson, he presented the collarette of Commandeur. Not only responsible for the storage and selection of our wines, Audrey along with husband Julian had hosted two excellent summer events and organised the very successful 1999 trip to Saumur. Chef des Expéditions Ernest Lee was also made Commandeur, with two first-rate excursions to the Loire already under his belt and another, to Burgundy, that he is planning for 2006. Finally, Chancelier John Ingram was promoted to the rank of Officier.

Having had Tony White, the Beadle, address us on two previous occasions, one wondered what further there was to say about the Worshipful Company of Bakers. A concern which quickly evaporated. We’d had the history, now he turned to his own personal and highly entertaining experiences. From banqueting catastrophes narrowly avoided to notable characters encountered within the Company, including one who lived a most remarkable double life, he gave us a nice little verbal aperitif before we adjourned to the Livery Hall for dinner.

Lady Bountiful once again introduced the meal that she and her staff had prepared and Audrey Thompson, in her rôle as Echanson, described the wines she had so carefully chosen to accompany it.

THE MENU

Parma Ham and Melon

Cheverny blanc 2001

Domaine Maison Père et Fils, La Roche

Fillet of Red Snapper

with creamed potato au cresson

Haunch of Venison steak

with a cracked black peppercorn sauce

Roasted potatoes with red onion

and seasonal vegetable selection

Gigondas Côtes du Rhône 2001

Domaine de Casson

Cheese board selection

with crackers and butter

White chocolate torte and mango coulis

Coteaux du Layon – La Cuvée Ancienne

de Jean Baumard

Coffee or tea

Cointreau, or

Dalmore 12 year-old single malt whisky

Over coffee, the Grand Commandeur gave his address. With the Entente Cordiale as the theme, it was a delight to welcome Michel Leterme, representing Head Office in Angers. Michel was the embodiment of the Entente, his efforts on our behalf having ensured that the Centenary weekend had been, for us, a great success. A view that was warmly applauded. Derek thanked Chef de Cuisine Geoffrey Wheal and all those others who had played their part in the enjoyment and success of the evening and there followed a toast to the new inductees.

Michel himself then spoke, taking us back to the start of Sacavin, portraying with little anecdotes some of its guiding lights and relating the key events that they influenced. The spirit of the Confrérie was brought to life for us and it was with great gusto that, following the loyal toast, we then sang both the National Anthem and the Marseillaise.

JMI

Front page picture:

Front row, from left to right: Tessa Hollingsworth, Beadle Tony White, Dominique Testud & Graham Macfarlane.

Back row: the Committee with, far right, Michel Leterme.

Photo: Julian Thompson

The 2004*Vintage*

IN the latest, No. 7, issue of “Bonjour Confrère”, the journal of our colleagues in the French Commanderie, their Chef de Protocole, Michel Fleur contributed the following article. Our own Chef des Expéditions, Ernest Lee has kindly provided us with this (free) translation.

Not so long ago, the vingnerons of the Loire would have been busy picking the grapes on their vines at a well-practiced rhythm and with a well-practiced technique – all in the interest of making decent wine. But the 2004 vintage was a different story!

In August, while sheets of water deluged our vineyards, our Minister of Health was waiting in vain, in the vastness of his lonely ministry, for a second heatwave. He enacted a stupid regulation (the utility of which is known to him alone) – a regulation requiring us to put a warning, addressed to pregnant women, on our bottles of wine, advising them that over-indulgence in wine could harm the foetus... What a revelation!

Meanwhile our mood was as black as the sky, which was pouring rain on our vines. The grapes, which should have been topping up their summer suntan, spent their time using the vine leaves as umbrellas, under which they sheltered from the rain. And we couldn't do anything about it. We had the same situation two years ago and the Grand Maître of our confrérie, Pierre Aguilas, was able to take control of the weather by uttering guru-like incantations! So couldn't he do the same again in 2004?

In the absence of that solution, the only thing we could place our faith in was lady luck and, mercifully, fine weather arrived at the beginning of September: our grapes took full advantage and gorged themselves on the sun. The vigneronns of the Loire are patient people and they had the strength of will to wait a

whole month, allowing the grapes to mature, before they harvested them – an abundant crop and one of good quality.

You will therefore have the pleasure of drinking 2004 vintage wines which will delight your palate, after you have taken the trouble to stimulate your nostrils with their bouquets. The dominant characteristics of wines made from Gamay and Cabernet grapes promise to be a subtle blend of such fruits as blackcurrants and raspberries. Tannins will be present, but they will not be too harsh or aggressive: a “silky” quality will round out the wine, as you revolve it around your taste buds.

2004 is going to be a terrific vintage for dry white wines. Our winemakers have succeeded in extracting from high quality grapes the overwhelming aromatic qualities of all our grape varieties – Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Chenin. The resulting wines promise to be generous, fresh and fruity, with all the vigour required for perfect balance. How delighted you will be to drink them with grilled fish, especially fish from the Loire, or on their own to slake your thirst on a hot summer day.

As for dessert wines, the bad weather we had in October was a real headache for Loire winemakers. They had to make a choice: should they make the best of a bad job and pick what they could (Choice A)? Or should they wait and hope, while taking the risk of seeing their crop rot, thus depriving us of the exquisite pleasures of the sweetness derived from picking grapes at their maximum ripeness (Choice B)? It will be up to you – on your

visits to our vineyards and caves – to judge which was the right choice.

So, Friends of the Sacavin, the story of the great wines of Anjou and Saumur goes on: after 2003, an exceptionally sunny summer, we have had 2004, which will also go down in

history. Never forget that, while wine is the healthiest drink we have, it must be consumed with discretion: we must discipline our appetites.

MF



Getting to know Pierre Aguilas

Those who attended the Centenary celebrations in Angers last October will remember enjoying an excellent lunch at Domaine Gaudard, the property of Grand Maître Pierre Aguilas in Chaudefonds-sur-Layon. Besides his leading role in the Confrérie du Sacavin d'Anjou he is also President of the Salon des Vins de Loire and was recently awarded the Médaille d'Officier du Mérite Agricole for his services to viniculture. An article by Vincent Boucault, published 30 January 2005 in *Courrier de l'Ouest*, an adaption of which appears below, paints a fascinating picture of our Grand Maître and gives us a great opportunity to get to know him better. We are again indebted to Ernest Lee for the translation.

Pierre Aguilas – the grandson of Spaniards who settled in North Africa – learned French history and the ditty ‘Our Gaulish Ancestors’ in the Congo. “My father was an Air Force mechanic stationed near Brazzaville and I was a little white-skinned boy surrounded by little black boys, but I just felt like one little boy in a crowd of little boys.”

And what has this got to do with the Rabelaisian loquacity deployed by this charismatic wine producers’ leader to defend “French wine, the best there is”? Nothing at all, unless you suggest that he is running the risk of being taken for a typical Frenchman, even a Poujadist*, by arguing for the superiority of French wine over the global competition (with its oak chips). A charge to which the winegrower of Chaudefonds-sur-Layon would reply: “I don’t know anything about racism and I hate Poujadism. I have always been of the opinion that one should not indulge in demagoguery. That’s not where I’m coming from.” All right, but that does not explain how Mr. Aguilas – born in la Couronne, near Angoulême, where (having

quit Algeria) both his grand-fathers worked in the Lafarge cement works – has become the charismatic spokesman for the 1,500 wine producers of Anjou.

We wonder if we’re on the right track, in seeking an answer to this question, when we learn that he spent most of his childhood at Pessac, near Bordeaux. Moreover, he had to pass an estate called ‘Pope Clement’ on his way to school every day. Mr Aguilas destroys this line of thinking, however, by saying “My ambition was to be anything except a wine producer” and, initially, he sought a career in mineralogical chemistry. However, he spent some time in Angers during his military service (in the 6th Engineers regiment), where he met and married Jeanette. He goes on, “My father-in-law had some land at Chaudefonds-sur-Layon, with some animals and a few hectares of vines. We took this on, without knowing much about the business.” Is that really true, we ask, or is it a typical Aguilassian exaggeration? “It’s really true. We spent 6 or 7 years making mistakes. I ruined plenty of vats of wine during that period. Moreover we

had no 'income support' from the state to fall back on!"

He pays tribute to 2 experts in vine cultivation in Anjou – Didier Couterceau and Jean-Claude Lépine – who helped him to master his trade. He doesn't boast about his current skills, developed over a period of 35 years, but he serves a Chaume which is nothing short of heavenly: his self-confidence is such that it is evident he does not fear comparison with any rivals.



*Grand Maître Pierre Aguilas amongst his vines
at Domaine Gaudard*

Mr Aguilas's constant refrain is the promotion of quality. He inveighs, for instance, against those who persist in shameless chaptalisation**, thereby contravening regulations and going against advice, good sense and meteorological indications. "We must abide by the regulations," he says, "We must not stain the image of the wine producers who have done so much to improve the quality of our wines over the past 10-20 years."

Having reached the age of 60, Pierre Aguilas has been installed as President of the Salon des

Vins de Loire. "In this part of France we have not over-planted vines. The Loire wines will do quite well, even though there is a crisis in global wine production," he states. Mr Aguilas has played a major role in achieving this regional success and he argues for a generic Loire appellation.

The man who has put down his roots in Anjou, despite himself, and who has thereby become a wine producer instead of a train driver, which was his boyhood dream, is pleased with what he has achieved so far. And for the future he hopes that his son will continue his work – the defence of the 'terroir' they have adopted.

NOTES:

* Pierre Poujade was a politician who founded the 'Union de défense des commerçants et artisans de France' in the 1950s, the philosophy of which is called 'Poujadism'. Essentially, the movement was against the growing bureaucratisation of business and what the self-employed/small business people considered to be overbearing taxation.

** 'chaptalisation' is the addition of sugar, before fermentation, to must (i.e. crushed grapes). The purpose of the chaptaliser is to increase the alcoholic strength of the fermented wine. (A certain amount of sugar can be added to certain grape musts under strictly controlled conditions, but "dodgy" wine producers bend and break the rules.)





Phylloxera in France

Fresh from his translation duties in the previous two articles, Ernest has also found time to contribute the following piece on the disease phylloxera, the consequences of which now seem unthinkable. In the course of his research Ernest found himself in Montpellier, where he came across the statue of Jules Emile Planchon, of whom more will be discovered below. He was kind enough to supply this photo of it.

A kind of blight (as it seemed) that caused vines to wither and die appeared in the Midi in 1860 and soon spread to other winegrowing areas, arriving in the Champagne region in 1890 – having in the meantime also spread outside France, notably to Spain, Portugal, Austria, Germany and Greece. Virtually the whole world eventually suffered from phylloxera infestation, the only exception being Chile.

French scientists struggled to diagnose the cause of this disaster, which threatened to wipe out the wine industry, but failed lamentably. A reward of 20,000 gold francs was even offered by the Imperial government in 1870 for the devising of an effective remedy but no acceptable solutions were produced, so the reward was increased to 300,000 in 1874! It was never won, though the lure of the reward stimulated “an avalanche of grotesquely wild ideas”, in the words of Jules-Emile Planchon, a botanist from Montpellier. Planchon himself came near to diagnosing the cause of the disease, since he discovered a tiny yellow aphid parasite (*phylloxera vastatrix*) on a vine root,

but the significance of his discovery was not appreciated by his scientific peers. For instance, France’s foremost entomologist, Victor Signoret, considered that the yellow aphid was a symptom of the disease, not the cause, and his view won the support of the Minister of Agriculture.

It was eventually discovered that American vines were both the cause of phylloxera infestation and the means of curing the problem: American vines (*vitis riparia*) acted as hosts to the bug, but had become immune to its depredations. The solution to France’s problem was radical: French vines (*vitis vinifera*) had to be grafted onto American rootstock, vine by vine!

The importation of the disease was finally traced to Monsieur Borty, a wine merchant who lived in Roquemaure, in the Southern Rhone: he had received a gift of vines from an American vigneron – vines that were infected with phylloxera – and he had planted them in his garden.

The phylloxera infestation had a significant impact on wine production in the Loire. Before the infestation, Loire wines were transported to Paris in barrel loads and were treated like vins ordinaires in the bars and restaurants. The post-phylloxera replanting exercise enabled the vignerons of the Loire to upgrade their grape varieties and, consequently, the wines they produced.

Bibliography

- (1) The Great Wine Blight, by G Ordish (Revised 1987, Sidgwick & Jackson), ISBN 0 28 3994251
- (2) Phylloxera: how wine was saved for the world, by C Campbell (Harper Collins, 2003)

EVL



We have received a letter from Chris Wilkinson, our previous Grand Commandeur, now retired and living with his wife Hilary in the Isle of Man. He wrote to say that they were both saddened to read in the last Courier that George Wilks had passed on and he felt he could not let the matter pass without saying a few words about him.

George was a splendid character, though not so tall in stature, his heart and voice were greater than most.

I remember him best, firstly from the early days of Sacavin before there were large Committee Meetings and the day to day business of the British Commanderie was run by a triumvirate of the three W's headed by Charles Whitfield MW, George and myself. We used to meet regularly in the Jarvis Halliday offices at 62 Pall Mall, always in the morning so that George could review the Queen's Guard going about its duties at St James Palace (we had a grandstand view of the proceedings). The meeting was invariably accompanied by several glasses of Bouvet plus any other wines which we were considering for future events.

Secondly, George will always be held in great affection by my children, particularly our youngest, Katy, as he never failed to join them in the swimming pool at Towersey on the occasions when we held summer lunches and tastings and I have some wonderful pictures of them all disporting themselves in the water! George's vast experience as a Headmaster made it easy for him to communicate with our youngsters!

George certainly ranks as one of the best and most influential characters in British Sacavin history.

CW



As this Courier is published, we have just returned from a gloriously sunny Sacavin weekend in Wiltshire, kindly organised for us by Alastair and Julia Bellingham. A full report will appear in our next issue.

The Chapitre in Angers last October was something really quite special, marking as it did the Centenary of the re-establishment of the Sacavin. However, there is a Chapitre des Vendanges every year, held in the same majestic setting, the Greniers Saint Jean. In the past, we have tried to organise our generally biennial trip to the Loire to coincide with this. However, one or two of our members have asked if it might be possible to attend the Chapitre on an individual basis, even when the British Commanderie as a whole has no such plan.

This would likely involve only a handful of members but we enquired and found that a small group, or even just two or three, would be more than welcome. We have dates: Saturday 24 September 2005 and Saturday 7 October 2006. For this year's Chapitre des Vendanges, registration will be around the beginning of September, but cost and other details will not be available much before then. Anyone interested in going should contact the Chancellor, John Ingram. However, this would only be with regard to centralising purchase of the tickets. All other arrangements, travel, accommodation, meals, etc., would be the responsibility of the individuals concerned.



There was that great weekend at Wivenhoe, we have had marvellous summer luncheon's hosted by the Thompsons, the Forsters and the Hollands and, most recently, the lovely weekend get-together organised by the Bellinghams in Wiltshire. However, this shouldn't give the impression we are overwhelmed by offers to host a summer event. We are very grateful to those who have already done so but we are always open to suggestions for new venues. If the prospect of 40 or so Rabelaisian imbibers tramping around your garden (or even, if it's raining, through your house!) is too awful to contemplate, you may still be keen to show off your own area and have ideas as to where such an event could be held. So we would always be glad to hear from anyone prepared to organise, or help with, a summer function.



DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES

Management Committee meeting **Wednesday 21 September 2005** at
The Kings Arms Buckingham Palace Road at 11 am



Chapitre 2005 at Armourer's Hall **Wednesday 30 November 2005**
Calling letters will be posted in October



AGM and supper at The Queens Club **Saturday 1 April 2006**

And, as we go to press, Chef des Expéditions Ernest Lee is in France with Krystyna his wife researching possibilities for a visit around the end of September 2006.