

Wednesday 3rd May

Ben Straw from the Lincoln Wine School

“Age is just a number. It’s totally irrelevant unless, of course, you happen to be a bottle of wine.” And Joan Collins would know! Ben Straw (none were needed) of the WSET, or Wine and Spirit Education Trust, brought with him not only words of wisdom, but free samples of red and white wine. Pity so many were driving.

The WSET was founded in 1969 to update bar staff etc on new brands of wine, to help them recommend these appropriately to the public. It is now an international agency with branches from Canada to Austria. In fact, 75% of new students are international, many from Hong Kong. Qualifications range from Diploma level to becoming an Institute Master of Wine...and there aren’t many of them. 416 to be precise! Not only does it involve a lot of tasting, but written exams too. Ben himself started off working on the NHS payroll, but found this line of work much more relaxing. He has been with WSET for 16 years now.

Experts argue about when wine was first invented, but the general consensus is 5,000 years BC. Grapes were put into an amphora, then buried in the ground for two months. This is called “Orange Wine.” This method has become popular again, but the product is not for the faint-hearted, being quite sharp and dry.

Malbec, Rioja, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc and Prosecco are the most popular blends. Chardonnay is the most common white wine whilst a cool half billion bottles of Prosecco are sold every year. These grapes suffered badly last year due to frost, but hopefully have revived this year. England is increasingly producing its own brands and is especially good with sparkling varieties.

Then came the highlight of the afternoon-glasses of red and white were passed round and sampled. To do this correctly, you swirl the wine round your glass to release the aroma; sniff; sip and move the wine around in your mouth to warm it up. A sour taste was left by the fact that £5 tax is imposed on every bottle!

Many thanks to Ben for his instructive (and delicious) talk. We all felt nicely mellow afterwards. So many things do improve with age, such as the freedom to attend such talks as these!

Barbara Pearce