

EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE: WILL LYONS



It's (Not So) Simply a Question of Taste

IT MAY SURPRISE you to learn that for a few weeks this summer not a single glass of wine passed my lips. No, I wasn't on some self-inflicted detox, I simply didn't fancy it.

A few weeks earlier I had gone under the surgeon's knife to clear up a minor ailment affecting one of my kidneys. Having been born with this condition, I had been putting off the operation for...well, some years. But I finally decided the time had come to get it fixed.

I had read about people losing their sense of smell after general anesthetic, or in some cases their taste being affected, but I was pretty confident, having spoken to my surgeon, that it wouldn't happen to me. Still, I was more than relieved to find, when I did come round after a few hours under, that I could smell the flowers in my room and taste the tea I craved.

But something had changed. While I still had my appetite, my palate was different. All I felt like eating was poached salmon and broccoli, soup and toast, and chocolate mousse. All those meals I had enjoyed involving beef, pasta, cheese and eggs were off the menu. It was as if I had undergone a palate transplant in which mine had been



Illustration by Jakob Hinrichs

How on earth could I do my job if I couldn't taste red Burgundy?

replaced with that of a child. More worryingly, the thought of a glass of wine just didn't appeal.

This was far more alarming than the idea of losing my sense of smell. Had I fallen out of love with wine? I was reminded of those sportsmen who retire early citing "a loss of affection for the game." When I did eventually open a bottle of wine, a good few weeks later, it didn't taste right. It smelled OK, but once in my mouth it tasted bitter and astringent, almost sour. In wine-tasting terms, my orthonasal receptors were working, detecting the compounds one can smell off the glass, but my retronasal receptors, which pick up the flavors released when the wine is swirled around in the mouth, were certainly not.

I don't mind telling you that for a few days I was more than a little agitated. The wine I had tasted was a red Burgundy, perhaps the finest wine of them all. How on earth could I do my job if I couldn't taste red Burgundy?

Buoyed by a conversation with an ear, nose and throat surgeon, I decided to come back into the tasting fold by way of fruit: primary, big wines with smooth tannins and soft, ripe characters. Fortunately, this is a story with a happy ending. With practice, my palate reverted to type. In fact, it was while tasting a white wine from Sicily—a Grillo with a distinctive citrus flavor, imported by British wine merchant Caspar Bowes—that the old feeling of excitement associated with a wine discovery returned. I'm delighted to say, after a few months off, the magic is back.

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DRINKING NOW: WINES TO EXCITE THE PALATE



2013 Viticultori Associati Canicatti Aquilae Grillo
Alcohol: 12.5%
Price: £10 or £12

Sicily is rich in glorious white wines at reasonable prices. This Grillo is exceptional, leaping out of the glass with its herbaceous, sweet spice smell. Fairly full-bodied, with lively acidity, this will pair well with spicy dishes.



2012 Johanneshof Reinisch Zweigelt
Alcohol: 13.5%
Price: £12 or €15

Zweigelt is a grape variety that is hugely popular in Austria. Lucky them, for this is just the sort of red wine the coming winter months demand. Fresh, juicy, red cherry fruit and zippy acidity make it a wonderful pairing with hearty winter dishes.

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