

WEST SURREY WINE SOCIETY - MAY MEETING – “Hidden Treasures from Lesser Known Regions of France”



Tim North and Peter Smith the event organiser

Frustrated by what he saw as “the poor choice of French wines in the UK” – at least at affordable prices – Tim North, West Surrey Wine Society’s May speaker, and his wife Jill set up Winchester-based Joie de Vin to bring quality wines from small artisan producers in the Loire and South West France to the UK market. Despite 30 years working in the French wine industry he found wines from large producers and companies lacked creativity and personality and decided to focus on wines from small producers who were hands-on in the vineyard and the cellar and who were free to make wines in the style they wanted.

Being personal friends with his producers is important to Tim and he provided photos and a lot of background information on each of them. Many of them looked and are surprisingly young and they all “all share a passion for making great wine and protecting the environment“ said Tim.

The quality of the wines tasted was excellent; one member commented that there were “more good wines than the average meeting”. Tim freshened up palates with a crisp sparkling wine, a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir from Domaine Salmon in Muscadet that would put a cheap champagne at much more money to shame, and then presented three very interesting white wines. The sauvignon blanc from Domaine de la Grange from the Cher Valley, a recently created cru in the Loire, was rated the best of the whites – much richer and fuller bodied than most Loire whites. While the chardonnay from Domaine Pampres in Beaujolais disappointed the majority of members, the fuller bodied dry rousanne/grenache blanc blend from Chateau Montfin in Corbieres way down in SW France was very interesting and would serve equally as an aperitif or food wine. Tim had originally ventured to SW France searching red wines and was delighted to find a winning white.

SW France has historically been known for cheap volume wines, however an increasing number of small growers are now working hard to change this and Tim is sourcing some excellent rosé and reds from them. The rosé based on syrah and grenache noir grapes from Domaine de la Toupie’s old bush vines was full of flavour – “a rosé to savour”. This property is in Maury in Roussillon which Tim describes as “the most interesting part of France where the Pyrenees meet the sea”.

The three reds attracted a lot of interest, starting with the surprisingly deep-coloured pinot noir (this was in fact from Burgundy) from Domaine Pampres had had just a touch of oak and was smooth and easy drinking and proved you can find a nice pinot noir for under £20. Jerome, the wine maker at Dom de la Toupie is a gamekeeper turned poacher having originally worked as enforcer of rules for the Appellation Controlée body; his grenache noir, syrah and mouvdre blend from ancient vines was mellow and fruity and gave no hint of its 15% alcohol. The final wine came from near the Spanish border in French Catalonia from Les Aspres a new appellation created in 2004 and reserved for Roussillon’s high quality red wines – the Domaine Trilles mouvedre from 80 year old vines certainly deserved this – a really serious complex wine with full, deep flavours.

Tim is planning to add more wines from these areas to Joie de Vin’s list. His belief in these wines is strongly supported by wine writers and critics who have become very supportive of the sort of small producer Joie de Vin specialise in – so look out for more interesting and unusual wines from these areas.

