

Victoria Moore

A good Yapp about great wine

A Wiltshire-based wine merchant that combines big, blustery tastes with surprising sophistication

Robin Yapp was a dentist first, and a wine merchant second. His son Jason describes him – lovingly – as a “pirate”, which makes it all the more alarming that for 16 years his two professions coincided: *Drilling for Wine* is the title of the book he has written about his adventures in drink and dentures.

A wine enthusiast who first encountered the good stuff working as a waiter in Scarborough, Robin set up Yapp Brothers in 1969 after taking out a quarter-of-an-inch column advert in two Sunday papers.

He is now retired, having handed Yapp Brothers over to Jason and stepson Tom Ashworth (who came to wine from a career in the City). At least, he has mostly handed it over. Jason and Tom, a formidable team, may have bought him out in 2004,

but as Yapp Brothers is still based in the buildings around Yapp Snr's home in Mere, near Warminster, a little interference is perhaps inevitable. “He’s always complaining about the grammar and punctuation in the list,” says Jason. We are chatting in the Yapp living room. Considering some of the timber-shivering tales I’ve heard about Robin’s capacity for revelry, it’s a surprise to find him quite so mildly spoken and Home Counties.

He tells anecdotes about selling wine to Anthony Eden and offering the one-time prime minister children’s rusks as a canapé because he seemed to expect something to nibble as he tasted, and there wasn’t anything else in the house.

What I like about Yapp Brothers is the sheer force of Yappness that sings through their list. Good wine merchants often lean towards wines that seem to belong to the same family. Yapp reds are often quite big, with a bit of bluster and rugged round the edges, but then you suddenly realise you’ve been caught, and they’re actually put together with more sophistication than you thought.

There’s a clue to one of their special interests out in the courtyard: a replica of the fountain at Châteauneuf-du-Pape. “And believe me, we now know a lot about how fountains work that you wouldn’t ever think you’d have to know,” says Tom drily.

When Robin was building up his list in the Seventies the Rhône was relatively under-appreciated. An old price list hanging on the wall of the tasting room shows that you could pick up a 1977 Chave Hermitage for less than double the cost of a Pascal Frères Côtes du Rhône. Robin was there before anyone else; Yapp still imports Chave’s legendary wines (current vintage of Hermitage: £140 a bottle, if they have any left they can sell you). Auguste, Pierre & Olivier Clape is another of their fêted producers. That Condrieu he sold through a tiny newspaper ad? It was made by Georges Vernay, whose top wines now sell on allocation.



Bons vivants: Tom Ashworth, Robin Yapp and Jason Yapp (L-R) raise a glass in their Warminster cellars

Yapp classics

Domaine JL Chave Hermitage Blanc 2001 France
(yapp.co.uk, £120/bottle)

● Smells like waxy white blossom, and tastes slightly of honeycomb.

Gigondas Domaine St Gayan 1990 France
(yapp.co.uk, £30)

● The result of aging a good southern Rhône red: confit of red fruit and figs streaked with black olives.

They’re still strong on the Rhône – as well as the Loire and Provence. And the new Yapp generation has continued to unearth unsung Mediterranean wines. Thanks to a neighbour who had written *The Rough Guide to Corsica*, Jason and Tom have spent much time rattling around the rocky island, tasting wines and persuading growers to collaborate. “We are glad we persevered,” as Jason says in his list, “because the inimitable, Maquis-scented wines of Corsica have proved incredibly popular back here.”

Rightly so. These two are always piling into their blue van and disappearing off to Provence or elsewhere in the

south of France on wine-hunting trips.

They are highly dedicated *bons vivants*, as well as hard workers. Jason can discourse at length on the best way to make ratatouille. Both share an ability to empty a wine glass without apparently raising it to their lips, which is one reason why I have always declined invitations to join them on a trip; I fear it would kill me.

Better to stick to a tasting here in Wiltshire, where a few bottles of the archive stock that Yapp occasionally releases are opened. I’m often asked where you can go to buy single bottles of good, older wine, and it’s a tricky question to answer as most of this sort of stuff changes hands young and/or

by the case. Library releases, where a merchant decides to sell stock from their cellar, is one good way (see box for a couple of these).

I also try one of the new Yapp finds, a red burgundy that strangely reminds me of a red Rhône. I have just written that in my notes when Tom reads my mind: “We think we might like it because it is a bit Rhône.” Well, yes.

It’s Rhône we choose to drink out at dinner. By the end of the evening Jason is threatening us with a game of Scrabble. “Show me those tiles, they are like catnip to me.”

That is the whole point of good wines, isn’t it? Good evenings, and good company.

What I’ve enjoyed most this week

Vin de Corse Porto Vecchio Domaine de Torraccia 2009 Corsica
(13.5%, yapp.co.uk, £13.25)

● This red has a ruffled, Rhône-like texture and is made with two tongue-twisting local varieties, nielluccio and sciacarello, together with grenache and syrah. One of the new Corsican discoveries, it reminds me of raspberry leaves, soil, tea and wild herbs. Drink with wild boar salami and make the vineyard owner, who’s sick of the beasts trashing his crop, very happy.



Châteauneuf-du-Pape Le Vieux Donjon 2009 France
(14%, yapp.co.uk, £29.95)

● A nearly perfect châteauneuf-du-pape with a classic shape and flow, and a gentle, soft texture. Although it does taste absolutely delicious right now it would be almost criminal not to put it to one side for a few years and let it develop.



Lirac La Ferme Domaine Maby 2010 France (14.5%, yapp.co.uk, £11.75)

● Lirac is a corner of the Rhône just to the north-west of Avignon, not far from the village of Tavel, famous for its deep pink wines. Long undervalued even now, it produces some excellent wines, of which this syrah, mourvèdre and grenache noir blend with dark, rugged fruit, is a fine example.



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