

# Circle Update

**July 2016**

## **IN THIS ISSUE:**

- **Charles Heidsieck tasting**
- **OPINION: enough aromas**
- **Climate change**
- **International cool climate wine symposium**
- **Prosecco progress**
- **Battle of the somms**
- **Grape prices in the Cape**



From the editor: *Wink Lorch*

## The times they are a-changin’

The wine world is but a microcosm of the whole world. We deal with, arguably, a non-essential or luxury product, although its origins are agricultural and that inherently means people working with nature. Vine farmers are vulnerable to everything else that happens in the world, whether man-made or not: from political change and market upheaval to climate change and unusual weather events, they along with all of us must feel that we are living in very challenging times.

Grape farmers who do not make their own wine are particularly vulnerable, as can be read in the worrying piece about grape prices in South Africa, contributed by Michael Fridjhon in this issue of *Update*. On recent visits to Savoie I have also heard about vineyards being grubbed up as they are no longer viable. The director of one Savoie cooperative told me that his members receive only 60% of the price per tonne for their grapes compared to a decade ago – something that is simply not sustainable.

Climate change and its effects on the wine world is the focus of an article by Linda Johnson-Bell and also features in my report from the fascinating International Cool Climate Wine Symposium held in Brighton in May. With bad news on prospects for the 2016 vintage from many parts of Europe, climate change is something everyone in the world of wine needs to pay close attention to.

Sommeliers value their jobs too and work in an ever-more competitive environment. On a more cheerful note and in a gripping tale, Amanda Barnes shares her experiences of watching the Best Sommelier in the World Competition in Mendoza. However, sommeliers might have to change how they describe wines according to Steve Slatcher’s well-argued opinion on how many aromas are perceptible



by tasters. I am delighted that this issue’s featured photographer, Ricardo Bernardo, took up my challenge to create, exclusively for *Update*, an image to go with Steve’s opinion piece and for this July’s very sunny cover. My apologies to readers in the grips of the southern hemisphere winter, but I hope this brightens your day.

Continuing with a sunny theme, we have a range of features on top tastings of sweet wines, Champagne, whisky, English wines and Douro Superior, along with discoveries of new wines from Prosecco, mountain purity in South Tyrol and contrasts in France’s South West. My thanks to all the contributors of these articles and to all the other photographers, who allowed me to use their pictures to help illustrate these articles. Thanks also to Robert Smyth’s help in editing the whole issue.

The AGM in May brought a changing of the guard and I look forward to working with Colin Hampden-White, our new chairman. I was happy that he agreed to be the focus of my ‘meet the member’ interviews, along with Heather Dougherty, a member who is also chairman of the Association of Wine Educators.

There are several CWW members’ trips this year and each will have its own separate report, starting with one on the trip to the Concordia Family wineries in the Duero, which took place last month. The next issue of *Update* will be in October and I welcome your suggestions for content and submissions by 5th September.

### **Circle Update: the newsletter of the Circle of Wine Writers**

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# Contents July 2016 Issue 127



p14



p20



p24



p26



p30



p38

## Features

CWW rare whisky tasting by <i>Sandie Leckie</i>	6
CWW seminar with Cyril Brun of Charles Heidsieck by <i>Becky Sue Epstein</i>	14
<i>Amanda Barnes</i> witnesses the battle to be top somm	20
<i>Neville Blech</i> on the EWP tasting	22
OPINION: Four's the limit for aromas, says <i>Steve Slatcher</i>	24
There's more to Prosecco than he first thought, finds <i>Robert Smyth</i>	26
Lagrein shines, thinks <i>Donna Jackson</i>	27
<i>Annabel Jackson</i> judges Douro	29
A worrying trend in grape prices in the Cape, reports <i>Michael Fridjhon</i>	30
<i>David Copp</i> is spoilt by some classic sweet wine producers	32
Contrasts in SW France by <i>Paul Strang</i>	34
<i>Linda Johnson-Bell</i> on climate change	36
<i>Wink Lorch</i> attends the cool climate wine symposium in Brighton	38

## About CWW members

AGM and Cyril Ray lunch	5
CWW committee roles	7
Membership changes and news	9
RIP Tom Whelehan	11
Meet the member: <i>Colin Hampden-White</i>	16
<i>Heather Dougherty</i>	18

## Regulars

From the chairman	4
Featured photographer	13
News briefs	41
Forthcoming wine events	44

Front cover: Flavours in a glass, specially commissioned to go with this issue's opinion piece. Back cover: Sherry butt named for journalist Manolo Liaño at Bodegas Barbadillo in Sanlucar de Barrameda. Photos by **Ricardo Bernardo**, this issue's featured photographer.

Membership of the Circle of Wine Writers ([www.circleofwinewriters.org](http://www.circleofwinewriters.org)) is open to accredited wine journalists and other professionals communicating in the media about wine. As such, it is editorial policy to give the editor and each writer for *Circle Update* freedom to express his or her views. It must therefore be stressed that the Circle as an organisation does not formally associate itself with the opinions expressed by contributors, except where this is specifically stated.

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*Steve Slatcher believes it's better to be roughly right than exactly wrong when it comes to describing wine. This article is adapted from a series of posts on Steve's blog [www.winenous.co.uk](http://www.winenous.co.uk).*

## OPINION: Why four's the aroma limit

Opinion is divided on tasting notes with flowery language and long lists of descriptors. Many serious wine lovers seem to expect them, and writers duly oblige, while the wine-drinker-in-the-street, when paying any attention at all, dismisses them as pretentious nonsense. Personally, I look at them quizzically, and wonder if they are really communicating anything of value. There are a number of contentious issues in tasting note style and content, but here I want to tackle just one: the number of aromas mentioned.

A specific issue with large numbers of aromas in tasting notes is that a series of experiments have shown people are incapable of identifying more than four aromas when those aromas are blended together. So how can tasting notes meaningfully refer to more than four? Was there a problem with the experiments? Or, after the four most prominent aromas mentioned in a tasting note, are we merely reading the product of an overactive imagination?

The research was carried out by David G Laing and co-workers in the 1980s and 1990s. In the first experiment, mixtures of up to seven aromas were delivered to the noses of subjects in vapour form, and they were asked to identify the aromas present. Each aroma came from a single chemical compound known to the subjects by an everyday name. Aroma concentrations were chosen to be moderately strong perceptually, and each aroma was roughly equally strong. The aromas were also known to be identifiable in binary

mixtures in the chosen concentrations. The subjects were first allowed to familiarise themselves with the individual aromas for several minutes, and then given mixtures that varied in terms of number and type of aromas.

The finding was that no more than four aromas in the mixture could be correctly identified. In subsequent experiments, subjects were given more training or chosen from expert flavourists and perfumiers. In addition, sets of aromas were then selected that were thought to either contrast or blend well with each other, while aromas based on more than one chemical compound were also used going forward. There were some differences in the results, but the fundamental conclusion remained: people could not correctly identify more than four or so aromas. So how do wine tasters manage to identify so many aromas? And what does it mean when they do?

I know some tasters sample their wine over the course of an evening, with and without food, and possibly even continue with the same bottle over two or more days. That is potentially going to lead to longer tasting notes, and the naming of more aromas, because the wine, context and taster might change over that period.

Others however are perfectly capable of reeling off a list of aromas within the space of a few minutes. The people I have personally seen doing this have all been Americans with some level of sommelier qualification, and

my preliminary conclusion is that it is related to their training and culture. In the case of professional wine critics who name many aromas, I suspect that, due to pressures of time, those lists are also usually produced rather quickly.

But are the aromas named in these long lists actually represented in the wine as chemical compounds in concentrations that could stand any chance of detection? Note that Laing's limit of four applies not to the imagination, but to the correct identification of aromas from chemicals actually physically present in the mixture.





Even if the aromas do not really exist, there may be understandable reasons why they may be identified. In Avery Gilbert's book, *What the Nose Knows*, there are several examples showing that we are extremely suggestible when it comes to our sense of smell, and suggestions of what we might find in a wine can come from many sources. The best known example is perhaps that the addition of red food dye to white wine prompts people to find aromas usually associated with red wine. In real life all manner of things might suggest what aromas should be in the wine, not least being told what the wine is, even if that information is false. There is no shame in being suggestible in this manner. It is simply the way we humans work perceptually.

Without wanting to name names, I am also convinced that some tasters fabricate aromas because they feel, for whatever reason, a few more are needed. I too would do that under certain circumstances – for example if I were taking some sort of test, and was required to list a certain number of aromas. If you have a good idea of what the wine is, it is very easy to throw in a few extra descriptors that would not raise eyebrows. Claret? OK, that will be blackcurrant, pencil box and French oak. Choose more unlikely ones if you aim to impress.

For whatever reason, some tasting notes contain more aroma descriptors than Laing's experiments suggest is possible. I cannot find any particular problem with the scientific evidence for our poor ability to identify aromas in a mixture, and I see no reason to doubt its applicability to wine. If anything I would expect it to be an easier task to identify aromas in Laing's experimental situation than with wine – in the experiments there were always subsets of the same seven or eight aromas, as opposed to the much larger number possible in wines.

### Not all on the nose

However, there is a possible issue because the experiments presented aromas only to the nose. With wine however, aromas are detected also when it is in the mouth. Does that cause a greater number of aromas to be detected in total? My personal experience suggests that happens

only occasionally, and to a small extent. And the results of a quick ad hoc online poll I ran seemed to suggest most other tasters feel the same way. What about letting a wine develop over a few hours or days? Does that let additional aromas develop and become identifiable? It is possible, but again in my experience it is rarely the case.

So if we take the identification of an aroma literally, by which I mean that the chemical compounds responsible for that aroma are present in the wine, I think it is fair to say that the limit of four correct identifications should apply. However, aromas mentioned in the tasting note may merely be reminiscent of the real thing. Or, as some less kind people might put it: imagined or made up. In these cases, there can clearly be no limit on the number of aromas, but by what criteria can we judge the value of such lists?



### Communication is king

For me, the main criterion for a successful tasting note is its ability to communicate the experience of drinking the wine. And here I mean to communicate accurately and not just to give an impression of what the experience might hypothetically be like. When I am tasting, the correspondence between my experience and tasting notes independently written by others is usually minimal, and we can also get hints of how successful communication is by comparing different peoples' tasting notes of the same wine. Usually any similarity is limited, and sometimes the differences are huge, particularly in the list of aromas mentioned. It is interesting to speculate about to what extent the differences are due to the subjective nature of taste, and to what extent it is imperfect communication; but differences there are.

The tasting notes I find communicate best are those where the aromas listed are few, and not very specific. For example, it can often be accurate, and still helpful, to identify citrus aromas in a wine. But when someone else describes a wine as tasting of lemon, I often think it is closer to lime. I admit that it seems reasonable to distinguish fruits at the level of detail of lemon and lime, but does anyone actually care? It is difficult to imagine a disgruntled customer returning a bottle of wine to a shop because the wrong type of citrus fruit was mentioned on the back label. The precision of detail is also linked to the issue of the number of aromas, as one person's citrus fruit could be another's three separate aromas – lemon, lime and orange – or even kumquat, clementine and charred mandarin.

In summary, there are two main reasons why I am sceptical about long lists of aromas. First, if you take a literal interpretation of aromas in tasting notes, on balance I agree that it is impossible to produce correct lists containing more than four. Second, I am not convinced about how useful long lists are anyway. I favour a shorter tasting note that contains only the dominant aromatic components, and one that is not over-specific in its aroma descriptors. Indeed, it is better to be roughly right than exactly wrong.

*Image created by Ricardo Bernardo.*