

FINE PARTNERS

Jo Burzynska suffers gladly for the cause of wine-matching

At times it felt more like a competitive eating contest than a wine competition, given the hundreds of wines that passed across the panel's palates were also accompanied by food. It may have got me grabbing the Gaviscon and engaging in vigorous post-judging exercise, but as a great believer that best wines are made for food, I was prepared to suffer for the cause during my stint at the Sydney International Wine Competition (SIWC).

"Wine is meant to be with food — that's the point of it," maintained American chef Julia Childs. And I agree.

Great wines are most often consumed and best appreciated with a meal, so I was happy to accept the invitation of outgoing SIWC director, Warren Mason, to join last year's "Top 100" team.

Though entries are limited to 2000 wines, I was relieved to discover on arrival at SIWC's Blue Mountains headquarters that we'd be having food with only the top 20 per cent. Nevertheless, several days of sampling proved a major internal workout, despite the dishes being fine fare cooked up by the competition's resident chef, Michael Manners. Not even post-judging power walks through beautiful local landscapes could offset our consumption that week.

Putting my digestive dilemmas aside, it proved to be a fascinating experience; with the copious food and wine combinations I encountered confirming that the presence of food helped good wines really shine. Conversely, those considered out of balance when judged alone remained so when accompanied with food, while excessive "show pony" styles that can seduce in a big line-up — but often prove difficult to actually drink

— were less likely to rise to the top.

Wines that work well with food — and are more likely to be awarded in these conditions — tend to be those with more elegant fruit profiles, subtle flavours, savoury elements, moderate alcohol levels and the fresh acidity that lifts the flavours of a dish.

These characters create a synergy with the food, rather than dominating it, enhancing the enjoyment of both.

Despite the benefits of judging wine with food, very few competitions around the world have chosen to take this route — possibly due the challenges both logistical and physical. SIWC was the first of its kind, while the Canterbury Wine Awards — of which I am chairperson — is the only other in Australasia. This extra dimension, however, was one of the attractions for the SIWC's new owners, Brett and Michaela Ling, who have some new ideas in this area they're looking to apply from their background as chemical engineers.

"The element of judging wine with food was definitely one of the attractive elements for Michaela and me," says Brett, who also works as a client executive for IBM, the company behind a cognitive computer system, Watson, that was "taught" to be a chef. "Watson understands food chemistry and can come up with novel dishes based on available ingredients," Brett explains.

"We are looking to explore if we can bring some more science to the matching of dishes to wines and if cognitive computing can understand the chemistry of matching wines with food."

This year a PhD student from Adelaide University is joining the team over the judging period to assist with this research. And I, too, will return, but this time I'll make sure it's following a period of fasting.



FOOD-FRIENDLY WINNERS

Lowburn Ferry "Home Block" Central Otago Pinot Noir 2014 \$55

Central Otago's Lowburn Ferry won SIWC's trophy for best pinot noir of the competition with its fresh and well-structured Home Block Pinot that layers cherry fruit with notes of earth, clove and herb. When judged with quail, it soared to even greater heights. From Boric Foodmarket, Fine Wine Delivery Company, Waiheke Wine Centre, Cambridge Fine Wines, Hamilton Beer & Wines, Primovino, Hillcrest Super Liquor, Pioneer Liquor, St Heliers Thirsty Liquor, Liquorland: Newmarket, Mt Maunganui, Katikati, Bethlehem & Gate Pa and lowburnferry.co.nz

Waipara River Estate Late Harvest Noble Waipara Riesling 2013 375ml \$24

Last month the Canterbury Wine Awards (CWA) announced its 2016 results, with this voluptuous dessert wine declared its overall champion. Made from some of the oldest riesling vines in Waipara, dating back to the early 1980s, it's hugely concentrated with notes of honey, marmalade and nectarine and a lusciousness cut by crisp citrus. Matched by chef and CWA judge Jonny Schwass at the awards dinner with a cheddar and white chocolate cronut. From waiparariver.com

The Winemaker's Wife Canterbury Pinot Gris 2015 \$22

Another CWA newcomer and trophy winner was this richly textured and pure pinot gris from the Banks Peninsula, in which fresh notes of pear and lemon are joined by a hint of spice. This worked wonderfully at the awards with chicken laced with hot sauce and garnished with leek. From Liquorland North Cross and thewinemakerswife.co.nz

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