

The joys and perils of Airport wines.

www.wine.co.za January 2015

In an effort to make my journey more of an experience, British Airways kindly changed my flight times so that instead of a three hour wait at Heathrow, it became a six hour wait. Something about schedule changes. Anyone who has experienced the joys of such soulless places knows how thrilled I was.

I decided that maybe I could do the 'joy' part of airport wines, by drooling at the wines in the 'cellars' of the Duty Free shops. I suspect most airports are fairly typical in the storage and presentation of their wines, though Heathrow at least has proper wine fridges in a couple of terminals for its top cuvées, most leave much to be desired but they don't stock many wines that deserve such treatment.

Several points came to mind. Firstly, the number of wines standing upright under 24 hour glaring light, and not just commercial wines either. Maybe they sell so many that none sit there for more than a few hours, limiting the damage, but I suspect not. During my 'stakeout' only a couple of bottles – at the bargain end- were bought. Lots of R400+ bottles were positioned right next to the busiest footfall and heat and light, in Terminal 5 my beloved 'Grange' at just under R7,000 was upright and brightly lit. Bet their corks are going to be fun to get out, and difficult to return a corked one when you aren't on the same Continent. Even the prestige wines in the fridge were spotlighted.

Secondly, the knowledgeable staff. I don't want any legal action, so let me just say that if I am going to buy a Pétrus I expect someone who isn't also selling perfume in the adjacent aisle nor someone who doesn't know whether 2004 was a good year for it or whether Penfolds Grange is red or white (yes, it was what she asked a colleague). I refrained from asking if Pétrus also came as a sparkling.

What about the wine description cards. Where several vintages of the same wine, say Lafite, were on offer, at very different prices (so someone knows its importance) the tasting note was identical. Each had bursting blue notes and elegant richness. I know Lafite is always superb, but you can't describe the 2002 the same as the 2005. I would also expect more than the, quote, 'full bodied, balanced and with silky tannins' on my Pétrus, something more Biblical, definitely – read on for its price. Mind you, tucked away in the corner of the note was a Robert Parker score for the wine of 91 / 100; heck, only 91? Maybe the 2007 Lafite at R29,000 was a better deal; at least Parker gave it 99 / 100. The 'rich berry flavours' note for the 2010 Penfolds Magill Shiraz was fine; the trouble was it was attached to the 2011's on sale.

And having the wine in the departure lounges is great, for those looking for a last minute gift or memory, and fine for most Riojas, Chiantis and 'Turning Leafs', but how many people want to buy

that Corton then subject it to carrier bag swinging, aircraft cabin pressure delights, turbulence, X-ray machines and boisterous Customs inspection?

If I had just paid R52,700 for the Pétrus – yes, really – I would want it to have its own seat at least. And be offered pretzels.

And that brings me to the greatest shocker. Prices. I know airports and the like are more expensive, but it is Duty Free and should be a reasonable deal. Maybe I am getting stingy and out of touch with what is happening in Europe (isn't there a recession?) but who is buying Penfolds RWT at R2200, Opus One at R5100, and Grange at nearly R7000? And very ordinary vintages too. If the Lafite 2004 was a shade under R29,000, what would the '05 be? Just how many impulse buyers are tempted by the half bottle of Inniskillin Cabernet Franc Ice Wine at R1200 ? I must be out of touch as I shudder on spying Jacobs Creek at R190 and Penfolds Bin 28 – a wine I cut my teeth on some ten years ago and hoarded at £8 (R135) a bottle now staring at me for R375. A little research showed me that prices have increased for the Penfolds range since I was a UK customer, Magill is indeed twice what I paid, but that is still nearly half what Airports are charging – Duty Free, remember.

Welcome to the real world ? Well, Veuve Cliquot in an SA supermarket is R200 cheaper than at Heathrow, and a world class 10 year old Tawny from our exceptional producers would be less than the R300 or a 20 year old less than the R850 on show at Terminal 5 and 3 under a light strong enough to assist planes with landing. Nice to see a spattering of SA wines at the terminal restaurants, too, though I shivered again at spying a familiar Stellenbosch Chenin Blanc at R90 for a 125ml glass, some six times the bottle price here in SA. I renewed my effort to put SA wines prices in a world context; boy, are we getting a great deal! To think what quality we are getting for under R200 a bottle is staggering.

As my sentence, sorry, wait drew to an end I did what I normally do; buy wines from the estates on my travels and never from airports. It's nice to leave the hot-house of the lounge for the plane – pity the poor wines. I can't imagine being in a position to buy a Pétrus and not derive maximum pleasure from the experience, as well as admiration and gasps from anyone within a 5 kilometre radius and a call from Hello Magazine. After all, this is not just buying a bottle of wine, this is making a statement in a place where statements go unnoticed.