

# STEVEN SPURRIER



## The togetherness of tasting

**P**ublicised as 'the only wine country with love in it', Slovenia is also known as 'the Switzerland of the Adriatic'. This sums up for me the charming, even exciting, wines now being made there and the ultra-restrictive rules of Ljubljana's International Wine Competition which I attended in early June.

The competition's President, Marjan Kveder, describes the competition as 'the oldest and the most advanced digital sensory evaluation in the world'. Oldest it certainly is, having been founded in the early years of the last century and now in its 52nd non-consecutive year; digitally advanced it is too, for the judges recorded their impressions by ticking 10 out of 50 numbered boxes on their computers, before moving on to choose from hundreds of pre-selected choices in the tasting programme to describe character, intensity, acidity, maturity and the like; as for sensory evaluation, giving an evocative description of what each wine has to say for itself, this remains for me the most frustratingly arid method of tasting in my long experience.

I have already written of my dislike of this system, which has been devised by the Union Internationale des Oenologues and the Office Internationale de la Vigne et du Vin (OIV), in 'In Search of a Scale for Judging Wines' (*Decanter*, June 2002). When asked to help create the rules for the Decanter World Wine Awards, I suggested the opposite of almost everything the OIV recommends, except tasting blind in proper glasses. Here numbers rule, there is no group discussion, and wines are never re-tasted, except if faulty. There are five tasters per panel, plus a chairman, only a median number is recorded for each wine,

the individual highs and lows being resolutely ignored, the reason for such opinions left un-asked. Pre-computers, at least some contact was possible as tasters were grouped around a table: solitary confinement now rules and not a word is spoken, the wine's number appearing on your screen after its barcode has been checked by the chairman.

The only information given is the wine's colour and whether it is still, sparkling, dry or sweet and, based on this, tasters have to tick boxes marked 'genuine' for nose and palate! Finally, not more than 30% of all

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wines presented are allowed by the OIV to receive awards, so if this quota is full halfway through, there will be inevitable demotions by the end of the event. Strip a wine of its medal without retasting it? Yes, for those are the rules, the OIV stating that the results are not for the consumer, but for the producer, the oenologist tasters judging their fellow oenologists' wines. Despite my reservations, the competitions are run by charming people in genuinely pretty locations, where, outside the tasting room, one can learn about the wines and enjoy them with their labels on. Next March, unless the OIV revokes my

invitation, I will be in Thessalonika.

But some pleasant surprises came outside the tastings. Ljubljana is a beautiful little 18th-century Baroque city on two rivers, whose hero is not a man of war, but a poet. Cafes spill out onto the cobbled streets and lunch for two in the fish market with half a litre of white wine and Illy espressos came to £13. The favoured hotel, the Slon (or Elephant), named after the circus animal that came to town after a long trek and could not be moved from the site, has large, airy rooms and broadband connections, and around the corner is Gostlina AS restaurant, with brilliantly modern food and a superb wine list. The grandest wine bar is owned by the charismatic Aleš Kristančič of Movia Vineyards, whose amazing Pinot Noir non-disgorged sparkling wine created a sensation at the London Wine Trade Fair in May, but others abound. Wine writers Robert Gorjak and Tomas Srsen have a passion for their country's local grapes, while admitting that Slovenia will probably find its identity on the international market through Rebula (Ribolla Gialla) Laski Rizling (Welschriesling), Refosk (the refreshingly tart red Refosco or Mondeuse) and Sipun (Furmint). Both agree, as does wine collector Professor Marin Berovic, that the revered 80-year-old Stanko Curin, whose credo 'finesse is inside the winemaker, nothing needs to be invented', is leading a younger generation, headed by Marjan Simčič, towards a great future.

Slovenia's performance in the Decanter Awards – seven wines/four awards in 2004, 35 wines/19 awards in 2005 to 53 wines/35 awards, with Simčič, garnering four Bronzes, a Silver and a Gold – shows clearly that this is a country to watch.

That they recognise the value of the UK market was shown in style at the Decanter Awards party at the Natural History Museum this year. Marjan Simčič, and Slavko Prapotnik, whose Curin-Prapotnik Sipun Icewine Prestige 2003 won a Decanter Trophy, took a whole table, well placed underneath the famous dinosaur, and I have seldom seen a happier bunch. I hope they come back next year. **D**

### WHAT STEVEN'S BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH...

#### ITALIAN WHITES

Over the late summer weeks, I really enjoyed Italian whites: Marco Felluga's 2005 Molamatta single-vineyard wine from DOC Collio, a perfect blend of Pinot Bianco, Tocai Friuliano and Ribolla Gialla (£12.50; BWC); and Michele Chiarlo's 'Rovereto' 2005 Gavi

from Piedmont, made with 100% Cortese (£11.02; N&P). Chiarlo's marvellous Rocca dell'Uccelletto Moscato d'Asti 2005 (Hal), frizzante and just 5% abv, is perfect for, or instead of, dessert. The pure deliciousness of these light sparklers is an absolute joy.

Steven Spurrier is *Decanter's* consultant editor, and a renowned taster