



Sydney International Wine Competition 2011

Reflections from first-time SIWC judge Xenia Irwin MW (England)

I felt very privileged to be invited to judge the Sydney International Wine Competition and when I read the list of other the judges, I was very honoured indeed. There aren't many wine competitions of international acclaim whose awards are recognised as a benchmark of quality all over the world, but the SIWC is one of them.

This was my debut year at the SIWC and I had no idea what to expect. The reality of it was quite astonishing. It is an amazingly slick and brilliantly organised operation.

It brings together an international panel of judges and attracts wines from around the world. It manages to be fair to the producers entering the competition and also to produce awards that are meaningful to the consumer. And that is no mean feat.

The dual-phase judging process allows entries to be tasted initially beside their varietal peers in controlled flights for elimination based on a combination of individual and consensus markings. Finalists are then retasted in controlled flights of wines of similar style, first alone and then with food. Combine this with a relaxed, conducive judging environment, finely tuned stewarding, pampered judges — and it gives all wines the fairest opportunity for proper evaluative judging.

One of the great strengths of this competition is the breadth of knowledge and experience of the judges, ranging from the stylistic and consumer-led experience of the international journalists, educators and trainers, to the technical expertise of the winemakers and then the disciplined analysis of the Masters of Wine. There was a wide and invaluable range of skills in use. Furthermore, the differing approaches of the Australasian judges, the European and Asian judges to differing wine styles and attributes ensured that all aspects of all wines got a fair and unbiased evaluation.

It is this second phase of judging with food that sets this competition apart from its peers and brings the consumer into focus. I have judged many international wine shows and frequently have been bogged down discussing intricacies and technicalities, chemical balances and invisible faults to the point where, often, we have lost sight of the end user — the consumer.

Of course it is vital to judge wine on its technical correctness, but it is also important to remember that very few consumers actually *taste* wine in the same manner or to the same detail that we judge it. They tend to *drink* wine and that is often with a meal.

This was the part of the competition I enjoyed the most but also found the most challenging. I am used to tasting and analysing the component parts of a wine, its overall style and quality, in isolation, but then to bring in an array of excellent, varied and delicious foods to taste alongside the contenders and a whole new layer of complexities needs to be considered and analysed. A comparison needs to be made between the “without food” and the “with food” assessments and a verdict come to in terms of improving — or otherwise — the final mark for the wine.

I found it fascinating the way some wines simply flourished with the ameliorating fats, oils, acids and textures of food, and yet others became overwhelmed or their structure disintegrated. From a consumer’s viewpoint, this holistic approach to the judging of the wines is an extremely valuable aspect. It was interesting to see that many of the rules for food-and-wine matching were borne out but also, that sometimes, the exceptions can break through.

One important lesson I learnt was that liqueur muscat and chocolate mousse is a new favourite of mine!