



## Sydney International Wine Competition 2011

### Reflections from first-time SIWC judge Oliver Masters (New Zealand)

As a prepubescent winemaker, one of the events I used to look forward to with eagerness was the annual appearance of the Sydney International's TOP100™ WINES tastings as they ventured south to Wellington.

For the occasional Kiwi award winners — at that time — it was merely a return home. But mostly, these were the exuberant Aussie tourists on display, eager to show off their wares. For me, the muscat selection was always the try line, the final goal to cross and the final exaltation. But Exhibition Godfather Warren Mason was always on beach patrol, ensuring we didn't have a chance to allow any individual wine to receive undue attention. These were tastings!

The international labels on the annual Sydney International's TOP100™ have changed quite dramatically since then, with Kiwi wines now competing favorably at many levels.

Still, it was with great excitement that I received an invitation to judge the 2011 Sydney International. In what felt like one of those formative early childhood memories, little did I realize it would be more like a rebirthing experience!

With a few months to go before the judging, there was plenty of time for Warren to build the atmosphere — mostly via a random cc selection of emails between himself and English Master of Wine Xenia Irwin (aka "Warrior Wine Princess") as she prepared to conquer the Blue Mountains by her sheer force of personality.

Base camp was the Sydney Airport Mercure Hotel where we gathered on a Sunday morning in a low-lit bar attended by the ghosts of previous judges. It felt a little like a scene from an Agatha Christie whodunit.

We were then transported into the Blue Mountains and "Birdland" where we were gently introduced into the well oiled machine that is the Sydney International. Time machine might be a better metaphor because, as per Dr Who's spaceship the Tardis, in a space no bigger than a normal residence, there was concealed a top-flight restaurant and a facility where 2000 wines were to be judged in immaculate circumstance.

Normally such events take place at sporting stadiums where large meeting spaces are available and the main entertainment is watching turf specialists torture grass.

As fellow Judge Simon Tam pointed out, even this competition's stewards seemed to operate in an invisible parallel universe, as an unending array of wines, glasses and food magically appeared and disappeared before us.

One of the tricks with such magic is that of distraction. This was provided for we judges by an array of recreational activities, darts and table tennis particularly popular.

So, to the judging itself. Obviously, one of the principal aims of the show is to combat the criticisms often launched at wine judgments — the sterile and controlled environs in which they normally take place are far removed from the reality of the dinner table. So, how do you combine the two?

It does seem that the Sydney TOP100™ has achieved a unique atmosphere where the wines are judged in a way that does meet the demands of both worlds. In fact I think the combination of people, place and food does allow the wines to be observed in what could be described as the Zen tradition of “open awareness” or “unbounded wholeness”. Nice concepts.

An initial assessment, along the lines of a normal wine show, takes place to select those wines which are potentially medal worthy.

In the second stage, most of the classes are divided into lighter, medium and fuller bodied whites and reds. But for me, in the case of many of the reds, it was more a case of XL tannin vs XXXL tannin.

In their new Style Categories, these successful wines are then scored again. First, once you have formed an initial opinion, a specifically designed food match is served to provide a different, and ideally sympathetic background against which to reassess the wine.

There were then various possible outcomes. Occasionally a wine would not match very well but this may not be the wine's fault. The score remained unchanged. Often the wine and food worked well together but, again, the score did not change. A number of wines did get up-pointed because their merits were reinforced by the food and, occasionally, the wine was transformed to a whole new level.

So where do we go from there?

The category I found most informative was the full-bodied reds. This class can often be one of the most challenging, where high tannin levels begin to reinforce between wines and they start to bully your mouth. Judging these wines with food was a joy. Generally I was inclined to follow my initial opinion but was much more convinced once all the wines had been given a fairer chance to shine and weren't just achieving by bluster.

Another category of wines on which it was interesting to observe the effects of food was those at either end of the normal complexity bell curve. That is, those that whilst having good concentration were either a bit singular or conversely overtly complex. With food, both these groups often improved dramatically.

Whilst these observations are not really surprising it was refreshing to have some important assumptions verified in practice.

Finally it would be remiss to not speak directly to the food prepared by Jaquie Mason and her team. It was superb! Deliberately not excessive in flavour but it often left me feeling guilty for not clearing my plate. The scallops, tuna tartare and beef cheeks didn't leave much evidence of restraint.