

# MY TASTE

**Theo Sloat**  
**Oxford Wine**  
**Company**  
**Oxford Wine**  
**Company v**  
**Cambridge Wine**  
**Merchants blind**  
**tasting**  
**Oxford**



Whose idea was it to have a blind-tasting competition? I had to wonder as I stared at the five unknown glasses of white wine in front of me as the two teams sat opposite each other, ready to do battle – the Oxford Wine Company on one side and Cambridge Wine Merchants on the other. It had all started off as an idea of OWC's Ted Sandbach's which he'd talked about with Hal Wilson of CWM for about a year or so. There we were, two teams of five, with only our gaily painted full-size wooden rooster mascot, Coq au Vin, for support.

Hal had been up for the challenge from the start and both companies thought a match could be fun. We drafted in Dr Hanneke Wilson of Exeter College to provide the wines and mark the papers. She has been the Oxford University Blind Tasting Team coach since 1994 when Jancis Robinson MW thought her old university team could do with some tuition and suggested Hanneke help them out.

We modelled the style of our match on the varsity format, using their tasting sheet and marking system, and having five people per team, no conferring and 35 minutes per flight of five wines (a flight of five whites followed by five reds).

You could sense the tension as we looked at the first five glasses in front of us. Going

## THE WINES

- Domiane Wachau Grüner Veltliner Smaragd 2008
- Leon Beyer Pinot Gris 2005
- Calera Viognier 2009, Central Coast, California
- Pazo Senorans Albariño 2009, Rias Baixas, Spain
- Saint-Daumary La Boca Loca 2008, Coteaux du Languedoc, France
- Two Paddocks Pinot Noir 2008, Central Otago
- Complices de Loire Chinon 2009
- Rosso di Montalcino 2008, Camigliano, Italy
- JL Chave Saint-Joseph Offerus 2007
- Finca l'Argata Montsant 2006

through the appearance and noses on the white flight didn't give too much away – two showed oak and neither of those struck me as being obvious by any means. The rest seemed horribly neutral and, as we discovered, not as chilled either, which didn't help. Both teams struggled with the whites with mixed success (I narrowly missed the Grüner Veltliner and Pinot Gris, and thought the Calera Viognier from California could just be a Napa Chardonnay).

After a brief 10-minute break we were on to the red flight which, after the whites, was a relief to all of us. Number one, which was obviously Pinot Noir with a New Zealand feel – I went with Marlborough and it was the **Two Paddocks Pinot Noir 2008** from Otago – close. With number three I was between Nebbiolo and Sangiovese and ended up going with the former – because of the kicked-in tannins – it was in fact a **Rosso di Montalcino Sangiovese 2008**. Number four was badly out of condition, but I picked up spice and leather and thought it could be a Saint-Joseph – which it was – **Saint-Joseph Offerus 2007**, in fact.



The hardest white was the **Coteaux du Languedoc La Boca Loca 2008**, which had 80% Roussanne and 20% Grenache Blanc, with semi-toasty new oak and relatively low acidity. It tasted rather like white Rioja. The hardest red was a **Montsant Finca l'Argata 2006** from Catalunya – a mix of 40% Grenache, 40% Syrah and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon – it was jet black and modern, well macerated with high alcohol and new French toasty oak. I toyed with a Syrah-dominated blend but changed to Malbec at the last minute.

Who said blind tasting is easy? On paper it all looks so obvious, but under pressure with little time it certainly isn't. But it was great fun, both teams thoroughly enjoyed themselves and the result was close. The Oxford Wine Company won by a margin of 41 points, scoring 462 against Cambridge Wine Merchants' 421. OWC's John Chapman scored the highest mark of the match on 111 points followed by myself on 99.

Personally I can't wait for our return match next year and I'm already getting in some practice for it.