

AUSTRALIA'S UNIQUE

CHAMPAGNE CHALLENGE

TEXT & PHOTOS: BERNADETTE O'SHEA

As clouds began churning in the late afternoon sky above Sydney, wind gusts picked up at street level, skittering leaves and urban flotsam. Something big was building in the heavens. Word soon flashed around the city centre that a monumental

storm, at present lashing the coast up north, was heading for the city and people were to take precautions. Not tonight, surely not, the night of the Vin de Champagne Awards dinner, with 140 invited guests set to arrive at the Opera House in just a few hours.

As it happened, nature's fury spent itself out at sea before lashing the metropolis, and the guests who stepped from their limousines by the grand staircase were decidedly grateful for the dry, balmy evening.

Inside the Guillaume at Bennelong, the stellar restaurant occupying the smallest "sail" of the Opera House on the quay side, the carefree crowd gathering on the upper terrace was sipping Ayala Zéro Dosage. Among them were twelve men and women who had more to be thankful for than just the passing of a storm. They were celebrating the completion of the final act in their bid to win the coveted award, the demanding examination about champagne before four judges. After long months of practice and study, it was over as of today. All

that remained now was to find out who had won.

And the only people who knew that were also on the upper terrace, sipping Ayala: the judges. This year, Daniel Lorson, Information Director of Comité Interprofessionel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC), had flown out especially for the day. He was joined on the panel by chief judge, author and wine writer Huon Hooke, wine lecturer Peter Bourne, and me, I'm honoured to say, all of us past winners of the award.

UNIQUE AND SIGNIFICANT

The Vin de Champagne Awards have been going for 35 years. They are unique to Australia and

have contributed to a notable spike in champagne statistics for a country of only 20 million people. Consistently, Australia is ranked among the top ten markets for champagne imports.

"For the first time, imports for 2007 hit the 3 million bottle mark, jumping nearly 12% on 2006," said Elisabeth Drysdale, Director of the Champagne Information Centre, which administers the Awards.

The contest is in two parts. First up is a written component earlier in the year which makes challenging demands requiring extensive champagne comprehension, method of production, history, palate judgment and opinion based on broad knowledge. When the twelve

winners of part one are announced, their training regimen gathers pace in the months before the final test.

Martin McAdam, an engineer from Brisbane, was the Amateur winner in 2006. He says most people think the Vin de Champagne Awards are only about drinking a lot of champagne - and he admits that a fridge filled with half-empty foil-wrapped champagne bottles may give that impression!

"But the palate's only part of the challenge," he says. "It is also important to have an intimate knowledge of champagne making, history, the process, the terroir, the producers, house styles and the characters of vintages and to be able to talk and write about it in a way that enthuses others.

"You need to be able to express your knowledge and experience so that others can understand and appreciate what champagne is all about."

Winners become lifelong champagne ambassadors, actively promoting champagne across all walks of life.

Daniel Lorson agrees. For the CIVC, the award has proved to be "a fantastic educational and promotional tool for champagne".

"It has enabled us to build a network of champagne devotees and aficionados across the whole of Australia. Some of the past winners are now real experts and contribute by their lectures, workshops and tastings to a better understanding of the region and its wines. The contest is exclusive to Australia and makes this market very special for the Champenois," he said.

RARE TREATS

As guests moved to their tables for the seven-course dinner, champagne talk was bubbling about everywhere and anticipation was in the air. Not only among the finalists, with their special interest in the announcements to come, but among all of us eager to try chef Guillaume Brahimi's menu, carefully devised to match the two or three champagnes to be served with each course.

The chemistry at play between champagne and food was enthralling, and the first great pairing of

the evening was Hiramasa Kingfish Sashimi with crème fraîche and Sterling caviar, accompanied by Bollinger Rosé NV. This new release has 5 per cent added red Pinot Noir from the family's Grand Cru vineyards, the Côte aux Enfants in Aÿ and their vineyard in Verzenay. On the palate are wild strawberries and figs - powerful and flavoursome in true Bollinger style - yet with a firm acid backbone that sang happily with the sashimi.

The Blueswimmer Crab Meat served on celeriac purée with beurre noisette was a perfect match for Louis Roederer Cristal 2002. The enticingly delicate bouquet in this wine followed with finesse and elegance on the palate, displaying yellow peach, raspberry and pink grapefruit, all surrounded by a prickly dryness. This worked ideally with the richness of the crab meat and texture of the celeriac.

And how stylishly the Pol Roger Sir Winston Churchill 1998 partnered the Southern Bluefin Tuna cooked à la plancha with confit of eggplant and capsicum! With its delicious mousse of tiny bubbles, it showed both youth and concentration, with leafy scents of moss and field mushrooms and purple iris. The palate reflected deep berries, and fresh notes of citrus fruits and mint, and the structure was compact with an elegant length on the finish.

In all, guests were served 16 champagnes from different houses throughout the evening and what a treat that was: a fitting feast for our spectacular harbour setting.



John Leydon, Elisabeth Drysdale, Martin Williams MW and Wiremu Andrews.

AND THE WINNERS ARE...

The finalists were dispersed among the different tables, so all the guests had their resident expert and would-be champion to wish hard for when the moment arrived. Winners are announced in three sections: professional - those who earn income from the food and wine industry, amateur - those with a passion for champagne, and student - those aged up to 27 who are enrolled in a wine or hospitality course.

These finalists had come from all over Australia, and many were far from home. Others were mid journey such as Trish and Tim, the Brisbane doctor duo who met up for the night in Sydney, she flying back from New York that day to be with finalist Tim for the announcement, and he flying out to New York the next morning to present at a conference of eye surgeons. Champagne ambassadors can pop up anywhere.

Though it wasn't Tim's night, he says he'll return next time to fight on. The Amateur award went to South Australian teacher, John Leydon, the Student award to Wiremu Andrews from Victoria, and the Professional winner was Martin Williams MW, a winemaker and wine consultant from Victoria - and, as it happens, a regular contributor to FINE Champagne Magazine.

The palate challenge, though essential, is the smallest part of the competition and it is the ensuing interview that is critical. Each finalist is given three champagnes in a blind tasting and twenty minutes in which to assess them and write



notes for the judges. This year the champagnes were Delamotte NV, Ayala 1999, and R de Ruinart NV. The two NVs were high-component Chardonnay wines, whereas the Ayala was Pinot Noir driven and expressing all the characters of the 1999 vintage.

During the twenty-five minute interview, each candidate responds to general champagne questions, covering all aspects of champagne production. Then follows a discussion relating to the tasted wines and each finalist talks us through how they reached their conclusions, in the process discussing the styles and qualities. This makes just guessing the House or vintage impossible, and it's a great way of discovering dedicated and talented palates.

Professional category winner, Martin Williams commented about how difficult it is to perform well. It's true that nerves can play an unwanted part on the day, and although we try to make the interview as relaxed as possible, it's never exactly a stress-free experience. Even for us judges, because we're keen for every finalist to do his or her best.

Martin feels that for him it was the amount of preparation he'd done that carried him through. The secret of his success, he says, was the steady, structured training he embarked on in the lead-up, and then remaining calm when it counted.

PRIZE MONEY CAN'T BUY

The appeal of the awards to such high achievers is the prize, something money can't buy. You practically need to arrive at the dinner with your bags packed because if you win you'll be leaving for Champagne in about 10 days. Finalists arrive at the dinner with their plans in place, just in case! Nobody to date has been known not to jump on the plane.

"It's always a very hard task to choose a winner from a strong field," says Huon. "It would be nice to send more than one finalist to Champagne as there seem to always be several who are well qualified, and we judges feel like overly harsh parents saying to their children: "You can go, but you must stay at home!"

The prize of two weeks in Champagne as the guest of the Champenois is a remarkable experience.

There is a beautiful ceremony of recognition which includes the presentation of the CIVC medal to each winner, usually in the presence of ambassadors and CIVC dignitaries. This is of course the coveted moment, and the hand-crafted bronze medal is something very special for the trophy mantle back home.



"For many it's the start of an exciting and passionate relationship with champagne," says Elisabeth Drysdale. And Daniel Lorson pays tribute to "the great friendship which has developed over the years between the producers of Champagne and the award winners".

Their arrival in Champagne in early October is just at the end of the harvest. They have the chance to taste the freshly-pressed juice, as well as discovering at first hand the various terroir and village characters, all of which mean so much to the enthusiast.

Martin Williams, writing from Champagne, says the hospitality this year is living up to its legendary reputation. "We are loving every minute." He mentions the many personal visits to various Houses where they are so warmly received, the tasting of great and rare wines, and magnificent meals at great restaurants. "We are making sure we squeeze in a good morning run every day so we can keep up with the pace!"

Huon Hooke sums it up when he says, "It's an experience they will treasure, and relive, and dine out on for the rest of their lives." And so say all of us.

Bernadette O'Shea is a wine consultant and champagne educator. She was one of the judges of this year's Vin de Champagne Awards.