

Weekend

It's a corker **P5**



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Northern soul: We chat to Lisa Stansfield

Grape expectations

Shaky about Chablis? Baffled by Beaujolais? There's no need to fear says sommelier Simon Ward, who's sick and tired of wine elitism.

Back in my twenties, I put red wine in the fridge," says Simon Ward. "I didn't know any different."

"And when I worked at Patshull Park, I felt unable to discuss wine with some of the guests who came in with a bit of money to spend on nice bottles. I didn't know a great deal and, to be honest, I was intimidated."

"There's an element of elitism around wine, people are scared of it: the names are strange, there's all the different varieties, there's this sense of you either 'get it' or you don't."

"I get so many people coming up to me saying 'I just automatically go for the second cheapest bottle on the wine list or the house red or white because I don't know any different'."

Wine is a baffling business.

All this talk of "bodies, aromas and noses" has got most of us tied up in knots - and that's before we get to "bouquets of raspberries" and "hints of cinnamon".

Jilly Gooden, you have a lot to answer for.

Are screwtops evil? Can we spend less than a fiver? Will the waiter laugh if I order this?

With all these questions and a thousand

more, it's little wonder most of us stick to what we know: whether that's a bottle of Chardonnay on a girls' night out or a £5.99 bottle of red in front of three hours of Netflix.

But 41-year-old Simon wants to put an end to this nonsense once and for all. His Wombourne-based business, The Glory of Wine wants everyone to discover and enjoy the beauty within the bottles, whether they've got £5 to spend or £500.

"I think the stigma is starting to go, thanks to the rise of the foodie generation and wine celebs like Olly Smith, but more still needs to be done," says Simon, who's been in the hospitality business for more than 22 years and has a Level 3 Advanced Certificate from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust.

But how do we do that? How do we broaden our boozy horizons?

"Ask questions!" laughs Simon. "Just ask away. There's no need to be embarrassed. Asking questions and asking to try things before you buy is the only way to demystify things."

"Go into wine merchants like Majestic or Tanners, which have branches across Shropshire, and just talk to the staff - they will be more than happy to advise you and share their passion. Be honest about your budget and your tastes. If you've got a budget of £7, just tell them that and they will find you a cracking wine. The average bottle of wine in the UK last year cost £5.03 so do not be ashamed of what you've got to spend."

Simon's own passion for wine started after he was sent on a course by his hotel bosses 15 years ago. His interest was immediately piqued and has grown every year since.

In 2012, he started a blog and, last year, started his own wine-tasting business, catering to everything and everyone from corporate events to stag and hen dos - intent on bring wine to the masses.

"Not everyone wants to wear bunny ears or go to Blackpool for their stag or hen do," he explains. "I suppose you could say this is a little more upmarket."

"The women seem to really enjoy it - it's an afternoon of bubbles and nibbles and they get to learn a little while having fun too. The blokes are always a little more cynical though! But if wine-tasting stag and hen dos are not proof that people want to embrace and learn more about wine, then I don't know what is."

Elizabeth Joyce

Simon's no-nonsense guide to enjoying wine

1 Set yourself a budget and try to stick to it. There are plenty of great wines available for under £10. One of my favourites is the Luis Felipe Edwards Gran Reserva Merlot from Chile for around £8.50. But if you can stretch to £15 or more the possibilities are infinite.

2 Ignore the most heavily discounted wines at the supermarket. They are there to tempt you to buy what they want to sell you. The vintage sounding wine names are often nothing more than the imagination of the marketing department.

3 Ignore the old adage of white wine for fish and red wine for meat. Drink what you like, when you like, although certain whites will go better with meat and vice versa. Viognier is perfect with chicken and Pinot Noir is a lovely match for grilled salmon.

4 Occasionally, think further than your local supermarket. Try a specialist wine merchant such as Majestic or Tanners. Don't be intimidated: go in and have a browse. There are some incredibly good value wines.

5 If you want to try something different, look for a familiar grape variety for a lesser-known region or vice versa. Examples would be Chardonnay from Argentina or Carmenère from Chile. They are usually great value.

6 If you are going to a dinner party, take a wine that is versatile enough to go with most food and neutral enough so that everyone can drink it. Sauvignon Blanc is good white and Merlot or Pinot Noir for red. Rosé is great at a barbecue.

7 Remember that duty, tax and retail profits make up a large part of the cost of wine in the UK. On a bottle costing £4.99, the real cost of the wine is 81p. At £6.99 it's £1.92 and at £9.99 it's £3.52 (more than four times that of the £4.99 wine). So trade up for better value.

8 If you are struggling to get into red wines, start with lighter styles as Beaujolais or Pinot Noir. Move to the heavier Majestic or Cabernet Sauvignon wines later on.

9 If you've not tried English wine you are missing a treat. We make some fantastic award-winning wine in England and Wales now, including wine from Halfpenney Green Vineyards from just outside Wolverhampton (pictured above). Our sparkling wines in particular regularly win top awards and rival Champagne for quality. Look out for names like Nyetimber, Ridgeview, Camel Valley and Chapel Down.

10 If you want to learn more and try some new wines at the same time, why not come to one of my events or book your own? One of the next events is on July 4 at Himley Country Hotel.



Five signs you're a wine snob

1. You decant

2. You cringe when someone uses the wrong type of glass or - even worse - holds their glass by the bowl rather than the stem



3. You don't buy wine from bad years

4. You don't buy screwtops. Heaven forbid

5. You go on holiday to vineyards

The stigma's starting to go thanks to wine celebs like Olly Smith