

# Wine Report 2005

Tom Stevenson



"The most significant entirely new wine book to emerge in 2003 is *Wine Report 2004*. This groundbreaking new annual has been produced by prolific wine author Tom Stevenson with a taskforce of strategically placed experts."

**Jancis Robinson, *Financial Times***

"A recent effort from Dorling Kindersley has set out to break the mould in which wine guides are formed ... A clever piece of publishing. It's truly international in nature, as useful in South Africa as it is in South Kensington. And it gives general readers a glimpse into the inside of the wine trade. For that reason alone, it's a stocking filler of rare distinction."

**Richard Ehrlich, *The Independent on Sunday***

"The truth behind the hype. A news-driven, one-stop resource for the busy wine enthusiast, professional, or amateur who wants to keep up to speed with a fast-moving subject."

***Drinks International***

"In a market swamped with too many basic, introductory guides, it's splendid to have at hand a truly useful and vivacious report of this kind. I sincerely hope it does well and look forward to the 2005 edition."

***Decanter***

"A meaty and original volume."

**Joanna Simon, *The Sunday Times***

"If you want to know what's really going on in the wine world, *Wine Report 2004* is a good place to start."

***The Independent Magazine***

"The perfect companion for a quiet evening in with a few glasses of smoky Spanish red? Oenophiles ... might like to curl up, glass in hand, with Tom Stevenson's excellent new *Wine Report 2004*."

**Giles Kime, *The Sunday Telegraph Magazine***

"*Wine Report's* 380 pages are packed with valuable information, fascinating facts, vintage evaluations and useful recommendations. It should become an annual institution."

**Liz Sagues, *Grapevine,***

***The Hampstead & Highgate Express***

"If you want the inside track on the global wine industry, with best bargains and top tips, this is the book for you. Stevenson offers a new angle using top wine experts to provide a snapshot of the world market."

***The Oxford Times***



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# Introduction

Sex sells, so they say, and no one knows this better than Larry Mawby, the Michigan-based fizz-master *extraordinaire* (see Atlantic Northeast).

I've been tasting his wines for many years and the quality and consistency have improved dramatically. It used to be – how shall I put it? – enthusiastic at best. But the amazing thing about Larry, apart from being able to levitate, is that even his worst sparkling wines have sold out. Other winemakers in the state thought that if Larry can do it, they could too, and within no time at all, almost everyone was selling Michigan fizz. Well, actually they weren't: they were making it, but not selling it. After a few years of watching their stock sit there, a number of wineries asked Larry if he would take it off their hands. He was mulling this over one morning, when the official notification arrived in the post that he could sell wines under the Sex label. Larry nearly spilled coffee over himself because he had half-jokingly applied for permission, not really believing that it would be granted in what is, after all, America's fairly puritanical society. But it was and, all of a sudden, he knew exactly what he could sell as Sex. He took everyone's stock, opened up the bottles, added a dash of red wine to turn the fizz pink, relabelled it Sex, and it has been flying off the shelf as fast as he can stack it! The owners of the other wineries were relieved and grateful that Larry bought the stock from them, but when they saw how quickly it sold, they did not know whether to laugh or cry. As for Larry, he never even knew what the 'pink dollar' was until Sex came along...

## New this year

There are two new reports this year: Luxembourg by Danny Kay-lookalike David Furer; and Belgium, Netherlands & Scandinavia by Fiona Morrison and Gert Crum. David Furer is a UK-based American who used to live in Germany, close to the border with Luxembourg, where he has a number of contacts. Fiona Morrison is a Belgium-based Master of Wine, whose husband, Jacques Thienpont, is the owner of Le Pin. It tickled me to think that someone used to drinking the world's most expensive wine would be reporting on the hobby wines of Belgium. I was also impressed that she would bother. After all, she hardly needs the money. Gert Crum is a Dutch wine writer I last saw on a small 12-seater plane in 1992, as we hedge-

hopped across Poland on our return from visiting wineries in Moldova. Gert was so struck by the experience that he wrote *The Moldovan Wine Adventure* (published by Immerc BV).

These two reports will appear in every edition, but do not expect contributions in the future to be as information-packed as they are this year. Fiona, Gert, and David have been asked to provide one-off overviews as introductions to these relatively unknown wine-producing countries. Future reports will be exclusively news-driven and will include, of course, Top 10s, Vintage Report, and Opinion.

## Future editions

It is not just the world of wine that is moving fast – wine consumers are leading ever more hectic lives too, making it increasingly difficult for the twain to meet. The concept of *Wine Report* was so simple it is surprising that it did not already exist. The aim is to provide a one-stop update to what has happened in the world of wine over the previous 12 months. This makes it an ideal resource for the busy wine enthusiast who wants to keep up to speed but does not have the time. It has even caught on in the wine trade itself, which is not surprising since it encompasses many wine enthusiasts. Yet they are often far too busy to keep abreast of much else beyond the products they handle. If anything, the knowledge of most people in the wine trade is distinctly lopsided. They have a good general grounding and probably know a darn sight more about the wines they handle than most high-profile experts, but they also have huge gaping holes. Since the publication of *Wine Report 2004*, I have met many people in the wine trade who had not heard of the book, but not one who could put it down once he or she saw its contents. News is knowledge, and the wine trade is thirsting for it.

But *Wine Report* is ideal for all wine enthusiasts, not just those in the trade. I know of one very famous international businessman who keeps a copy of *Wine Report* in his briefcase, so that he can read the appropriate chapter when flying to different countries. When he dines out the first night, he is already up to speed. He told me that his local contacts raise an eyebrow when he orders one of the Most Exciting or Unusual Finds listed in the report, especially when he can tell them why it is so exciting or unusual. Just knowing the New Up-and-Coming Producers and some of the Grapevine news items that even his local contacts do not know gives him an enormous advantage.

Ideal maybe, but *Wine Report* is never likely to be perfect. There are plenty of gaps to plug. Not just countries such as Morocco and Algeria

(which are lined up for the next edition), but even more obscure wine-producing areas like Zimbabwe, Kenya, or the islands of Madagascar, Réunion, and Mauritius (which were supposed to have been covered in both the first and second editions, but proved to be tougher nuts to crack than expected, so the search continues). Or, indeed, minuscule-production countries of the ilk of Malta and Ireland. When they are reported on, readers will know that I am happy with the extent of geographical coverage. I also need a contributor whose remit will pick up on French wine news items that fall beyond that of the regional reports, such as the proposed super-AOCs. René Renou, the director of the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine, has been dubbed 'Superman' for proposing a two-tier appellation system, the upper division of which would be bestowed on wines of "demonstrably superior quality". The good news is the Burgundians are for it, the bad news is the *Bordelais* are not. Still, the good news is not all that good when we read why the Burgundians support the proposal. As Jean-François Delorme, president of the Bureau Interprofessionnel des Vins de Bourgogne, commented: "Of course, all of Burgundy's AOCs would be super-AOCs." ... Er, no. If they were, they would not be very super, would they? It would have been good to have a contributor follow this through and perhaps make it central to an Opinion piece, but it is not quite clear how such a report would be structured. Perhaps it should also have a broader brief to include matters of global importance, such as multinational wine companies.

As the reader can discern, there is a lot of tweaking to be done before *Wine Report* is even half-perfect but, as some of the topics covered in this edition illustrate, it should be interesting getting there.

- Wine made from vines grown north of Poland.
- Winery on Bali grows a crop every month.
- Viognier is a no-brainer in Idaho.
- Screwcap arrives in Canada.
- Teetotal Canadian restaurateur has 47,000-bottle wine cellar.
- Bioterrorism threatens Burgundy.
- Red-wine grapes grown in one-third of Germany's vineyards.
- Value of fake Italian wine in US exceeds \$541 million.
- 10,000 hectares of vines go missing in Slovenia.
- Wild vines have more sex.
- Black goo found in California nursery.
- Luxembourg wins nine out of 55 gold medals at the Riesling du Monde.

Tom Stevenson

# About This Guide

This is not so much a 'How to Use' section as an explanation of the brief that I gave to contributors and the parameters they applied (or did not!).

## Contributors

Every contributor to *Wine Report* was my personal choice. For the most part, they are the expert's experts in their various specialist areas. For some regions there are no experts, and I had to twist the arm of the most strategically placed professionals to tackle such reports. There have been small changes in contributors since the first edition, and I imagine there will be more in the future. *Wine Report* has very specific needs, so if some contributors come and go, the going has nothing to do with their expertise on the subject and everything to do with how I expect it to be applied. Ideally, I would like to see no more than one report per contributor (with my Champagne and Alsace reports the only exception), since this would project the desired specialist ambience, but it will take time to achieve.

## Opinions expressed by contributors

These are, of course, their own. I am not referring specifically to the Opinion section of each report (which is dealt with separately below), but rather the more general way in which they report a story. For example, the way that François Lefort (Grape Varieties) writes about GMOs could not be further from the way that Monty Waldin (Organic & Biodynamic Wines) covers the subject. I respect both of these contributors' opinions, although I do not agree with either of them. (Anyone interested in my view should look at [www.wine-pages.com/guests/tom/gm.htm](http://www.wine-pages.com/guests/tom/gm.htm).)

## Reader's knowledge level

Unlike most other wine books, *Wine Report* assumes a certain level of knowledge. Therefore, there are rarely any explanations for technical terms or even references to historical incidents. Readers are expected to know what these terms mean and what the references refer to, or at least have the intelligence and curiosity to look them up.

## News and Grapevine items

Regional reports include news affecting the region and its producers, wines, and consumers. This may incorporate gossip and rumour but not

marketing or sales stories unless they are of an exceptional or very hot nature. Non-regional reports have their own structure. It should be noted that, for Wine & Health, Beverley Blanning has been specifically commissioned to report the bad news as well as the good and, if anything, to err on the side of the former rather than the latter. I want to give readers as much good health news as possible, but *Wine Report* is for wine enthusiasts and cannot afford to be vulnerable to accusations of selective reporting of this sensitive issue.

## Opinion

Contributors have quite a free hand to spout off about anything they feel strongly about, but there are certain categories of opinion that are obligatory. These are, essentially, anything that is currently practised, legally or not, that the contributor believes should not be, and anything that the contributor believes should be happening, but is not. A few contributors found nothing wrong in their regions, which I cannot accept. There is no wine region where everything is right. Contributors should always attempt to balance their criticisms with practical solutions. Readers should expect to see the same opinions repeated or refined in each edition, unless the situation changes, which would be news in itself.

## Vintage Reports

Each regional contributor provides an advance report on the very latest harvest (the year before date of publication for the northern hemisphere, the actual year of publication for the southern hemisphere), plus brief updates on the previous five vintages. In the first edition, it was difficult enough to get some contributors to rate vintages on a 100-point scale, but most toed the line. However, everyone was using a different yardstick, so, from the second edition, all vintage ratings conform to the following definitions.

100	No vintage can be accurately described as perfect, but those achieving a maximum score must be truly great vintages.
90–99	Excellent to superb.
80–89	Good to very good.
70–79	Average to good.
60–69	Disappointing.
40–59	Very bad.
0–39	Disastrous.

Vintage ratings should merely be seen as 'betting odds'. They express the likelihood of what might be reasonably expected from a wine of a given year. The higher the rating, the fewer the exceptions; quality and consistency do, to some extent, go hand in hand.

## Top 10s

If percentile ratings for vintages did not set the cat among the pigeons, then these Top 10s of producers and wines certainly did. Very few contributors were worried about listing the 10 best of anything, but several were extremely reluctant to put that list in order of preference. Eventually most agreed to do this, but readers might come across the odd list that looks suspiciously as if it is in alphabetical order....

There was no requirement for each Top 10 to be fully utilized. If a contributor truly believes that, for example, only five or six producers or wines deserve a place in a particular Top 10, then that is perfectly acceptable. Furthermore, it was permitted to place the same producer or wine in more than one list. Such coexistence could even apply to the Greatest and Best-Value or Best-Bargain Top 10s.

## Prices

All prices in this guide are average retail prices, including tax, per bottle, expressed in the local currency of the country of origin. This is not a buyer's guide; the wines listed are supposed to be the greatest, best-bargain or most exciting or unusual, without restricting the choice to those that happen to be available on any specific market.

## Greatest Wine Producers

My guidelines to the contributors made it clear that their choice should be "regardless of status". In other words, even if there is some sort of acknowledged hierarchy, such as Bordeaux's *cru classé* system, the contributor should not feel restrained by it. On the other hand, if a contributor agrees entirely with a perceived hierarchy, there was nothing preventing him or her following it slavishly. Some contributors set themselves their own criteria. Dan Berger, for example, told me that for his greatest producers he had decided: (a) the winery had to be in business for at least 10 years, and production over that period had to have remained substantially the same; (b) the winery had to use substantially the same fruit sources, mainly from owned or leased vineyards, for the last 10 years, and not deviate from a house style; (c) the ownership and winemaking had to be consistent over the last 10 years; and (d) the winery

must make at least two wines that have achieved the highest levels of quality without ever deviating from that level, even in a mediocre vintage.

Dan's criteria represent a very professional way of ascertaining greatness, but it is not one that I would impose on all contributors. Furthermore, the term 'greatest' is relative: it does not necessarily mean that the producer is intrinsically great. The best producer in California should be intrinsically great, but although the greatest producer in Belgium must, by definition, be its greatest, in practice it will be no more than 'interesting'. Readers should expect the Greatest Producers list to change the least of all the Top 10s from year to year.

### Fastest-Improving Producers

Whether good or bad, reputations tend to stick well beyond their shelf life, which is why this particular Top 10 is probably the most useful. While the rest of the market lags behind, you can benefit from the insider knowledge of *Wine Report*, buying up top-performing wines long before others cotton on and prices increase.

### New Up-and-Coming Producers

While Fastest-Improving Producers will probably be well-established wineries that have perked up, this Top 10 focuses on the newer producers that are the ones to watch. In some of the more conservative traditional areas, 'new' will be relative and should perhaps be taken to mean newer or a producer whose wines used to be sold only from the cellar door but have recently become more widely available.

### Best-Value Producers

This is self-explanatory.

### Greatest-Quality Wines

Each contributor has his or her own method for determining their greatest wines. I am sure that many do as I tend to do, and that is to list the greatest I have tasted within the last 12 months, rather than the greatest wines *per se*. True experts in classic areas will probably have notes on thousands of wines tasted in the last 12 months, and of these there could be 50-odd wines that would justifiably achieve a top score. Most contributors could probably fill their Top 10 Greatest Wines several times over. (Most years I could fill the Top 10 Greatest Alsace Wines twice over with just Zind-Humbrecht's wines.) Thus realistically this should be viewed as merely '10 of the greatest'. Then, of course, we

have to put them in order of preference, which can be a real pain. How, for example, is it possible to say whether the greatest red bordeaux is better than the greatest Sauternes, or the greatest Alsace Gewurztraminer better than the greatest Alsace Pinot Gris? If David Peppercorn and I find this difficult, what about Nick Belfrage and Franco Ziliani? The range of wines in Italy is far more complex. So, what most contributors end up with is '10 of the greatest in a less-than-logical order of preference'. This would worry me in any other book, but readers of *Wine Report* are supposed to be sophisticated enough to understand that this is fascinating enough in its own right.

### Best Bargains

Although most will be relatively inexpensive, bargains do not necessarily have to be cheap. It is easier to find bargains at lower prices, just as it is easier to find great wines at higher prices, but it is possible to find relative bargains at any price point. In theory, the greatest, most expensive bordeaux could be the number-one Best Bargain.

### Most Exciting or Unusual Finds

This could be an unusually fine wine from what is normally a below-standard region, winery, or grape. It might be an atypical wine, or the first of a certain variety or style. Each wine listed will carry a brief explanation of why it is so exciting and/or unusual.

### The 100 Most Exciting Wine Finds

Each contributor was asked to submit four wines for consideration for this section of the book, which meant approximately 160 wines. Only contributors for the emerging or more obscure wine regions were allowed to proffer wines from their Greatest Wines. The rest had to select wines from either their Best Bargains or Most Exciting or Unusual Finds, otherwise this section would be stacked with Pétrus, Krug, Romanée-Conti, the quality of which most readers will be aware of, but few can afford. I then tasted the wines blind, grouped by variety or style, culling almost 40 per cent (which is why I limited myself to just two wines from Champagne and two wines from Alsace). Contributors also provided a tasting note, which is followed by my own comment.