



By Paul Howard

Wine idols?



Celebrity wines uncorked

Celebrities are everywhere these days, clamouring for our attention.

Our lives are saturated with their latest images, activities and gossip. Celebrity status for some is based on achievement, notably in politics, the arts and sport. Others achieve it through notoriety or sleeping through reality TV. The nature of celebrity goes far beyond mere fame and, regardless of talent (or a lack of it), all celebs have one thing in common - they are famous for being famous. Whether on the A-List or the Z-List they'll happily promote a new range of merchandise to stay in the public eye, make money and massage their ego. Hence those familiar product ranges, from perfume to clothing, cookware to wine.

It's because we're worth it.

Those that protest against the rise of celebrity-backed wines will assert that celebrity is simply another merchandising tool, exploiting the brand value of a well known name for popularity, sales and profit while boosting the self-importance of the celebrity concerned. Meanwhile, the fans, hapless but happy consumers, are simply duped into drinking over-priced rubbish.

Others however, will argue precisely the opposite, pointing to the fact that some celebrities are extremely passionate about wine and furthermore, that they are actually responsible for wines that have real credibility and taste good too. In any event, what's wrong with a little commercialism?

The reality of course, is that both these opinions are true.

First then, those celebrity-endorsed wines: generally speaking such wines are far more about what's on the outside of the bottle than the contents inside. Open one up and you can almost smell the conceit, while what you'll taste is unlikely to tempt you back for another glass. What's on offer is no more than overpriced memorabilia.

There are plenty of these on offer and the list is growing rapidly. In sport, golf seems particularly well endorsed, while there's a cellar full of wines from film and TV actors - including Marilyn Merlot. From the Rolling Stones to Barry Manilow, the music industry is equally guilty. Would Elvis approve of his Jailhouse Red or Jerry Garcia like his own Chardonnay?

I'm more interested in discovering and drinking those celebrity wines that actually taste good. My top six are well worth seeking out. I've chosen these on the merits of the wine rather than whether or not I like the celebrity. Wine quality tends to depend on how active and involved the celebrity is, if not as outright owner then at least by having a say about how the wine finally tastes. Hence both the celebrity and the wine drinker can enjoy the results in the glass.

My all-time favourite is Rubicon from the Napa Valley. It's a Cabernet Sauvignon based wine from film director Francis Ford Coppola, maker of the Godfather and Apocalypse Now. He bought and restored an historic California winery back in 1975 and is still very actively involved. Rubicon is one of California's top wines and is expensive, but all the wines in the Coppola wine range, even the cheapest available, are well worth investigating.

Not far behind in my estimation is actor Sam Neill. He is one of New Zealand's best exports and well known for roles from Jurassic Park to Reilly, Ace of Spies. When asked about his winery he once said that, "if all I did was acting I'd go out of my mind." He owns the Two Paddocks organic winery in Central Otago in New Zealand and their award winning Pinot Noir is one of the best examples made. It sells out fast and rightly so.

Staying with acting, Gerard Depardieu is France's most iconic actor, with over 150 films to his credit. His passport states his profession an acteur/vigneron and he insists that he'd rather spend his time with grape growers than actors and directors. With several wine investments

to his name in France, the beautiful Château de Tigné in the Loire produces white and red wines. The red Cuvée Cyrano, named after his award winning performance in Cyrano de Bergerac is the best.

Money obviously wasn't Too Tight (To Mention) when Mick Hucknall of Simply Red bought an eighteenth century wine estate to create Il Cantante. This is a red wine whose name translates as The Singer, from the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily.

Hucknall enlisted Italian winemaker of the year Salvatore Foti and the results are impressive. Foti had, amazingly, never heard of Hucknall but was impressed enough with the estate's potential to sign on. I'm a big fan of Etna wines but this must surely be the only example ever reviewed in Hello! magazine. Not calling the wine Simply Red suggests that this operation wants to be taken seriously.

By far the best wine with a sporting connection is from golfing superstar Ernie Els. He teamed up with acclaimed winemaker Jean Engelbrecht in 1999 to create the Engelbrecht Els winery. Their flagship wine is called Ernie Els, a classic Bordeaux blend that has received great acclaim from wine critics around the world. No other sporting wine comes anywhere near this for sheer quality.

Continuing the sporting theme, England cricket legends Ian Botham and Bob Willis teamed up with Australian winemaker Geoff Merrill in 2001 to create the BMW wine range, a big seller and available in UK supermarkets. Plain speaking Beefy has long preferred wine to beer and BMW is an unpretentious honest quaffing wine that has Botham's big personality stamped all over it. A reasonable price too - I'll be making sure there's a bottle to hand for the 2009 Ashes series to invoke the spirit of Headingley 1981!

But sadly, celebrity involvement is no guarantee of good wine. Sir Cliff Richard is well known for Vida Nova, his Portuguese wine venture. However, he was duped into criticising his own wine by celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay on TV programme the F-Word. After tasting it blind he said "that's rubbish. I'd never buy that." We can debate whether Ramsay tricked Cliff into such an admission but he shouldn't need to worry - sales of Vida Nova have been enormous since it was launched in UK supermarkets back in 2002.

When all's said and done, it's the fans that count.

winereview...



Bodega Colomé, Estate Malbec, Valle Calchaqui, Salta, Argentina. 2005. 14.5%.

Colomé has the highest commercial vineyard in the world, at 3,002 metres. In Argentina "mine is higher than yours" makes a big difference - high UV radiation produces intense colour, fresh acidity and silky-smooth tannins. Hence this wine has a dense, almost black core with a purplish-black rim, smelling of a rich mixture of black cherry, blackcurrant, blackberry and blueberry with herbaceous and floral top notes. The rich velvet palate makes this a very satisfying wine, with masses of fruit and dark chocolate, black pepper and coffee notes appearing as it opens up in the glass. Very fine and one of Argentina's best, a perfect match with Braised beef in red wine with roast garlic mash **(see Recipe on Page 102).**

Oddbins £14.99 (£11.99 if you buy two), Waitrose £14.99.



Champagne Billecart Salmon Brut Réserve NV, Champagne, France. 12.5%

Billecart-Salmon make special Champagnes. Founded in 1818 by Nicolas-François Billecart, seven generations later it's one of the last prestige Champagnes to be family owned. Brut Réserve blends 40% Pinot Meunier for roundness and fruit, 30% Pinot Noir for structure and 20% Chardonnay for finesse. Very fresh before the richness kicks in, the bubbles are tiny and persistent - always a sign of high quality. Complex flavours overlaying a subtle yeasty background keep you coming back for more. Drinking now, it will improve for another 10 years. It's a wonderful apéritif; my favourite place to drink it is at the Champagne Bar in London's St. Pancras Station while waiting for the Leeds train.

Oddbins, £33.99.

Andrew Quady, Elysium Black Muscat, Central Valley, California, USA. 15%

Elysium is a sweet wine made from a rare black-skinned Muscat. Quady first made it in 1983 - love-god Bill Clinton regularly served it to his guests at the White House. Best slightly chilled, it is seductively scarlet hued and leggy, the intensely aromatic nose has a lovely perfume of red roses. The palate may be sweet but it's balanced by a good level of acidity, so it never cloy. You'll taste roses, sweet red fruits and lychee and one sip lasts minutes. Elysium is one of those rare wines that goes with chocolate brilliantly - Green & Black's 70% dark organic really hits the spot. A half bottle is plenty for two. Hint: this really is ideal for Valentine's Day!

Around £6.79, at Majestic, Costco, Latitude (Leeds) or Hoults (Huddersfield).



L.A. Cetto, Petit Sirah, Valle de Guadalupe, Baja California, Mexico. 2005. 13.5%

This wonderful wine is Mexican! The L.A. Cetto winery was founded in 1926 in Baja California by Luis Agustin Cetto, very popular with Americans during US prohibition! More recently, this wine won the International Wine Challenge Trophy for Best Red back in 1995 and has been an easy recommendation ever since. Petite Sirah is a deep dark ruby colour with violets on the nose, while the palate has concentrated blackcurrant and loganberry fruit supported by a good structure: fresh acidity and slightly drying tannins make it good with chops anytime over the next couple of years. Serve it blind and impress your friends mightily.

£5.99, Waitrose.



www.winealchemy.com



Astrolabe, Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand. 2008. 13.5%

This wine was awarded the Sauvignon Blanc Trophy at the International Wine and Spirits Competition in 2006. I was delighted to see that it's just won it again in 2008, particularly as I took part in the judging! Astrolabe was established in 1996 and quickly became a cult, named after the French ship which explored New Zealand back in the 1820's. Made in the big bold and pungent Kiwi style, it's dominated by a riot of powerful aromas and flavours. All the Sauvie hot buttons are present - gooseberry, currant and citrus overlay green herbaceous notes (think peapod or capsicum) before a smoky mineral finish. Food-wise, salads are good but seafood, especially mussels, are perfect.

Try it when dining out at Brasserie Blanc (£27.50) or Loch Fyne (£6.50 per glass or £25).

drink talks...

- The most northerly commercial vineyard in the UK is in Leeds. Leventhorpe Vineyard near Woodlesford is just three miles from the City Centre. Contact George Bowden on 0113 288 9088 to try and buy his excellent white wines.
- Esgana Cão is a Portuguese white grape whose name literally translates as "Dog strangler".
- South Africa is usually thought of as "New World" yet wine production dates back to 1652.
- The greatest wine labels are probably from Château Mouton Rothschild. These have changed annually since 1945 and feature commissioned works by renowned artists including Cocteau, Dali, Chagall, Picasso and our very own Henry Moore.

6 celebrity wines worth drinking

Francis Ford Coppola: Rubicon, Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, California, USA. £££££

Sam Neill OBE: Two Paddocks, Pinot Noir, Gibbston Valley, Central Otago, NZ. £££

Ernie Els: Ernie Els, Bordeaux blend, Stellenbosch, South Africa. £££££

Gérard Depardieu: Château de Tigné, Cuvée Cyrano Anjou Rouge, Loire, France. £££

Mick Hucknall: Il Cantante Etna Rosso DOC, Mount Etna, Sicily. £££

Sir Ian Botham OBE and Bob Willis: BMW Cabernet Sauvignon, McLaren Vale, South Australia. ££