



The South Bank: England's Newest Wine Region

by Tim Hughes

(originally published in the June 2001 Round Table Newsletter)

It is well known that England's status as a wine producer ranks a distant second to its reputation as a leading wine consumer. Indeed, England is a principal export destination for fine wines from around the globe. As such, it is hardly surprising that London should be home to places of interest to the wine enthusiast. Two such attractions are found in the newly fashionable area comprising the revitalized south bank of the Thames: "*Vinopolis—City of Wine*" and the Borough Market. Both are located a short walk from the London Bridge underground stop and can be visited during the course of an afternoon.



VINOPOLIS
CITY OF WINE

Vinopolis is constructed among the warren of enormous, barrel-vaulted arches that support London Bridge, giving its interior the dramatic impression of a wine cellar that Alice might have seen through the looking glass. It resists a definition that is both accurate and concise. Identified by its promoters as the "most exciting and atmospheric visitor attraction in the world, which you can enjoy with a glass of wine in your hand, Vinopolis is part museum, part school, part shop and part shrine.



Admission to Vinopolis is £11.50 (£10.50 if tickets are purchased in advance over the Internet), and includes an audio tour and five wine tasting samples. Each of the eleven rooms on the Vinopolis tour is dedicated to providing information on wine and winemaking in a particular wine region. The circuit begins with a lesson on how to taste wine: a sound idea for those who have not yet joined the growing company of persons who enjoy wine as a regular good habit. The talk I attended was enthusiastically presented by a member of the Vinopolis staff, who did a good job of conveying the basics of wine appreciation. For the remainder of the visit a digital audio player and headphones provide information recorded in considerable detail by well known wine writers such as Jancis Robinson, Hugh Johnson and Oz Clarke.

The audio tour begins in a room devoted to the "Cradle of Wine" which, according to Vinopolis, is Georgia. Those interested in a museum-quality experience will be disappointed that the majority of the bits of 'antique' wine paraphernalia in the room are reproductions. During my visit, a number of modern Georgian wines were available to taste. I tried Tamada 1998, which is produced from Saperavi, a grape unique to Georgia. It tasted of intense black fruit and had solid tannins, but suffered from a rather offish barnyard nose that suggested faulty vinification. The Saperavi grape may be a contender, but only when winemaking techniques catch up with the raw material available.



My affinity for fizz resulted in a protracted stop in the Champagne room. Here, a wide variety of sparkling wine is available to sample beneath a huge pyramid constructed from Mumm's Cordon Rouge bottles. The purpose of the structure is to demonstrate the various sizes of container in which Champagne is packaged—from the gigantic Nebuchadnezzar to the tiny bottles found on airplanes. For me, the most interesting wine at this stop was a vintage sparkling wine from India. Omar Khayyam 1994 is produced by



Champagne Indage Ltd. using traditional methods, including a secondary fermentation in the bottle. The wine has fine, persistent bubbles, a biscuit/hazelnut nose, and good acidity. The palate is not particularly complex, but it certainly isn't bad for £7.50 per bottle (much better than supermarket Champagne selling at the same price).

Admittedly, a passenger jet in which visitors can view a film about winemaking in Australia, and the row of Vespa scooters one can mount in the Italian room, give parts of Vinopolis a Disney-like feel. However, many useful exhibits are available for those without a keen interest in mechanized transport. For example, there is an excellent olfactory excursion through various wine faults. Additionally, a good series of exhibits explains how climate and soil conditions affect the characteristics of common grape varieties.

Overall, the Vinopolis experience is a good one, and well worth the price of admission. If you wish to part with more of your money, Vinopolis has a decent wine store (offering all of the wines available on the tour and many more), as well as a gift shop that sells a wide range of wine accessories.

A worthwhile wine stop immediately adjacent to Vinopolis is the Borough Market. Open from Friday noon to Saturday at six, it offers everything from food, to flowers, to wine. The Market lacks some of the architectural charm of Vinopolis (imagine the St. Lawrence Market located underneath the Gardiner Expressway), but it abounds with charming people. One such person is Stephen Harrison. He runs WineWineWine, a small booth where he sells a variety of French wines, with particular emphasis on the wines of Cahors. The major



grape variety used in Cahors is Malbec, which provides such excellent colour extraction that wine from the region has often been referred to as "black wine". The popularity of Malbec is undergoing somewhat of a renaissance at the moment because Argentina, the world's newest inexpensive wine region, relies heavily on the grape. Cahors is capitalizing on this wave of consumer demand by producing certain wines in a simple, fruit-forward style. One example is Georges Vigouroux French Malbec 1998, which is a true bargain at £3.95. The fact that it is named after the grape belies its New World character. Unlike inexpensive Argentine Malbec, however, Georges Vigouroux does not have tannins that attack your tongue like Attila the Hun. A more complex, cellar-worthy wine is Chateau Leret Monpezat 1996 at £8.95. The estate is owned by the Danish royal family, which explains the distinctive blue and gold capsule that adorns the top of the bottle. Mr. Harrison has many other wines in his stable, and a trip to his booth is superior to a visit to Vinopolis in at least one respect: he provides generous tasting samples at no charge.

A vendor of English fruit wines also plies his wares at the Borough Market. Although I didn't have a chance to taste any of the wines he had on offer, I did notice that some of them were made from grapes. Perhaps English wine producers are on to something after all. □

(Tim Hughes, ringleader of the Club's Wine Circle, is currently taking time out from his tax law duties at Stikeman Elliott of Toronto to do his Masters in Law at Exeter College, Oxford)