



Will LYONS on Wine – The Wall Street Journal – February, 20th 2014

Getting On Top of Wine's Altitude Problem

How wine behaves—or misbehaves—at 35,000 feet



Illustration by Jean-Manuel Duvivier

WE ALL DREAM of flying first class. Admit it, when the plane pushes back from the gate and begins its taxi to the runway, those of us not quite as close to the cockpit as we had hoped begin to entertain envious thoughts about those up front, sipping vintage Champagne and nibbling their smoked salmon and Osetra caviar.

I'm one of those who still experience a little pang of excitement as the catering trolley makes its way down the aisle. But such has been the downgrading of air travel in recent years that food is no longer a given, let alone wine. To compound matters, modern aviation regulations mean the oenophile hasn't a hope of bringing his favorite bottle on board.

Drinking Now





I'm always reminded of the final scene of "Hannibal" (2001) when Anthony Hopkins, flying in economy, takes delivery of a Dean & DeLuca hamper complete with a half-bottle of 1996 Château Phélan Ségur from Saint-Estèphe, an assortment of fruits, caviar and cheese and, infamously, a tiny pot of brain.

Not that I would recommend drinking such a delicate wine in such a small glass at 35,000 feet. Wines taste very different in the air; a combination of altitude and low humidity tends to accentuate a wine's acidity and alcohol. Meanwhile, the cabin's dry atmosphere will make the tannins—the bitter-tasting compounds found in red wine—more pronounced. And it's not just the wines that are affected. The way we taste things also changes at altitude. As the recycled cabin air dries the mucus in our nasal passages, our sense of smell diminishes, wreaking havoc with our olfactory appreciation.

Saint-Estèphe is known for producing wines with plenty of tannins and acidity in their youth—Dr. Lecter would be advised to plump for something a little riper and softer to pair with his brain; maybe an Australian Shiraz.

Which brings me to Australia and its flagship carrier, Qantas, which has, for the second year running, picked up a string of prizes in the annual "Cellars in the Sky" awards. The airline was judged to have the best overall wine cellar, above Emirates, which won silver, and El-Al and [Cathay Pacific](#), [0293.HK +3.98%](#) which shared bronze.

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Qantas says its success lies in its wine panel, created in 2003 and comprising three Australian winemakers: Vanya Cullen, Stephen Pannell and Tom Carson. They meet several times a year and assess hundreds of wines, asking questions such as, does it represent a premium wine? Is it a benchmark of its style? Is it drinking well and will it show well under flying conditions?

A spokesman for the panel says altitude dulls a wine's aroma, potentially ruining a good bottle of wine. Soft fruit and citrus flavors are reduced, whereas wines with riper, red-berried fruit tend not to be so badly affected. Meanwhile, a young wine can seem hard whereas older wines tend to taste better.

With its mainly Australian wine list, Qantas has got it right. My advice to fliers has always been to opt for those wines that are bigger, riper and more expressive, with low acidity. Something like a Merlot, Pinotage or Shiraz for reds or Chardonnay, Semillon and Viognier for whites.

It does seem a shame, though, that some of the finest wines in the world are consumed under such poor conditions. Having said that, if I were traveling first class and were handed a cool glass of effervescent vintage Krug after takeoff, I'd take it.

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DRINKING NOW

Three picks from British Airways' First Class wine list

(Select the dots to see the details)



2001 Château Grand-Puy-Lacoste Pauillac, Bordeaux, France

A British airline couldn't have chosen a more British-style claret if it had tried. The Borie family produces a wine that is refined and understated—a favorite of those in the know. With earthy notes of cassis and cedar, this will pair well with hot airline food.