

THE BLACKDOG
WINE COMPANY



Wine Merchants

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WITTERING on the VINE

News from Ashlyn's

Great British Artisan Cheeses

Chateau Roc de Cambes, Côtes de Bourg

and other thoughts & reflections

NEWS from ASHLYN'S FARM SHOP

Customers at Ashlyn's could be forgiven for feeling that matters here have recently lacked a certain amount of the zest that so characterised the earlier days of the business. Jim and Bird Collins founded Ashlyn's a decade or so ago, initially running it from the old outbuildings of the farm in Ashlyn's Lane, before developing the current site, with its spectacular traditional Essex Barn, newly constructed in green oak, and the adjoining Cart Barn from which we run Black Dog Wines. Jim's primary farming activities have however taken up more and more of his time and resources, and it is with considerable regret that some while ago the family made the decision to sell the farm shop and the adjoining land in order to concentrate resources on the prime wheatlands beyond the Cripsey Brook. These things of course have a way of taking more time than intended, hence perhaps the sense of drift that has pervaded matters for rather too many months now. However, we are pleased to report that the sale is now reaching its conclusion, and we expect the changeover to take place imminently.

As regular customers of the Wine Shop will be aware, I have been reluctant to commit the investment into this business that it requires until I have had a clear view of the direction in which the new owners intend to take the Farm Shop. Our tenancy does not yet afford us the security that would justify us, indeed allow us, to commit the requisite funds, and I have been keen to sense that things are settling down and 'moving forward' in such a fashion as will mutually benefit the two businesses. The incoming proprietor, Terry Mason, comes with a fully-formed reputation, and one which has been the subject of much worried speculation amongst the local community, by no means all of it ill-informed. Beneath his somewhat eccentric demeanour, however, there lies an undisguised Midas touch. We are great admirers of eccentricity in our wine producers, and the Ashlyn's business certainly will benefit from investment, so beyond any more immediate concerns one suspects there lies opportunity. It is Mason Snr's son, also Terry, who will be responsible for the activities of the business, and he has been working here, both inside and outside the main shop, for the past couple of months, during which time it has become abundantly clear that he and his brother James have the energy, the genuine enthusiasm and most importantly the resources, to carry Jim and Bird's original vision on to new levels. Customers will have noticed a new building at the rear of the shop, that fencing and hardstanding have been renewed, and that the site is being generally freshened up. More is to come. Terry Jnr is passionately enthusiastic about rare breeds, and we are awaiting the arrival of small herds variously of British Lop pigs, wild boar, critically endangered Boreray sheep, dwarf goats, Highland cattle and of a number of Rhea, small ostriches which I am told possess an 'assertive' personality. All of this is not mere frivolity. The meat will be fed through the shop and restaurant, and the overall range of high quality and local produce will be progressively enhanced. Such attention to the output of small, artisan producers is of course entirely compatible with our own principles and *raison-d'être*. The seeds of a potentially fruitful and exciting synergy are being sown.

further THOUGHTS & REFLECTIONS *on our* FUTURE PLANS
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❖ BRITISH FARMHOUSE CHEESES ❖

A passion for the wines of small, top quality producers is of course entirely compatible with one for excellent, artisan produced cheeses, and I am indeed passionate about good cheese! For a while now I have been acting in an informal capacity to help Rob and the team build up the selection of British Farmhouse Cheeses available in the delicatessen. We have concentrated, at least for the time-being, on British cheeses because these isles have somewhat unexpectedly become the standard bearer for fine artisan cheeses in Europe. Although there were once many thousands of locally distinct, and distinctive, cheeses produced here, the industry was all but destroyed by post-war government agricultural policy, which not only promoted a hideously flawed utopian ideal of standardisation, but enshrined it in law, to the almost fatal detriment of colour, individuality and originality. A few doughty traditionalists just hung on, most often by dint of recipes and techniques handed down through generations of families. After a long gestation and years of promotional donkey work by the likes of Randolph Hodgson of Neil's Yard, the industry is now once again flourishing, with brilliant new discoveries appearing on an almost monthly basis. Indeed, so good are we now at artisanal cheesemaking that young French cheesemakers are coming here to learn, or relearn, their craft! The selection that we keep here at Ashlyn's changes on a weekly basis, but a few favourites which lie at the core are shown for your intellectual delectation below. For the actual gustatory version, you will have to come here and buy some, but be assured that the experience of tasting these cheeses is far, far removed from anything you are likely to find at you local Tescburys.

KIRKHAMS LANCASHIRE £17.95 kilo

One of the truly traditional English cheeses, it has been made by Ruth Kirkham and her family to a recipe she learned from her mother 30 years ago. In 1939 there were over 200 dairies making Lancashire, by the end of hostilities in 1945 there were 25, and by 1970 this had dropped to a mere three. It is a particularly laborious cheese to make, using the curds of 3 days milkings, and is totally unsuited to factory production. It has a soft, buttery, crumbly texture and a lemony, tangy, savoury flavour. It is famously good melted on toast.

MONTGOMERY'S CHEDDAR £22.60 kilo

James Montgomery is the third generation of his family to be making cheddar from the herd of 140 Friesian cattle which graze on and around Cadbury Hill in Somerset, said to be the 'Camelot' of King Arthur. This famous cheese is traditionally handmade using unpasteurised milk, traditional yoghurt-like 'pint' starters (rather than modern powdered starters), and calf rennet. It is cloth bound in rounds, and aged for at least 12 months. It has a wonderful, smooth, firm texture and a complex, rich, nutty and persistent flavour, with a tangy finish.

DUNSYRE BLUE £22.80 kilo

From Humphrey Errington, maker of the famous Roquefort-like Lanark Blue ewes milk cheese (which we also keep here), this is from the unpasteurised milk of a herd of Swaledale cattle at the nearby Kirklands Farm. It has a smooth, creamy coloured paste pierced by a quite tight, chunky blue/green veining that imparts a spicy quality. It is not too aggressive in flavour, sharp yet mellow, rich and creamy, with a lingering complexity and a marked salt tang, very much in the tradition and style of Roquefort.

APPLEBY'S CHESHIRE £21.30 kilo

Cheshire is said to be the oldest British cheese, dating back to the Roman occupation, and mentioned in the Domesday Book. Traditionally from cattle grazed on the salty pastures of the Cheshire & Shropshire plain. Applebys use unpasteurised milk from their herd of 290 Friesian cattle, and make the cheese in traditional cloth-bound rounds. It has a lovely, rich, delicately russet coloured paste, a lightly salty flavour which becomes more tangy and pronounced with age, and a moistly crumbly texture.

SAINT GILES £21.90 kilo

St.Giles is made with organic cow's milk from High Weald Dairy at Horsted Keys in West Sussex. It is a semi-soft creamy cheese with a rich, buttery texture, a mild, creamy flavour and a stunning, edible orange rind. It is similar in style to a Port Salut. As well as being an excellent addition to the cheeseboard, it is delicious as part of a salad with tomatoes and black pepper.

CORNISH BLUE £17.95 kilo

This popular award-winning blue cheese is made by the Stansfield family using milk from their own herd of Friesian cattle at Knowle Farm near Liskeard in Cornwall. It is quite different from traditional British blues such as Stilton, having some of the characteristics of European cheeses such as Cambozola or Dolcelatte. It has a natural rind, a buttery coloured paste, a beautifully creamy, mild yet delicious, complex flavour, and a lovely texture.



∞ CHATEAU ROC DE CAMBES ∞
One of Bordeaux's Hidden Gems

The little port of Bourg, some twelve miles due north of the city of Bordeaux, overlooks the confluence of the great Dordogne and Garonne rivers; henceforth they collectively form the Gironde estuary. On the distant bank lie the famous vineyards of the southern Haut-Medoc – Margaux, Cantenac and Ludon. Important when Aquitaine was under the English crown and the town held some significance in the export of wine, the vineyards which lay on the limestone escarpment and its hinterland were once held in far higher esteem than those of the Medoc. Today the town possesses an air of sun-kissed, if sleepy, decay, an effect which might easily be perceived as being reflected in the wines traditionally produced in its appellation, the Côtes de Bourg; solid, but perhaps uninspiring, a little old-fashioned. In 1988 Francois Mitjavile, owner of the then rising-star St.Emilion Château Tertre Roteboeuf, heard of a vineyard which was on the market here. He visited, and was immediately struck by the similarity of the limestone escarpment and aspect with that of St.Emilion – it is essentially a continuation of the same geology – and the unique setting of the vineyard, which comprises a pair of natural amphitheatres overlooking the river, the great thermo-regulator which would provide protection from both frost and extreme heat. He persuaded his bank to back him, and immediately set about breathing life back into what he had intuitively perceived as a sleeping beauty, its 14 hectares of venerable vines split roughly equally between Merlot and Cabernet.

Today, Chateau Roc de Cambes is recognized by lovers of fine claret as not merely the leading wine in the appellation, but as one which can sit very comfortably at the top table of all of Bordeaux. That it is very often better than much that is produced in the famous appellations across the river is perhaps not the point – it arguably leans more towards St.Emilion than the Medoc – but it is both great and original in its own right. The hand of a quiet genius is clear, for the familial link to Tertre Roteboeuf is undeniable. Perhaps more characterized by red and berry fruit – cherries and blackcurrant – to the opulent spice of Tertre, sometimes more roasted, it is a wine which drinks beautifully from its youth, yet is fully capable of staying the course, developing breathtaking, thrilling finesse, depth and complexity over anything up to 20 years.

It has always given me enormous pleasure (for it permits me to drink it) that Roc de Cambes falls largely below the radar as regards the speculative investment that has definitively removed most decent Bordeaux from the shopping lists of mere mortals. I sense that this is changing. We have quantities of both the 2003 and 2004 vintages that we have held since the original shipment, and I must admit to having been taken aback when I saw the worldwide market prices for the wines during the course of preparing this offer. It is no longer quite the bargain it once was. However, we are pleased to be able to offer these vintages at comfortably the lowest prices in the world, and quite probably for the last time. It is an opportunity that the canny claret lover should not miss.

∞ CHATEAU ROC DE CAMBES continued ∞

Prices are shown per case ex-VAT, and the equivalent per bottle inclusive VAT delivered. Minimum order for this offer is one case of 12 bottles. The wine is presented in its original wooden case, and has been held since original shipment in the perfect conditions of the Octavian Underground Bonded facility in Wiltshire.

10 cases	2003 Château Roc de Cambes, Côtes de Bourg	£350	35.00
20 cases	2004 Château Roc de Cambes, Côtes de Bourg	£350	35.00

2004 Roc de Cambes – The Press

There are a handful of real stars in the côtes, but one stands out. At Roc de Cambes, François Mitjaville is making what is surely the best right bank wine outside Pomerol and St-Emilion. The 2004 Roc de Cambes, Côtes de Bourg is silky, graceful and harmonious with medium-weight tannins, cassis and black cherry. Buy some before it doubles in price. Or someone from Paris buys the château.

The first person to shake the area out of its torpor was François Mitjaville, whose Roc de Cambes in the Côtes de Bourg cocks a snook at the grandees of Margaux across the river. As the fragrant, silky, black cherryish 2004 Roc de Cambes demonstrates, Mitjaville's intensive vineyard work has made a nonsense of Bourg's humble status with a series of remarkable wines.

Lovely bloody edge to this wine that shows fine maturity. Refined, cedary, touches of gaminess quite tight and refined, has lots of spice and racy finesse. £46.99

Tasted four times - last time in April 2009. Consistent notes. Strong and spicy wine, full-bodied, black cherries everywhere. Fine length and fine aftertaste.

2003 Roc de Cambes – The Press

Deep cherry colour, medium intensity. The nose displays red fruit, jam, cinnamon, chocolate and fine notes of toasted nuances. Excellent attack on the palate followed by an impressive evolution of vivacious, smooth vinosity and a richly ample finish. A real treat!

Fragrant and beautiful, black fruit, prunes, woodsmoke, coffee and jam: Exotic. A note of warmth on the finish. A very complex wine, and not at all surprising given the vintage.

This was my first taste tonight and what a treat! Truffleley, briary nose, great balance on the palate. It has evolved into a dark fruit, complex mouthful as the night has worn on. Tannins and acidity are balanced and easy on the mouth.

Good bright red. Exotic aromas of cherry and dried rose, with a slightly roasted quality. Rich, sweet and lush; fat with jammy fruit but firmed by an edge of acidity. Very ripe and sweet but with sufficient structure to maintain its shape.

The wines are offered on a first-come first-served basis, subject to stock remaining.

SOME *further* THOUGHTS & REFLECTIONS

Assuming, then, that matters progress as we hope they will following the sale of the premises and business at Ashlyn's, what are our plans for Black Dog in the medium term? I am aware that events have dictated a certain 'treading of the water' and that much that we promised when we first opened here remains yet unfulfilled. This has been a matter of expedience, for which I beg forbearance.

Our *raison d'être* deserves brief reiteration. We exist to provide an alternative to the relentlessly bland and unrewarding experience of buying wine in the multiples. To do this, we must first specialise, and then inform. Personal prejudice dictates a strong preference for the wines of the northern hemisphere, and in general for those produced from grapes grown in more marginal locations, where the natural tendency possessed of the vine to yield substantial quantities of sweet but flaccid fruit is held in check by lean soil and a temperate climate. Almost all of the classic wine producing regions are thus constrained, by virtue of either latitude or altitude, to the outer limits of the ability of their given grape varieties to achieve ripeness. This way one finds potential nuance, complexity, harmony, and originality rather than sheer brute power. However, for that latent potential to be realised requires passion, dedication, a degree of eccentricity and above all intuition on the part of the winemaker, characteristics with which large organisations that exist primarily to make a profit for their shareholders are uniquely ill-provided. Great, original, thrilling wine is largely the stuff of small producers. Supermarkets and chains are entirely uninterested in such people, whatever gloss their marketing departments may put it. It is primarily the task of the small, specialist wine merchant to source such wines, and to attempt to bring that uniqueness as close to the customer as possible; to close the gap of comprehension, if you will, between the vineyard and the glass.

This should not be taken to mean necessarily high prices. Whilst I make no excuse for having no intention of attempting to slug it out in the notorious sub £5 category – true value for money of the kind that ensures a living wage for winemaker and merchant whilst also producing a drinkable wine is now out of the question here – I equally take issue with those who espouse the currently in-trend evangelism that we should all be drinking 'natural' wines at £20 or more a bottle. Delicious, even intriguing wines made with low-intervention regimes on an artisan scale are available from around £7 to £8, and it is frankly rarely *necessary* to spend much more than £15 or £20 per bottle, unless you are a lover of good claret, top-class Burgundy, fine Baroli or 'super-Tuscans' in which case deeper pockets are mandatory.

In the coming year we propose to increase our mailings to something as near as we can to a monthly basis, with the primary intention of being able to offer regular mixed cases which will feature the wines variously of our growers, of new vintages, and of new discoveries. We will try to make them both lively and informative. I am probably unique now in preferring the e-mail/printable PDF format, perhaps because I do not particularly enjoy reading from a screen. We will, however, develop our website to carry both the archive and future PDFs, as well as to ultimately show our entire catalogue of wines, with backgrounds to both regions and producers.

For the shop to fully realise its potential as a venue for not only buying wine, but also learning, we propose to install conventional wall racking, the better both to properly display the bottles, as well as to clear the floor space to serve as a tasting area. There has been a huge interest expressed by customers in wine courses, and you must be assured that as soon as matters are settled here we will instigate regular, probably weekly, tastings in the shop, which can also act as a venue for our proposed evening wine courses. In conjunction with Ashlyn's we also expect to commence a series of food and wine events using the restaurant and facilities in the main Farm Shop, upon all of which I will keep you fully informed.

With thanks to all of you for your custom over the last year or so, and my best wishes to you for the coming Easter, with heartfelt hope that the first shoots of an early spring give promise to a better year ahead than our esteemed leaders keep telling us we shall be having!

Toby Webster, April 2011



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