

THE ULTIMATE WINE LIST

With a daunting number of entries, competition was always going to be tough. **Chris Losh** looks on as teams of experts whittle down the hopefuls to create the shortlist for the Louis Roederer Wine List of the Year 2012

As the Wine List of the Year competition has grown, so we've kept adapting it. And this year we brought in a more rigid judging process, whereby each list was reviewed by at least two judges, who scored it against six key criteria: accuracy, aesthetic appeal/creativity, clarity/ease of navigation, quality of wine, relevance to market and value for money.

Accuracy, relevance and value for money were all scored out of 10, creativity and navigation out of 20, and quality of wine out of 30, to give each list an overall score out of 100.

By the end, it became apparent that to make the shortlist, restaurants needed to be scoring over 80. This year, being good was not enough, lists had to be

exceptional – and a lot of perfectly decent entries didn't get through. They weren't flawed or rejected (as has often been the case in the past) – they simply didn't score highly enough to make the cut.

As usual, our panel were not simply looking to reward vast wine lists stuffed full of blue-chip wines. A tight, well-sourced neighbourhood list, or an imaginative pub list put together with care and attention, had just as much chance of getting through.

Given that only 17% of the entered lists made the shortlist, there will doubtless be a lot of disappointed sommeliers and GMs out there. But we hope you can learn from the lists that did make it, carry out a few improvements and come back stronger next year.



THE JUDGES

Hamish Anderson, The Tate Group **Paulo Brammer**, ETM group **Neil Bruce**, Studio Alto **Nicolas Clerc**, Le Pont de la Tour **Christopher Cooper**, Soho House Group **Gearoid Devaney MS**, Flint Wines **Laure Patry**, Pollen St Social **Peter Prescott**, Prescott & Conran **Athila Roos**, The Arts Club **Alex Sergeant**, The Harwood Arms

Note: No judges were present at a session where their own list was judged.



SHORTLIST

63 Tay Street

PERTH

This small Scottish fine-dining restaurant picked up a Chairman's Award last year, and our judges liked much of what they saw again this time. An extraordinary number of wines for such a small place (36 covers), including – impressively – 18 by the glass, and 37 half bottles. The food-and-wine matching grid remains a unique stroke of genius (even if not a beautiful one), and some of the prices are terrific. £89 for Langoa-Barton 1995, anyone?

1707 Wine Bar, Fortnum & Mason

LONDON

This list is about two things: selection and price. Presentation-wise, it's a list of wines by region – albeit one that's clear and consistent. But the range of wines is terrific. You might expect Fortnum's to have a good range of champagne and claret, but the Austrian and German selections are great as well. And at shop prices plus £10 corkage, the prices are unmatched.

Boundary Restaurant

LONDON

When the champagne list starts around £60, you know you're in serious territory, and this Shoreditch eatery is unashamedly classical in orientation, with a fabulous selection of blue-chip French wines. Yes, there's some wallet-bashing stuff for City workers, but also a lot of careful sourcing at £40-£80 for the locals, too. Clear, elegant and accurate, Master Sommelier Christopher Delalonde has done his job very well. And the 'sub-£35' page is a fine idea.

Brian Maule at Chardon d'Or

GLASGOW

A second consecutive shortlisting for this Glaswegian eatery. 'We want our guests to

discover new things and love what they drink,' says GM Steven Whitbread. And this list – modern, clean and helpfully divided into broad flavour characteristics, such as 'aromatic whites with vibrant fruit', and with helpful tasting notes – will help them to do just that. A dozen excellent merchants and a few direct imports saw a high score for the wines on the list, too.

Camino

LONDON

This Canary Wharf-based tapas restaurant might cater heavily to City workers, but the formula is the same as for the others in the group: 50-odd wines, plus some sherries and fizz, and good pricing. Reds and whites are split up by style ('sunny', 'juicy', 'luscious' and 'buxom' for the latter, for instance), and there's a good selection by the glass and carafe. Quick, easy to navigate and bang-on for the venue.

The Cherwell Boathouse

OXFORD

Fine Wine List of the Year in 2010, shortlisted in 2011 – and back again in 2012. This is just a very good wine list. Clear and elegant, it's as easy on the eye as it is intuitive to follow. Despite being heavily European in focus, wines are split up by grape variety, so the 12-wine focus on Domaine des Comtes Lafon appears in 'Chardonnay'. Although not a vast list, there is 'plenty of variety', as Christopher Cooper noted, and pricing is astonishingly good, especially for the older wines.

Claridges Bar

LONDON

There's the air of a beautifully printed, 1920s leather-bound book about this A5 list: crisp, elegant typography, immaculate design and utterly faultless content. The champagne selection is particularly special, with enviable selections of formats and vintages for 20 marques of varying sizes. Only eight are available by the glass, and there's precious little under £100 (Veuve NV at £115!), but it's unlikely the target market looks at the right-hand column too closely. Perfect for the luxury bar it serves.

WINE LIST OF THE YEAR



SHORTLISTED RESTAURANTS AND BARS FROM TOP: BOUNDARY RESTAURANT, CLARIDGES BAR, 1707 WINE BAR AT FORTNUM & MASON

The Cross at Kingussie

PERTHSHIRE

A third successive and deserved shortlisting for the winner of last year's Small Restaurant List of the Year. Wines are split up by both varietal and style (depending on which seems more natural), the tone is helpful but relaxed, and the selection of both wines and whiskies is impressive. 'There's something here for everyone,' said Nicolas Clerc. 'It's a big list for such a small restaurant, but it's very dynamic.'

Divino Enoteca

EDINBURGH

The large, continuous selection of Italian red and white wines would be somewhat daunting to the non-expert, but these problems of navigability were, to an extent, countered by some interesting and accessible wine flights, and the fact that the many by-the-glass wines were listed in order, from light- to full-bodied. 'There are some very good wines here,' said Nicolas Clerc. 'They'll satisfy both the curious client and the connoisseur.'

Donnington Valley Hotel and Spa

NEWBURY

This list has the enthusiasm of a young puppy, with reasons-to-buy scattered throughout: sommelier's recommendations, 30 wines by the glass, focuses on selected wineries. And if the tasting notes and section introductions aren't enough to give you a flavour of sommelier Chris Neeves' personality, there's even a full-page cartoon of him. So yes, quirky and lively, but all clearly aimed at encouraging experimentation.

Enoteca Turi

LONDON

With more than 500 wines, nearly all of them Italian, and most accompanied by lengthy tasting notes, this is a list that's not short on information or affection. There are clear opportunities to charge big money for big names, but there's also evidence of thought at the entry level, too. And the selection of older wines is appealing. 'For a lover of Italian wine, this list is paradise,' mused Nicolas Clerc.

The Felin Fach Griffin

BRECON

'Wine,' says Julie Bell, GM at this Welsh inn with rooms, 'should be treated with respect and love.' And such fondness for the product shows throughout this terrific pub list. The 100 or so bins might be mostly European (something the team is working on), but the selection and pricing are impressive. A fine sherry range, and 17 wines available in two glass sizes and two carafe sizes, complete the picture of a place that knows its market superbly well.

The Harrow at Little Bedwyn

WILTSHIRE

Michelin-starred chef Roger Jones is a big champion of New World wine, particularly Australia and New Zealand – and his list is a prolonged love letter to the efforts of winemakers Down Under. There are 13 pages of whites (including a mouth-watering selection of Clare Valley Rieslings) and 11 pages of reds (including seven vintages of Grange). But this isn't so much about sheer volume as great names – often with a fair bit of age and at great prices.

Kenny Atkinson at The Orangery

DARLINGTON

For a top-end country house hotel, this list manages to be large and wide-ranging, without veering into phone-book territory. The by-the-glass selection is broad but accessible, and there's an unusually large range of stickies. Key to its place on the shortlist, though, is the way in which, along with the good selection of European classics, there are edgier offerings from Wales, Israel, England and Slovenia. It looks fantastic, too. 'Stylish and well laid-out,' praised Neil Bruce.

The Lawn Bistro

LONDON

For a French restaurant, this list is



SHORTLISTED RESTAURANTS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: THE LAWN BISTRO, THE GALLERY AT SKETCH, THE MODERN PANTRY, DIVINO ENOTECA, ENOTECA TURI



commendably comprehensive, including a Kékfrankos, a Brazilian Cab/Shiraz and plenty from Spain and Italy, as well as France. The structure is simple (with Traditional/European, New World and Off The Beaten Track sections), the pricing keen (around half the 150 or so wines are under £40) and the presentation exemplary. 'There are lots of good wines, it's relevant to its location, and the pricing is very fair,' praised Gearoid Devaney MS.

Lazy Lounge

LEEDS

Shortlisted for the third year running, this Leeds wine bar breezed through the first round again. Clean, neatly presented and simple to follow, its list scored highly for navigability. Felton Road Pinot for £7 a glass had our judges smacking their lips, and the 'pre-order' section – allowing punters to order more expensive bottles in advance – is a clever idea, and allows for blue-chip offerings without tying up money.

Lumière

CHELTENHAM

This small (25 covers) Cheltenham fine-dining restaurant's list is a great example of simple things done well. It's beautifully presented without being gimmicky, impressively accurate and consistent. The wines are fairly priced and well chosen for its clientele, with a good spread of prices and no hints of self-indulgence.

The Modern Pantry

LONDON

There's something eminently friendly about this five-page wine list that divides its wines by broad style and supports them with helpful tasting notes. With 25 wines by the glass (most of them in three different serve sizes), a good selection of sub-£40 wines, plus the odd splash-out wine for wealthy

THE SOMMELIER'S AWARD 2012

There are as many types of wine list as there are restaurants. But one definite sub-group is the Large List. Often the preserve of the very top-end eateries around the country, their listing of many hundreds of wines (sometimes running into the thousands) on offer precludes them from doing much more than simply listing the vast number of bottles they have available. There is no room left for tasting notes, quirky observations or educational extras – the kind of things that (along with great wine) our judges are looking for to win Wine List of the Year.

And yet these lists are worthy of recognition for the sheer range and quality of wines that they offer. And it is to reward such elements that last year we set up the special Sommelier's Award. This year's shortlisted contenders are:

Le Pont de la Tour

36d Shad Thames, London, SE1 2YE

Texture

34 Portman Street, London, W1H 7BY

Locanda Locatelli

8 Seymour Street, London, W1H 7JZ

Marcus Wareing at

The Berkeley

Wilton Place, London, SW1X 7RL

Bibendum

81 Fulham Road, London, SW3 6RD

Alain Ducasse at

The Dorchester

Park Lane, London, W1K 1QA

Clos Maggiore

33 King Street, London, WC2E 8JD

The Square

6-10 Bruton Street, London, W1J 6PU

Sketch

9 Conduit Street, London, W1S 2XG

The Greenhouse

27a Hay's Mews, London, W1J 5NY

L'Etranger

36 Gloucester Road, London, SW7 4QT

The Vineyard at Stockcross

Newbury, Berkshire, RG20 8JU

entrepreneurs, this Clerkenwell eatery really matches wine to customer.

Moro
LONDON

Unsurprisingly, this Moorish/Spanish restaurant focuses entirely on Iberian wines. In less than 100 bins, it takes you from Lisbon to Priorat, adding 26 sherries, in case you missed the point. As well as tasting notes (for most), every wine is rated 1-5 (whites) and 6-10 (reds) to give an idea of style and weight. 'Honest and well priced, this is perfect for this style of restaurant,' praised Paulo Brammer.

Nopi
LONDON

With less than 100 wines neatly packed onto two pages, the list at Ottolenghi's all-day Soho eatery is a great example of clarity and concision. But it's also intriguing, with sub-categories like Black Gold (Pinot Noir), Volcanic Wines and Going Natural. Oh, and there are even three sakés. 'It's perfect, yet still challenging,' praised Chris Cooper. 'And there are great wines at all price points.'

Northcote Manor
BLACKBURN

This Lancashire institution – Michelin-starred since 1996 – has a good selection of wines in every geographical section of its list. But it's quality, not bling (and certainly not sheer weight of numbers) that it's after, with fairly priced pedigree offerings from everywhere from Chile to Ribera to Champagne. Clear, easy to follow and consistent, there's certainly plenty here to like.

Pollen Street Social
LONDON

This is not a list that does anything unusual – but it is about as rock solid and professional as you could wish for. At 500 bins, it's not a small list, but nor is it stuffed with wines that won't sell. And while there might be a few trophy wines for clients with deep pockets, there is no shortage of fairly priced stuff, too. A third of the white Burgundies, for instance, are around £50 or less. 'This is very good for its Mayfair clientele,' said

Gearoid Devaney MS. Free of fuss, simple to use and error-free, it's a really good illustration of a no-nonsense list.

Porth Tocyn
ABERSOCH

This is an excellent example of a country house hotel wine list. There are enough wines (about 120) for it to be wide-ranging in scope, but not so many as to make it daunting. And the disciplined approach to listings means there's enough space for useful tasting notes for every wine. With helpful sub-divisions by style, and amazing pricing (lots under £25), this is a list that works hard, but does so effortlessly.

Rhubarb
EDINBURGH

It's good to see a fine-dining restaurant that takes the New World seriously, and head sommelier John Power has clearly put a lot of thought into all his sourcing for the restaurant in this boutique Edinburgh hotel. There are a lot of good wines in all styles from all over the globe, but little in the way of over-indulgence. 'These are relevant for the market, and a very good selection, with some exciting wines and a few good finds, too,' praised Gearoid Devaney MS.

The Rib Room
LONDON

The last year or so has seen head sommelier Louise Gordon increase this list to a whopping 500 bins – though she's doing her bit for the planet by putting it all on an iPad. This being Knightsbridge, there's not much under £40, but, as well as predictably good selections from Bordeaux, other regions such as the Rhône, southwest France, Australia and the US all have carefully thought-out



THE JUDGES SCORED EACH LIST AGAINST SIX CRITERIA: ACCURACY, CREATIVITY, EASE OF NAVIGATION, QUALITY, RELEVANCE TO MARKET, VALUE FOR MONEY



SHORTLISTED RESTAURANTS AND BARS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE SILVER STURGEON, SEARCYS CHAMPAGNE BAR, THE RIB ROOM

selections. 'An unfussy layout, with a judicious mix of classical and innovative wines,' said Hamish Anderson.

Searcys Champagne Bar
LONDON

With 29 houses, from André Jacquart to Veuve, half a dozen older, rarer vintages and a handful of larger formats (complete with helpful explanations), this is a solid, clear, user-friendly example of how to put together an engaging champagne list. Fair prices, too.

Shaka Zulu
LONDON

Tony Safqui, bars and beverages manager for this busy South African restaurant, has stuck with the eatery's national theme and put together a list made up (apart from champagne) entirely of South African wines. All bound up, in case you missed the point, in a (fake) crocodile-skin folder. Still, it's easy to follow, looks great, the pricing is fair, and

just about all of the country's good wine producers are in there. 'It's an original presentation, and very clear,' said Gearoid Devaney MS.

The Silver Sturgeon
LONDON

Jamie Oliver's floating restaurant has put together a list that is, as one judge put it, 'a bit cheesy, but also very Jamie. It's notably different'. Presentation is highly stylised, but easy on the eye, and it's a joy to follow, with helpful notes and some good, personal introductions. Could it be more radical? Probably. Does it work? Absolutely.

Tan y Foel Country House
BETWS Y COED

One of the best examples in this year's competition of how to make a wine list

accessible. There's a good selection, but, at less than 100 bins, it's not remotely overwhelming, and, separated by broad style, it's easy for the uninitiated to find what they want – particularly given some helpful tasting notes and low mark-ups. A Classics sub-section might have helped those looking for Rioja, say, but, for such a small place (12 covers), this is truly impressive.

Trangallán
LONDON

This list practically made it through on the basis of its excellent – and unusual – selection of 20 sherries alone, where the easy route has been carefully avoided and all but two are available by the glass. But the 28 table wines are equally stimulating, with three Riojas representing the only 'big name' region on view, eight natural wines and lots of interesting offerings from the outer edges of Spain. Good pricing, real personality, and much to get excited about – all in less than 50 bins. Terrific!

Terroirs
LONDON

With almost perfect scores for 'accuracy' and 'navigability', this list was a joy to read – and not just for its clarity. While there were no individual tasting notes, the commentary introducing each section was genius: funny, informative and tremendously engaging. With 20 by-the-glass options, a Flavour of the Month, and a horse logo used to highlight 'wildier wines... be they fizzy, farmy or just plain mental', this is wonderfully imaginative.

Thackeray's
TUNBRIDGE WELLS

No reason for the green-pen brigade of Tunbridge Wells to be disgusted with the wine list at their local eatery. Fine French restaurant Thackeray's has a well-chosen, medium-sized list that mixes the well-priced and recognisable with showier offerings to great effect. One of the deciding factors for our panel was the 30 or so wines on the Selection pages – all available by the glass.

Congratulations to the shortlisted venues. See the Nov/Dec Imbibe for the winners.