



Who serves the best onboard wine, and which bottles should you choose?

TOP-FLIGHT VINTAGES

WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

CELLARS IN THE SKY AWARDS

Over two busy days at the end of November, some of the world's finest wine experts assembled to select the best bottles served by airlines in business and first class in 2019. Our judges – masters of wine Sarah Abbott, Tim Atkin and Peter McCombie, journalist and wine writer Kathryn McWhirter and head judge Charles Metcalfe, co-chairman of the International Wine Challenge – took up residence at London's Amba Hotel Grosvenor in Victoria to conduct extensive tastings.

Business Traveller's Cellars in the Sky awards has been running since 1985. This year, 35 airlines entered, with judges sampling more than 250 bottles to find the winners. The competition is open to any carrier that serves wine in business or first class on mid- or long-haul routes, with each airline invited to enter two reds, two whites, a rosé (a new category), a sparkling, and a fortified or dessert wine from both cabins. Although they can compete in as many categories as they like, to be eligible for the overall award of Best Cellar they had to enter at least one red, white and sparkling wine.

All of the tasting is done blind, meaning the judges are not aware of the wine make or the airline that entered it. Given their extensive knowledge, "blind tasting is the only way to do it properly," Metcalfe said. To ensure their anonymity, bottles were encased in black plastic bags labelled simply with a letter and two numbers. I watched, for example, as the judges silently filled their glasses with the first flight of first class white wines – or, as they had come to be known, FC1 (followed by an additional number to differentiate each entry).

Perhaps silence is misleading. The swirling, smelling and swishing of the contents did create a rather amusing chorus of sounds, interjected by a few remarks as the experts jotted down notes on their trusty clipboards. Other senses were called upon, too, with the judges holding their glasses up to the light to examine the appearance of the wines.

To avoid lingering headaches, spittoons were arranged around the room – although these tended to lose their purpose during the final flight of first class sparkling wine, which, as McCombie chuckled, was "basically a



To be eligible for the Best Overall Cellar, airlines had to enter at least one red, white and sparkling wine

pleasure". A plate of crackers provided a much-needed palate cleanser between flights.

HOW THE WINES ARE ASSESSED

The judges paired up and tasted half of the entries for each flight. Once they had tasted them independently, they convened in their pairs and compared findings, scoring the wines out of 100. I watched as they discussed their remarkably close scores, which were averaged to get a fair mark. Team A then picked their favourite wines of the flight and put them up against Team B's selection, with the quartet then re-tasting the final selection and awarding Gold, Silver, Bronze and sometimes Highly Commended. "By the time we get to the final top winners, they're bloody good wines and they've been through the mill to get there," Metcalfe said.

Broadly speaking, the judges tended to agree, but disagreements were always welcomed as they were "a way to get deeper into the wine", Abbott said. "We know each other's strengths and weaknesses," Metcalfe added, although Atkin quickly tweaked this to "our likes and dislikes". →

COMPETING AIRLINES

Aegean, Aer Lingus, Aeroflot, Aircalin, Air Canada, Air Italy, Air New Zealand, Air Tahiti Nui, American Airlines, ANA, Austrian Airlines, British Airways, Brussels Airlines, Cathay Dragon, Cathay Pacific, Delta Air Lines, Emirates, Etihad Airways, EVA Air, Finnair, Gulf Air, Icelandair, Japan Airlines, Jetblue, Jetstar, Korean Air, LATAM, Malaysia Airlines, Oman Air, Qantas, Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines, TAP Air Portugal, Virgin Atlantic, Westjet. *Our thanks to all of the airlines that took part.*

PICTURED: The judges blind-tasted the wines then compared their findings in pairs



RICHARD GRAY, RUGFOOT PHOTOGRAPHY



UP IN THE AIR

While our judges have their feet on solid ground, they are well versed in the quality of wines at 35,000 feet. Experts in the field – or air, should we say – they look for balance and structure. White wines, I was repeatedly told, perform better than reds as the latter are high in tannins, which are more pronounced in the air and thus more intrusive. “What you tend to find is wines that have a kind of juiciness, a succulence about them, and have aromatic generosity, can work really well in the air,” Abbott said. “You don’t want anything too lean or austere.” Mature wines are preferred, but it can be hard to find these in the large quantities needed.

Red Bordeaux wines are often served on board as the estates, by and large, produce enormous quantities, but these don’t tend to fare well at a high altitude. That said, this time the competition saw some well-chosen Bordeaux, with great fruity vintages that had had time to age. “When you do find something like a posh red Bordeaux which is smooth, nicely mature and doesn’t have too frightening tannins, that’s a really significant achievement,” Metcalfe said.

Carriers also have to bear in mind that first and business class passengers have forked out a lot of money for the fares, and so expect an ultra fine-dining experience. “Just imagine knocking that back, falling asleep on your first class bed and waking up in Tokyo,” Abbott remarked enthusiastically. Meeting such elevated expectations is no easy feat, but Abbott congratulated the carriers: “Overall, they overcome these challenges brilliantly.”

So how do airlines go about grabbing a coveted Gold medal? According to Abbott, it’s all about “good, sensitive buying”. “The airlines that maybe don’t do so well are perhaps buying on label or prestige,” she said. McCombie added: “Sometimes those wines don’t shine in the air.” Still, I was assured that some luxury names had been very well chosen.

Wines that have juiciness and aromatic generosity can work really well in the air

THE JUDGES

FROM LEFT: Master of wine Tim Atkin, head judge Charles Metcalfe, wine writer Kathryn McWhirter, master of wine Peter McCombie (not pictured: master of wine Sarah Abbott)



A TASTE OF TOMORROW

So what does the future hold for in-flight wine? The aviation industry is constantly evolving, and new aircraft types with higher cabin pressures create a different environments for how passengers taste them.

“[The wines] should be more forgiving because low pressure and low humidity are definitely not favourable to enjoying wine,” McCombie explained. Metcalfe agreed: “It dries you out as a person and therefore dries out the inside of your mouth. That’s part of the reason you feel the tannins more.”

Abbott added: “I think those new cabins are trying to replicate more closely the conditions when you’re not in the sky. So I suppose the effect they would have for wine is that they would bring it closer to a natural environment on the ground.”

Then there’s the fact that Asia is a fast-growing airline market, and countries in this region are also starting to produce wines. For the moment, the airlines’ selections often remain traditional and conservative – French-focused old world wines still being a favourite – reflecting the expectations of passengers. Atkin commented: “The airlines are, in some senses, ten years behind the curve.”

The consensus is that European wines will perform better than Asian wines in the current climate, although the arrival of wines from China “might not be too far away”, Atkin suggested. In the meantime, here are the bottles that came out on top this year. Our congratulations to all of the winners.

AWARDS CEREMONY

Head judge Charles Metcalfe presented the awards at a well-attended reception on February 24 in the Grand Ballroom at the Langham London (pictured) – our thanks to the hotel for providing the perfect venue. See our next issue for pictures from the event.

READER EVENING

To register your interest in attending the annual tasting of the Cellars in the Sky winners, please email events@businessstraveller.com, stating your name and company.



WINNING REDS

BEST FIRST CLASS RED

Gold

ANA

Domaine David Duband, Nuit-Saint-Georges Les Pruliers 1er cru 2017, Burgundy, France

Judges said: Dark, alluring and perfectly complex. Incredibly good.

Score: 98

Silver

Emirates

Les Forts de Latour 2005, Pauillac, Bordeaux, France

Judges said: Great drinkability and maturity with a lovely classic Bordeaux palate.

Score: 97

Bronze

Qantas

Giant Steps Tarraford Vineyard Syrah 2018, Tarrawarra, Yarra Valley, Australia

Judges said: Fragrant and crowd-pleasing. Very good for the air.

Score: 96.5

BEST BUSINESS CLASS RED

Gold

Air New Zealand

Brennan B2, 2016, Queenstown, Central Otago, New Zealand

Judges said: Lovely fresh, juicy red fruits with some oak. A lovely balance and very elegant. A sexy crowd pleaser.

Score: 96

Silver (joint)

Air New Zealand

Trinity Hill Homage Syrah, 2015, Gimblett Gravels, Hawke’s Bay, New Zealand

Judges said: Charming and delightful. Savoury and oaky. Firm with rather dry tannins.

Etihad Airways

Turkey Flat Butchers Block Red 2016, Barossa Valley, Australia

Judges said: Ripe with a hint of sweet oak. Has an intense, long palate.

Qatar Airways

Astelia Syrah, 2017, Languedoc-Roussillon, France

Judges said: Delightful oak and gentle tannins; fresh, juicy.

Score: 95

Bronze

Singapore Airlines

Catena Paraje Altamira Malbec 2016, Mendoza, Argentina

Judges said: Attractive raspberry nose. Soft with sweet oak and a long palate.

Score: 93



THE WINNERS



WINNING WHITES

BEST FIRST CLASS WHITE

Gold

Qantas

Shaw and Smith Lenswood Vineyard Chardonnay 2017, Adelaide Hills, Australia

Judges said: Modern, rich, ripe and toasty. Very good.

Score: 98

Silver

Cathay Pacific

Nik Weis St Urbans-Hof Saarfelser GG 2016, Mosel, Germany

Judges said: Delicious and fragrant; a lean, fresh palate.

Score: 97

Bronze

Malaysia Airlines

Palliser Estate Chardonnay 2016, Martinborough, New Zealand

Judges said: Wonderful modern, oaky, elegant chardonnay.

Score: 96

Highly Commended (joint)

Cathay Dragon

Craggy Range Sauvignon Blanc 2017, Marlborough, New Zealand

Judges said: Classy, fresh and balanced with crisp acidity.

Singapore Airlines

By Farr Chardonnay 2018, Geelong, Victoria, Australia

Judges said: Lovely depth and texture while still gentle and delicate.

Score: 95

BEST BUSINESS CLASS WHITE

Gold

ANA

Stella Bella Skuttlebutt Sauvignon Semillon 2018, Forest Grove, Margaret River, Australia

Judges said: Delightfully fresh with grassy aromas. Wonderfully aromatic with a hint of oak.

Score: 97

Silver

Air New Zealand

Kumeu River Maté’s Vineyard 2016, Kumeu, Auckland, New Zealand

Judges said: Modern and smart with hints of citrus and toast. A lovely crisp, fresh palate.

Score: 96

Bronze

Virgin Atlantic

Van Volxem Saar Riesling 2016, Mosel, Germany

Judges said: Modern and complex with a nice fragrant and apple intense nose.

Score: 95



THE WINNERS

WINNING
ROSES

BEST FIRST CLASS ROSE

Gold

American Airlines

Château Gassier Le Pas du Moine Côtes de Provence Rosé 2018, Sainte-Victoire, France

Judges said: Lean and fresh with a bright, tangy palate.

Score: 95

Silver

Korean Air

Château d'Esclans Les Clans Rosé 2017, Côtes de Provence, France

Judges said: Refined and complex but well balanced.

Score: 94

Bronze

Etihad Airways

Château Les Valentines Rosé 2018, Côtes de Provence, France

Judges said: Had some great character as well as freshness and balance.

Score: 93

BEST BUSINESS CLASS ROSE

Gold

Air New Zealand

Two Rivers Isle of Beauty Rosé 2018, Southern Valleys, Marlborough, New Zealand

Judges said: Fresh, crisp, delivering a zesty palate with a clean, dry finish.

Score: 90

Silver (joint)

ANA

Château La Castille Rosé 2018, Côtes de Provence, France

Judges said: Clean and fresh with a touch of pear drop.

Emirates, Korean Air

Whispering Angel Rosé 2018, Côtes de Provence, France

Judges said: Crisp with red-berry fruits and good acidity.

Score: 89

Bronze (joint)

Air Tahiti Nui

Perle de Roseline Rosé 2018, Côtes de Provence, France

Judges said: Clean, fresh and attractive with bright berry tones.

Jetstar

De Bortoli Rosé, 2019, King Valley, Victoria, Australia

Judges said: Peachy and crisp; a light-bodied palate.

Score: 88



WINNING
SPARKLING

BEST FIRST CLASS SPARKLING

Gold

Cathay Dragon

Champagne Rare Millesimé 2002, Piper-Heidsieck, France

Judges said: Restrained, with toasty intensity. Absolutely fab.

Score: 98

Silver

Singapore Airlines

Champagne Krug 2004, France

Judges said: Really impressive. Gentle and toasty. Very drinkable.

Score: 97

Bronze

Emirates

Champagne Dom Pérignon 2002 Plénitude 2, France

Judges said: Rich and creamy, with real depth on the nose.

Score: 96



BEST BUSINESS CLASS SPARKLING

Gold

Malaysia Airlines

Champagne Taittinger Comtes de Champagne 2007, France

Judges said: Lovely – complex and serious with an interesting long palate.

Score: 98

Silver

Air Tahiti Nui

Champagne Charles Heidsieck Rosé Réserve, France

Judges said: Complex and very complete. Rich and long with lots of depth.

Score: 97

Bronze

EVA Air

Champagne Castelnau Millésimé 2006, France

Judges said: Complex, with a hint of honey and lemon curd. Good acidity. Really classy.

Score: 96

Highly Commended (joint)

Aircalin

Champagne Pol Roger Réserve, France

Judges said: Rich; serious. Really good for business class.

Korean Air

Champagne Perrier-Jouët Grand Brut, France

Judges said: Fresh, bright, vigorous and youthful.

Score: 95



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WINNING
FORTIFIED/DESSERT

BEST FIRST CLASS
FORTIFIED/DESSERT

Gold

Emirates

Klein Constantia Vin de
Constance 2013, South Africa

Judges said: Deep and
sweetly intense. Wonderfully
long and incredibly good.

Score: 98

Silver

Qantas

Morris of Rutherglen Old
Premium Rare Liqueur Muscat,
Rutherglen, Australia

Judges said: Classy and
outstanding.

Score: 97

Bronze

Cathay Dragon

Lions de Suduiraut 2015,
Sauternes, Bordeaux, France

Judges said: Rich, honeyed
with a lovely lift. Very classy.

Score: 96

BEST BUSINESS CLASS
FORTIFIED/DESSERT

Gold

Emirates

Dow's Colheita Port 1992,
Douro Valley, Portugal

Judges said: Appealing
layered nose with nutty and
dried fruit aromas. Gentle and
easy in the air.

Score: 96

Silver

Cathay Dragon

Château Filhot 2014,
Sauternes, Bordeaux, France

Judges said: Intense, ripe fruit;
layers of spice and botrytis.

Score: 95

Bronze

Oman Air

Château Suau 2016, Sauternes,
Bordeaux, France

Judges said: Good Sauternes,
creamy, honeyed and sweet.

Score: 94

WINNING
CELLARS

BEST FIRST CLASS
CELLAR

Gold - Qantas

Silver - Cathay Pacific

Bronze - ANA,
Singapore Airlines

BEST-PRESENTED
FIRST CLASS WINE LIST

Gold - Singapore Airlines

BEST BUSINESS CLASS
CELLAR

Gold - Malaysia Airlines

Silver - Qatar Airways,
Air New Zealand

Bronze - Aer Lingus

BEST-PRESENTED
BUSINESS CLASS WINE LIST

Gold - Singapore Airlines

OVERALL

BEST OVERALL CELLAR

Gold - Malaysia Airlines

Silver - ANA

Bronze - Cathay Pacific

BEST AIRLINE ALLIANCE

Oneworld

Head judge Charles Metcalfe



THE WINNERS

WELCOME
TO HOTEL PARISTER ★★★★★



Ideally located between South Pigalle (SOP) and Grands Boulevards, just a stone's throw from the Opéra and Les Galeries Lafayette, the Hotel Parister will offer you the most confidential and Parisian experience.

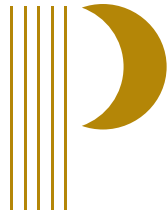
An indoor lap pool, yoga and pilates classes, lunch in the bamboo-shaded inner courtyard and a fabulous cocktail bar offering the city's largest French whisky selection: you will easily find that little something to make your stay special.

All-day restaurant Les Passerelles offers a great buffet breakfast, and lunch from Monday to Friday, before turning into a terrific cocktail bar at night.

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