

Unfiltered: Jules Bensacq

25 MARCH 2022

By Douglas Blyde

The group head sommelier and wine buyer for the 28°-50° collection of wine bars and a cabaret venue, talks to Douglas Blyde about his love for Château d'Yquem, the draw of London's vinous ecosystem, and love for jam – just not in his wine...



What is your vintage?

I was born in Bordeaux in 1997, a year from which I've been lucky to try the complete, floral, elegant Château d'Yquem twice – most recently at Christmas with my best friend, Thomas Robert, the estate's "Chef de Culture".

How did you learn about wine?

Rather than it being a revelation, my love for wine grew gradually. From the age of 15, I studied the subject under the much garlanded, Jean Luc Dantou, my teacher at my Lycée Viticole in Sauternes. He is a monster when it comes to his tasting ability. Wild looking and amazingly talented,

this very direct gentleman has won best blind taster in France twice. He coached me to become a finalist in the European Competition of Young Wine Professionals in Paris in 2017.

Where did you work before 28:50?

I did a mixture of cellar duties, wine brokers, then sales at properties including Château La Tour Blanche, Château Soutard and for Caroline Frey, at Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Château La Lagune and Château Corton C in Burgundy.

Why did you join 28:50?

I originally intended to spend just six months in London to improve my English. But when I stepped into 28:50, it became clear that I had so much more to learn here in this fast, cosmopolitan, dynamic city, replete with its rich vinous ecosystem of sommeliers, suppliers and journalists, so I stayed. And three years on, I am still here.

How many outlets does 28:50 have?

We have a new late-night cabaret venue in Marylebone opposite our wine bar, with other wine bars in Chelsea and South Kensington, and we are a fortnight away from another opening in Oxford Circus with the biggest counter so far. We are also opening a British pub featuring English still and sparkling wines and beers in Paddington in a month with an equestrian theme called "The Stable Hands".

How many wine references would we typically find at one of your venues?

350.



Describe the wine and drinks lists, including standout producers and recent upgrades?

Each venue has its own sommelier, which is a win-win situation because they can introduce me to great winemakers and the other way around. They will bring their own touches to the core list, which previously fit on two pages of A4 and has significantly evolved. Our approach is predominantly French, with Bordeaux being particularly well represented, including older bottles such as 1902 Lafite, 1982 Mouton and 1966 La Mission Haut-Brion and the wines of Château Magdelaine a gem of a château in Saint-Émilion which no longer exist having been divided into two properties.

What is your overall philosophy for the lists?

I don't want to have anything sleeping in the cellar for long – I prefer people to open bottles and enjoy them, which is why we must make sure our prices are attractive.

What might we find care of Coravin?

Casanova di Neri Brunello di Montalcino 2012.



What has been a standout wine pairing with a dish designed by executive chef, Julien Barris?

Julien has been at 28:50 since the start, working with Xavier Rousset MS. A new addition to our menus has been the seasonally changing recommendations for large plates for two to share with a bottle of paired wine, such as Gilles Flacher's Terra Louis St. Joseph with lamb. And there will always be cheese and charcuterie.

What has been one of the most delicious bottles you tried?

Château Rayas '98 has been the wine of my life (so far).

Which is the best table in the house at 28°-50° by Night?

It depends on how you want to design your night, though, for me, it would be the tables closest to the music.



What is a misconception guests have of sommeliers?

They might not understand the work that goes into building a decent list, the back office stuff, and all the items needed to provide a good service. But that's okay – I want them to forget about that, and not to think about how the sommelier might struggle to open a bottle of 1982 Bordeaux with its fracturing cork.

What was the last series you watched?

Netflix's "Chef's Table" goes inside the brains of the craziest and most talented chefs.

Where do you go on your days off?

Blandford Comptoir, La Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels and Noble Rot.

What style of wine do you struggle with?

I like jam, but not in my wine, preferring acidity, freshness and elegance.

Tell us something surprising about yourself?

I never drink wine after a shift.

What do you look for in potential sommeliers?

A good mindset. I don't care if you can't tell me the 33 Grand Crus of Burgundy north-to-south so long as you're motivated, want to learn, and want to be part of this friendly and almost familial adventure which we're living together.

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