



LIFESTYLE »

Raise your glasses

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The results are in. After sipping, swilling and spitting some 260 wines from 33 airlines, our expert judges have chosen the winners of the Business Traveler Cellars in the Sky awards, presented to the carriers that served the best onboard wine in first and business class in 2012.

Charles Metcalfe, head of the judging panel, handed out trophies at a well-attended reception on Feb. 4 at the Dorchester hotel in London (thedorchester.com) – our thanks to the Dorchester Collection for providing the perfect venue for the evening. We hosted tastings of the winning wines at the Business Travel Show in Earls Court on Feb. 5-6.

The judges were: Charles Metcalfe, co-chairman of the International Wine Challenge and food and wine matching guru; Tim Atkin, Master of Wine and award-winning wine columnist; Sam Harrop, Master of Wine and international winemaking consultant; and Peter McCombie, Master of Wine and top restaurant wine consultant.

How the Winners Were Chosen

Airlines can enter providing they serve wine in business or first class on mid- or long-haul routes. Each could enter two reds, two whites, a sparkling and a fortified or dessert wine from both their business and first class cellars. They could enter as many categories as they liked, but to be eligible for the Best Cellar awards, they had to enter at least one red, white and sparkling wine submission.

The tastings took place on Dec. 6-7 at London's Brigade bar and bistro (thebrigade.co.uk). Every vintage was blind-tasted so no one was influenced by the labels. Our thanks to the staff and the judges for all their hard work.

Wines were scored out of 100, with award-winning ones scoring between 93 and 97, and anything under 75 deemed undrinkable. To calculate the Best First and Business Class Cellar awards, we took the average score of an airline's red, white and sparkling wines. For the Best Overall Cellar prize, we took all scores into account.

What the Judges Said

"We're looking for drinkability," Metcalfe explained. "You don't want a mouthful of bestial tannins in the air. Your body is more stressed, you're dehydrated, so you want wines that are ready to drink now, and not ones that will be wonderful and mature in five years' time."

What characteristics work particularly well in the air? "Intensity," Harrop said. "Your senses are muted when you're up there, and I think all of the wines we've selected are aromatic, pungent and powerful." McCombie agreed: "At 10,000 meters, where you've got low humidity, the wines are more volatile, and sometimes the more subtle flavors disappear too fast."

During the 2011 competition, the judges found the quality of entries was not as high as it had been in previous years, perhaps an indication that airlines were cutting back in tough economic times. Fortunately, the general consensus was that things have improved. "This year, business class has been superior to previous years," Harrop said. "It could be that the wine buyers are listening and engaging with what the customers actually want in the air."



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Nonetheless, there is still work to be done. "There were too many tannic wines, particularly with the reds, which in the air would just be terrible texturally," Harrop remarks. Metcalfe agrees: "There were fewer absolute duds this year – although we did have one first class red that stank like the wrong end of a horse. It really shouldn't have been chosen to represent an airline."

Were there any pleasant surprises? "There were a couple of beautiful Bordeaux," Metcalfe noted. "Bordeaux can be tough in the air, with tough tannins and high acidity, but when you have a vintage with enough maturity – like the 2007 wine we chose as the Best Business Class Red winner – it can be delicious."

McCombie added: "Traditionally, New World wines have done better, as they have a more immediate flavor. But a more modern, fruitier Sancerre wine from the Loire, an Old World wine, won Best Business Class White."

As budgets continue to come under pressure, how can airlines maintain standards? "Cheap champagne isn't the answer," Metcalfe said. "If you're trying to cut corners, you're better off finding a decent sparkling wine."

Harrop agrees: "Champagne is the most important category, in a sense, because it's a passenger's first impression of an airline. It's better to spend an extra £10 and get something with richness and age. In business class, wine buyers shouldn't be led by brands too much. First class is perhaps a different story as passengers expect expensive brands, but in business you have a great opportunity to pay less and get more."

How Airlines Choose Wine

While some carriers have in-house teams to source them, others partner with external companies. Aer Lingus works with Dublin-based distributor Febvre. Monica Murphy, Febvre's wine research and development manager, says: "We rotate 16 wines each year, and try to have four different countries each time – the brief is to always have a French wine, because people expect an airline to offer one. The classics are always successful, so we try to offer them as well as the wild and woolly ones. We try to follow trends where possible – Aer Lingus was one of the first airlines to offer prosecco on board, for example. We're looking to Eastern Europe at the moment – Romania, Slovenia, Hungary and Greece."

Malaysia Airlines involves cabin crew in the selection process, training some to be "wine ambassadors." The carrier's food and beverage executive, Wong Rei-Wu, says: "Our ambassadors provide advice and insights into the wines we offer. All cabin crew are also educated on which wines pair well with which foods. This is something we have to consider carefully because of the often heavily spiced and fragrant Malay dishes served on board. Our satay appetizer, for example, pairs superbly with a Riesling."

FIRST CLASS

Best First Class Red

1 Malaysia Airlines Schubert Marion's Vineyard Pinot Noir, 2010, Wairarapa, Martinborough, New Zealand

What the judges said: "Wonderful and ripe with sweet aromas of cassis, damson and red fruits. Pure, dark, vibrant and intense with good evolution and soft tannins. A young wine, but very drinkable."

Score: 95

2 Emirates Château Clinet, 2001, Pomerol, Bordeaux, France

Score: 94

3 Lufthansa Château Canon la Gaffelière, 2007, Saint-Emilion Premier Grand Cru, Bordeaux, France

Score: 93

Best First Class White

1 British Airways Vincent Girardin Puligny Montrachet Premier Cru le Champ Gain, 2007, Burgundy, France

Earn up to 1000 Avios points



What the judges said: "Wow, step-up! A wonderful balance of freshness, minerality and opulence. Notes of lime and matchstick, with a toasty, rich, elegant palate. Sensational."

Score: 96

2 Emirates August Kessler Lorcher Schlossberg Alte Reben Riesling Spätlese, 2010, Rheingau, Germany

Score: 94.5

3 American Airlines Henri Darnat Meursault Clos du Domaine, 2010, Burgundy, France

Score: 93

Best First Class Sparkling

1 (JOINT) Oman Air and Qantas Champagne Taittinger Comtes de Champagne, 2000, France

What the judges said: "A superb, classy bouquet with a super palate of biscuits and limes. Fresh, vibrant, elegant and lean, with a wonderful intensity. Very well-balanced - incredible."

Score: 97

2 (JOINT) Emirates and Malaysia Airlines Champagne Dom Pérignon, 2003, France

Score: 96

3 Cathay Pacific Champagne Amour de Deutz Brut, 2002, France

Score: 95

Best First Class Fortified OR SWEET

1 All Nippon Airways W&J Graham's 30-Year-Old Tawny Port, Douro, Portugal

What the judges said: "Magnificent nose, showing an array of dried fruits and nuts. Smoky with a touch of heat, very well blended, gentle, soft and creamy."

Score: 96

2 (JOINT) Oman Air and Qantas Dr Loosen Riesling Beerenauslese, 2006, Mosel, Germany
and Qantas Seppeltsfield Paramount Collection Rare Muscat, NV, Rutherglen, Australia

Score: 95

3 Air France Château Guiraud, 2006, Sauternes, Bordeaux, France

Score: 94

Best First Class Cellar

1 Malaysia Airlines

2 Qantas

3 Lufthansa

Best-Presented First Class Wine List

1 Qantas

2 Cathay Pacific

3 Qatar Airways

BUSINESS CLASS

Best Business Class Red

1 TAM Airlines Château Bel-Air-Ouÿ, 2007, Jean-Luc Thunevin, Saint-Emilion Grand Cru, Bordeaux, France

What the judges said: "A very modern, drinkable Bordeaux. Cedary and leafy fresh with good tannins - lovely to drink now."

Score: 95

2 Singapore Airlines Bodegas Roda Rioja Reserva DOCa, 2007, Spain

Score: 93

3 Cathay Pacific Villa Maria Single Vineyard Southern Clays Pinot Noir, 2010, Wairau Valley, Marlborough, New Zealand

Score: 92

Best Business Class White

1 Oman Air Sancerre "La Porte du Caillou", 2010, Henri Bourgeois, Loire, France

What the judges said: "A vibrant, aromatic wine – bright, attractive and fresh, with grassy tones. Lovely attack, nice body."

Score: 94

2 Jetstar Main Divide Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, 2011, New Zealand

Score: 93

3 (JOINT) Aer Lingus Lawson's Dry Hills Riesling, 2008, Marlborough, New Zealand
and Emirates Metis Sauvignon Blanc, 2009, Trinity Hills/Pascal Jolivet, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand

Score: 92

Best Business Class Sparkling

1 (JOINT) Qantas and Singapore Airlines Champagne Charles Heidsieck Brut Reserve, NV, France

What the judges said: "Notes of orange peel and white pepper – a subtle, toasty, creamy palate. Fresh and elegant with superb richness and a bright complexity. Wonderful."

Score: 94

2 Qatar Airways Champagne Bollinger Special Cuvée NV, France

Score: 92

3 (JOINT) Air France and Cathay Pacific Champagne Deutz Brut Classic, NV, France

Score: 91.5

Best Business Class Fortified OR Sweet

1 KLM The Stump Jump Sticky Chardonnay Riesling Semillon Pinot Gris, 2010, Adelaide Hills/McLaren Vale, Australia

What the judges said: "A super wine – sweet, intense and bright. The exotic finish has notes of citrus fruit, peach, apricot, lemon and candied orange peel. Fat, oily and luscious, with a sensational acidity."

Score: 93

2 Finnair Niepoort Colheita, 1998, Douro, Portugal

Score: 92

3 Air New Zealand Winter Solstice Glacier Wine, 2010, Reliance Wines, Marlborough, New Zealand

Score: 91

Best Business Class Cellar

1 Singapore Airlines

2 Qantas

3 Aer Lingus

Best-Presented Business Class Wine List

1 Air New Zealand

2 Finnair

3 LAN

OVERALL

Best Overall Wine Cellar

1 Qantas

2 Singapore Airlines

3 Qatar Airways

Best Airline Alliance

Oneworld

-Rose Dykins

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