



THE  
ATHENÆUM  
PALL MALL LONDON

## **WINE DINNER**

Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2022 at 7pm

**THE BOOZE MUSE**

*Wine and The Creative Urge*



Manet's Absinthe Drinker (1858-9)

**Speaker: Professor Stephen Bayley**  
**Chairman: Richard Higham**

# **MENU AND WINES**

**Duo of Scottish Salmon, Tartare & Smoked from The Smoking Brothers. Served with Avocado, Sweet Pickled Shallots & Sourdough Crisps**



**River Tweed Sea Trout (GF)  
Sweet Peas, Roasted Parmentier Potatoes**



**Wild Boar Hand Raised Pie  
Creamy Mashed Potato, Koffman Cabbage & Bacon, Sherry  
and Rosemary Gravy**



**Strawberry Shortbread  
Ruby Chocolate Ganache, Vanilla Crème Patisserie,  
Strawberry Sorbet**



**Victoire Premier Cru, Champagne, France NV, 12%  
Sancerre Domaine Vacheron, Loire, France 2019, 14%  
Château Tiregand, Pécharmant, France, 2018, 14.5%  
Pedro Ximenez Nectar, Jerez, Spain NV, 15%**

## THE BOOZE MUSE

I am often asked how to stimulate creativity. And my answer always is: make it illegal. Nothing is likely to inspire the cussed creative type than an invitation to rule-breaking. Conventional morality counts for very little in the creative universe: as Picasso said, “I don’t borrow. I steal”.

But there are other sources of inspiration besides sin and speculation. Intoxication has a big part to play.

Poets tell us that opium dreams involve intense colours and excite powerful, often harrowing, visions. In both Poe and de Quincey, habitual abusers, a recurrent motif is a terrifying version of space both limitlessly vast, but claustrophobically controlled.

Opium reveals the semi-conscious sources by which literature begins to be written, but it is actually rather difficult to recall, still less describe, the intensity of the effect when sober. You need to be awake to describe a dream. So, opium flatters only to deceive.

The most accessible version of opium was laudanum, a suspension of the drug in alcohol. Both Walter Scott and Wilkie Collins, neither of whom we would consider hopeless junkies, dosed themselves with laudanum to help write when unwell. Thus, *The Bride of Lammermoor* and *The Moonstone*, sober monuments to Victorian genius, were drug-fuelled masterpieces written by middle-aged men who were off their heads.

Sobriety was never of much interest to poets.

Indeed, the idea that sobriety is a benefit at all is historically specific and a largely modern conceit. Most of Byron's poetry was written on "hock and seltzer", a mild potation when compared to Coleridge's Kendal Black Drop which contained opium, vinegar, spices and sugar. Byron helpfully noted that his friend's tippie makes you "drunk at once". John Keats had a well-developed taste for claret, the experience of which he liked to enhance by putting black pepper on his tongue.

The evidence is clear that drugs and drink help generate imagery and ideas, but do little to help capture, describe or edit them.

After experimenting with mescaline and describing his experiences in *The Doors of Perception* (1955), a title thieved from William Blake, Aldous Huxley became unconvinced that drugs helped creativity. In an interview about LSD with *The Paris Review* in 1960 he said :

"You could never hope to reproduce to the full extent the quite incredible intensity of colour that you get under the influence of the drug".

But he was impressed by the way LSD transformed his vision of the world. While under the influence, Huxley had *the impression* of experiencing "penetrating insights" into both others and himself. He thought it was both cheaper and faster than psychotherapy in helping excavate buried personal material which could be useful in writing.

LSD, Huxley thought

“shows that the world one habitually lives in is merely a creation of this conventional, closely-conditioned being that one is, and that there are quite other kinds of world outside. It’s a very salutary thing to realise that the rather dull universe in which most of us spend most of our time is not the only one there is”.

Still, it’s got to be admitted that the literature and art facilitated by LSD do not amount to much. The anthology of psychedelic creativity is a thin one.

With alcohol, we are on more solid ground, although in this context that may be an absurd metaphor. There is ample evidence that alcohol facilitates painting and writing, even as its larger destructive effects are well-known.

William James, we coined the term “Pragmatism”, admired alcohol because it was a “votary of the ‘yes function’ in man”. And creativity is more closely allied with saying yes than with saying no.

Take absinthe as an example. This was the fuel of nineteenth century artistic Paris : the bohemian poet and painter sitting hollow-eyed in a cabaret with trembling lip and aesthetic pallor was, to be sure, an absinthe drinker.

Besides simple drunkenness, of which it was a reliable cause, absinthe also caused vertigo, muscular spasms and narcosis. Its essential ingredient, alcohol apart, was wormwood, or *artemisia absinthium*. In its purest form, oil of wormwood causes severe convulsions, black-out, constriction of the throat and, very likely, death.

These effects alone cannot explain its popularity. It excited both mania and fear: the first painting Edouard Manet submitted to the Paris Salon was *The Absinthe Drinker* in 1859. It shows a degenerate in a top hat. It scandalised the artistic establishment who rejected it, giving rise to the Salon des Refuses which, ironically, became far more significant than the Salon itself. Thus, in a roundabout way, absinthe helped normalise the revolution of later nineteenth century painting.

Two years before Manet, in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire claimed absinthe reversed the vectors of his poor and doomed soul. To Rimbaud the green fairy, *la fee verte*, it was liquid alchemy, a drink that had a transforming effect on his imagination.

Science, however, remains uncertain whether it was the daunting 80% alcohol content of many commercial absinthes of Manet's day which had more effect than the presence of *thujone*, the psychoactive agent present in wormwood. Like a good curry, the Green Fairy also contained anise, fennel, coriander, marjoram, hyssop and *calamus aromaticus*. Its sale was banned in France in 1914. Modern *pastis* is its house-trained descendant.

Despite being made illegal in 1912, absinthe was never popular in The United States, but the following American Nobel Prize winners in literature nonetheless managed to become hardcore alcoholics abusing only domestic liquor.

Not, that is to say, mere *bon viveurs* with a taste for fine claret at dinner, but pitiable addicts with a destructive dependence pathology: Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O'Neill, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. And, while not

Nobel Laureates, the following distinguished themselves by being merely extremely heavy drinkers : Hart Crane, Edna St Vincent Millay, Thomas Wolfe, John Cheever, Norman Mailer, Djuna Barnes, Dorothy Parker and Hunter S. Thompson.

Hemingway adapted O. Henry's witty remark that "I drink to make other people amusing" and this ingenious strategy might account for much of alcohol's beneficial effect for the creative individual. Unamusing people may be transformed into useful material.

Hemingway's idiosyncratic and obsessive drink culture has lot of ballyhoo and bragadoccio. It is, for example, not at all clear that he much enjoyed drinking the cloudy mixture of champagne and absinthe which he recommended. Drink three to five....slowly was his advice and you will become agreeably drunk. However, always the one for practical advice, Papa always insisted that while you may certainly "write drunk", you must "edit sober".

So alcohol might offer a delusional fillip to creativity. It also has an uncertain role in matters of the heart. Shakespeare knew that drinking leads to "nose-painting, sleep and urine". Porter says to Macduff "Lechery, Sir, it provokes and unprovokes. It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with Lechery. It makes him and it mars him...makes him stand to and not stand to".

But Hunter S. Thompson was more certain of the all-round benefits of intoxication. "I hate" he said "to advocate drugs, alcohol, violence and insanity to anyone, but they've always worked for me". He had a commitment to extremes in every

activity. Of his motorbike he wrote: “Faster, faster, faster, until the thrill of speed overcomes the fear of death”.

The opening passage of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) has become a classic. Talking of the trunk of his signature '71 Chevrolet Impala convertible which he called The Red Shark, Thompson said: “We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt-shaker half-full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-coloured uppers, downers, screamers, laughers and a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls”.

As is well-known, in 1972 American cars had very big trunks. He modestly added: “Not that we needed all that for the trip but once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can”. Soon after Barstow, which is on Route 66 almost exactly half-way between Los Angeles and Las Vegas which are a mere two hundred and seventy miles apart, the drugs kicked-in. But Thompson had many strategies to avoid incapacitation or even just hangovers.

His daily regime involved regular shots of Chivas Regal de luxe whisky, cocaine, marijuana, margaritas, beers, chartreuse and LSD. And to recover from benders he would breakfast on four Bloody Marys, two grapefruit, a pot of coffee, crepes, a half-pound of non-specific “meat” and a couple more margaritas. (The “Bloody Mary”, by the way was created when Hemingway was hospitalised with war wounds and forbidden alcohol. The spicy tomato juice disguised the vodka and, at the time, Mary was his wife’s name).



In the absence of a supportive muse, artists crave other forms of stimulus. Coffee will do. At the same time as absinthe was wrecking one quarter of creative Paris, coffee became known *a le carburant des grands artistes* in another.

Drinking coffee has always been a form of social promotion: Nescafe Society is altogether more acceptable than crack dens, but coffee too has its dangers: 10mg of caffeine within four-to-six hours may be fatal. Be that as it may, the prodigally industrious Balzac drank fifty coffees a day ....although, we do not know whether they were hearty mugs or cute, miniature *demi-tasses*.

It “roasts your insides” Balzac said, although it was unclear why this was a good thing. He continued “Many people claim coffee inspires them, but....coffee only makes boring people more boring”.

It is maybe this very act of *transformation*, from drabness to colour, from unamusing to amusing, from boring to even more boring, that makes drugs and drink (and coffee) such valuable accessories to creativity: the booze muses.

## Champagne Victoire Premier Cru

Martel's Victoire has been one of the Club's favoured champagnes over the years. The grapes all come from the villages classified as Côte des Blancs Premier Cru: Mesnil sur Ogr, Vertus, Chamery.

The Chardonnay, Pinot Noir blend evokes effusive but different descriptions from brioche to apricot to citrus zest.

## Vacheron Sancerre 2019

We chose a Sancerre because Ernest Hemingway loved it.



He drank it at the Closerie des Lilas and I like to think that he raised a glass of it to Scott Fitzgerald when he handed Hem his draft of the Great Gatsby

Was he referring to Sancerre when he paid tribute to the the enormous, flat, slighty green-tinted *Marennnes-Oléron* oysters

in *A Moveable Feast*? “As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.” Incidentally and surprisingly he also enjoyed Sancerre with Pont l’Eveque.

Vacheron is one of the great names of Sancerre. Jean-Dominique and his cousin, Jean-Laurent are the current family members making this excellent bio-dynamic wine with its minerality, its cleanly balanced acidity and its fruit - gooseberry, passion fruit, lime green apple?

## **Chateau de Tiregand Percharmant 2018**



Ch de Tiregand has been in the hands of the St Exupery family for generations. The St Exupery connection is worth

celebrating in the wines made by this part of the family. Antoine's whimsical Petit Prince or his wistful Vol de Nuit are the works of a man who thrilled to (and died for) the early days of aviation but who could write: *"If you want to build a ship, don't summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs, and organize the work; teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean."*

The St Exupery family links to another literary figure: The musketeer d'Artagnan was almost certainly based on Jean-Balthazar de St Exupery Mousquetiere de Roi and Chevalier de St Louis in the sixth decade of the C17th. Percharmant sits just to the north of the city of Bergerac. Antoine de St Exupery makes good wines from grapes grown on good land. The grapes echo those of Bordeaux just to the West. Merlot (54%), Cabernet Sauvignon (23%), Cabernet Franc (18%) and Malbec (5%). A further branch of the St Exupery family own Château Pech-Celeyran in the Languedoc. while Malescot-St Exupery in Margaux retains the names of Maitre Simon Malescot, adviser to the king, and to the Parliament of Bordeaux, who acquired the property in 1697, and Jean-Baptiste Count Saint-Exupery, the owner between 1827 and 1853

## **Pedro Ximinez Nectar**

The González Byass wine story began in Jerez in 1835, when young entrepreneur Manuel María González started out as a wine trader. Rapid success led him into wine production, helped by his uncle José Ángel, known affectionately as Tio Pepe.



In the Gonzalez Byass Bodega in Jerez the great barrels named for the luminaries of the last 150 years are massed under a structure designed by Gustave Eiffel.

The PX grape is picked late and then dried in the sun. The wine must contain at least 212 grammes of sugar per litre but may have 3-400! The concept of the Solera is intriguing. As new sherry is added to the old in the original barrel, elements of each bottled sherry contain (reducing) amounts of wine dating back to the very beginnings.

Although Hemingway is said not to have liked sweet drinks he does seem to have favoured Pedro Ximenez: “Wine is one of the most civilized things in the world and one of the most natural things of the world that has been brought to the greatest perfection, and it offers a greater range for enjoyment and appreciation than, possibly, any other purely sensory thing.” —*Death in the Afternoon*

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