



Try your luck to win six of the best

Half-dozen-bottle cases of fine French wines are up for grabs in our contest

If you've never entered a wine competition in your life, now is the time to try. Equally, if you're a regular prize-seeker, try again. Something very special is waiting. The "thank you" afterwards will be owed to Sopexa UK, the agency which promotes French wines and other Gallic goodies here, and also to some leading British wine writers and sommeliers.

Let me explain. The Absolutely Cracking Wines from France tasting 2012 has just taken place, a showcase for some truly exceptional wines. And 12 of those I liked most will be in the wine racks of *Ham&High* readers soon. All you have to do for a chance to win one of the two six-bottle cases is to follow the instructions below.

Before I describe the wines, a little history. The Sopexa-organised Abcrack tastings go back to 2003. The first was prompted by an inspirational book, Andrew Jefford's *The New France* (Mitchell Beazley) and featured wines from close to a hundred of the growers identified by Jefford as responsible for ensuring that French wine culture early in the 21st century continued to be "as great an achievement as French literature or



■ Specially selected wines from across France are up for the taking

French cinema". That tasting was an eye-opening success.

In subsequent years the formula changed, with more wine writers (I'm privileged to be among them) selecting the wines – three from each writer, each in a different price bracket. This year for the first time sommeliers have also joined in.

The results have always been exciting, and 2012 was no exception. What is especially enjoyable – beyond the pure quality of just about all the wines, whatever their price – is their diversity, both where they come from and the grape varieties in them. This year, among just over 150 wines (costing from £4.50 to £42.50) bordeaux, burgundy and champagne hardly figured. Instead, top-of-the-league locations were Languedoc-Roussillon, the Loire and the Rhone. And other far less familiar vineyard regions included Franche-Comté, the Auvergne and Savoie.

Favourite retailer

As for grape varieties – how often have you encountered brauocol, carignan blanc, fié gris, jacquère, poulard or savagnin?

Another key feature of the tasting is how it identifies where some of the very best French wines are to be found in the UK. Far and away the favourite mainstream retailer among those making the 2012 Abcrack choices is The Wine Society, source of well over 10 per cent of the

bottles. Majestic comes next. Independent retailers (lots easily accessible on-line if they don't have London shops) way outnumber high street outlets, and names which feature most frequently are Berry Bros, Lea & Sandeman, Les Caves de Pyrène and Yapp Brothers.

Now to tempt your palates, here is a summary of the 12 wines in the prize boxes. Each box (they are equal in interest and value) contains a fizz, two whites, two reds and a sweet wine.

In box one is a fine Loire sparkler with no added sugar, a very serious muscadet and a complex Roussillon white, a light, fresh red from the Auvergne and a much richer one from Languedoc, and a sweet partner to all things chocolatey.

Box two's contents are a smart alternative to champagne, a remarkable Loire chenin blanc and a stylish Rhone white blend, an intriguing, delicious light red from the Vendée, an exciting Loire example of malbec, and a gloriously sweet yet crisp dessert wine from the foothills of the Pyrenées.

If you'd like the detailed list, with brief tasting notes, the selectors' quotes, stockists and prices, plus suggestions of other lovely Abcrack wines, email me on liz@sagues.force9.co.uk.

To enter the competition, answer the following question: Which wine writer's book inspired the first Abcrack tasting?

Fabulous fish, pity about the furniture

Despite his discomfort, our reviewer revels in exemplary fishcakes and perfect frites

The taxi driver who took me down to Camden Town was one of the few remaining wheezy old geezers who in the old days always would have had a damp and skinny stump of a roll-up wetly wagging up and down between his always whining lips, and clamped in place by one of his two good remaining fangs. "See that roadworks? See it? Weren't there this morning. On my life. I come down here early this morning, right? First job. Weren't there. None of it. Straight up. God's honest truth. Jubilee-vit? Always changing – that's the trouble. Everything, these days – it always bleeding changing."

Yeah – but not Camden Town. Never bleeding changes, Camden Town. Always a bit edgy, a bit dirty, a bit trendy, a bit tatty, a bit cool, a bit foodie, a bit criminal ... and always seemingly a million miles from Hampstead. The air: it's just not the same. Down here it is laden with the whiff of sweet chocolate muffins, joss sticks and Underground breath – badly tanned catskin, old ale and Moroccan pot. The stalls in the Inverness Street market are choked with not just knock-off logos but the naff embodiment of Old English tradition: obsolete LPs, Mecca Bingo, Amy Winehouse and the Union Jack. Now that the Queen's diamond anniversary and the Olympics are already



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Hazara is an Authentic Indian Restaurant using the freshest of ingredients with only the finest of herbs and spices.

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