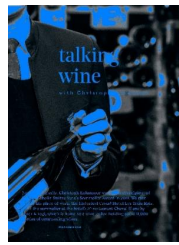




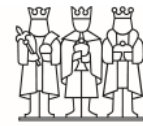
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LES TROIS ROIS

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talking wine

with Christoph Kokemoor

Not unexpectedly, Christoph Kokemoor was the first recipient of Guide Michelin Switzerland's Sommelier Award in 2019. We met him at his place of work, the historical Grand Hotel Les Trois Rois. He is the sommelier at the hotel's 3* restaurant Cheval Blanc by Peter Knogl, which is home to a wine cellar holding some 11,000 bottles of outstanding wines.

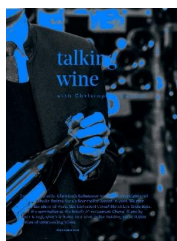
WORDS THOMAS HAUER



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I try to describe wines not only metaphorically, but rather with all senses.'

In 1797, Napoleon Bonaparte dined at Les Trois Rois. Rumour has it that the future Emperor of France preferred to enjoy his favourite wine, Gevrey-Chambertin, chilled. Today, this would be considered a taboo, right? How would you deal with such an unconventional guest request? At Les Trois Rois, such requests are rare. We're not in Zurich, Geneva or New York. However, should a guest ask for an ice cube with a glass of red wine, sure, I'd serve it. We'd never argue the point. A visit to the Cheval Blanc is meant to make our guests happy, and their pleasure takes absolute priority over our own preferences.

In 2019, you were bestowed Guide Michelin Switzerland's prestigious Sommelier Award. What is the significance of such an award? At the start of a career, especially, it can serve as a motivation to remain on the ball and always give one's best. I, myself, having worked on the job for many years, consider awards are nice to receive, but they are not the priority. Of course, it is an honour, a confirmation of the quality of one's work, but at the end of the day, our guests decide whether I served them well.

The Cheval Blanc's wine list includes over 700 different wines ranging from 50 Swiss francs for a bottle of Riesling x Silvaner from the Basel region to 13,500 francs for a bottle of Romanée Conti 2010 Burgundy from France. Truthfully, how often do you sell a bottle in the latter price range? Surely, a luxury wine of this kind mainly serves as a conversation piece. From my point of view, it needs both types in a top-class restaurant, reasonably priced wines that are fun to drink, and truly unique wines at a world-class level. Mainly, however, the price must reflect the value. To be precise, the Romanée Conti is actually a bargain. In the market, you wouldn't get this bottle for less than 19,000 francs. Consequently, for the same money you would need to enjoy a bottle of this wine in our restau-

rant, you could invite a dozen more friends for a fine meal. Quite honestly, most of the wines we serve are in a balanced price range.

We've also noticed that your wine list contains more than 100 types of champagne... True, sparkling wines – and especially champagne – are a hobby of mine, you could say, my passion. About 40 per cent of the selection on the list are produced organically, a very robust trend at the moment.

Your wine list includes over a dozen vintages of Château Cheval Blanc, a legendary Saint-Emilion Premier Grand Cru, to which the restaurant owes its name. Do you have a hot tip for a good bottle of Bordeaux that doesn't cost an arm and a leg? Unfortunately, the price of Bordeaux wines has skyrocketed in recent years and reached astronomical heights, which is a problem for exclusive restaurants. We are happy to see that the market situation has eased up a little with the 2019 vintage – current subscription prices are more or less back at the level of 2008. But you are absolutely right, there are lovely Bordeaux Châteaux outside the Grand Cru range. The simpler Crus Bourgeois offer outstanding products. Off the top of my head, Château Poujeaux from the Moulis region comes to mind. Wines that are great enjoyment for the money come from such producers as Château de Fieuzal (Graves) or Château La Croix Saint André (Lalande-de-Pomerol). Of course, these wines will obviously not provide the same level of enjoyment as a top-class Bordeaux.

How would you describe a wine to guests who have never before tasted it? Do you fall back on sommelier phraseology, or do you try to show by the use of visual imagery? If I know in which lines of business my guests work, I like to make use of connected analogies. For a guest in the field of music, for instance, I may compare the wine to an opera by Wagner or a symphony by Mozart, depending on its character. For other guests I might use examples from architecture, the visual arts, or the animal kingdom. If you like, I try to describe wines not only metaphorically, but rather with all senses.

In a recent interview you mentioned that, today, fewer guests ask for a wine list. Instead, they prefer to order on the recommendation of the wine steward. Are the days of the fat, leather-bound wine bibles on



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the way out? Today, on average, of ten tables only one or two will ask for a wine list. As a result, and I take a critical view of this, we have considered changing to a digital format. While an iPad may be stylish and practical, it doesn't convey a sufficiently high level of emotion and sensuality which I feel is an essential part of the enjoyment of wine.

Increasingly, non-alcoholic beverages are coming into vogue in top-class restaurants. What do you think of this trend? We have relatively few guests asking for a non-alcoholic beverage, no more than six or eight a year. That is why we do not have a standard selection, although we do serve some non-alcoholic alternatives. We've had very good experiences with single-variety grape juice from Sauvignon Blanc or Gewürztraminer, which convey the primary aroma of the grape variety without alcohol surprisingly well.

From your point of view, which elements of a dish are the most important when choosing a suitable wine accompaniment? In the past, the sauce determined the wine. Today, considering the complexity of the dishes, often with a dozen or more components on a single plate, this is no longer true. However, the style of our head chef, Peter Knogl, focuses on three to four first-class, intensely aromatic elements, which must be taken into consideration when recommending a wine. In this respect, it is essential that the focus remains on the food. In other words, the dish and the wine should not put up a fight for supremacy. In actual fact, the wine should supplement or complement the aromas on the plate. Therefore, I don't make a general recommendation concerning wine to accompany a dish. From the various options, I will recommend a wine that I believe will best fit the individual guest's taste.

With more than twelve years of service, you count as one of the veterans among the staff at the Cheval Blanc. Have you ever been tempted to work in another restaurant? In the past 30 years I have relocated thirteen times for occupational reasons. That's enough! Should I ever move again, it would be to a retirement home. (He laughs). I love Basel, and I'm surrounded by a great team. As long as this situation doesn't change, I see no reason to move on. I enjoy putting down roots. ♦



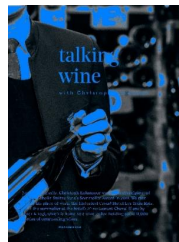
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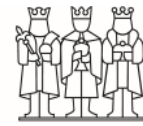
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