

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE

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## PERSONAL JOURNAL.

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Fine-wine gatherings of the rich, famous and plebeian.

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### TOP CELLARS

Executives' wines, favorite regions and oeno-remembrances.

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## Wining, Dining — And Grapevining

### London Club Toasts a Vintage Networking Idea

By ERIK PORTANGER

**F**OR ANYONE WITH the slightest leaning toward hedonism, it's a dinner invitation that demands serious attention.

The evening at London's elegant Berkeley Hotel will begin, the red-and-white letter explains, with four courses by Michel Roux, the head chef at London's double-Michelin-starred restaurant Le Gavroche. Each dish will be crafted to complement classic vintages from the past three decades of Château Palmer, a Bordeaux whose elegance and complexity is matched only by its price—more than £100 (€150) a bottle in good years. In an added bonus, a representative from Château Palmer in Margaux will be flown in to introduce the wines.

In itself, the launch of a new private club would barely register on the Richter scale of London's buzzing social scene. But Claret Club founder Denis Houles, a 33-year-old Frenchman, has a grand ambition: to reinvent, on a greater scale, the age-old English tradi-

tion of mixing business with the socially lubricating influence of ultrafine wine and other culinary pleasures. Claret Club wasn't created for ordinary mortals. The strictly vetted guest list at its mid-January launch includes chairmen and chief executives from some of Britain's largest companies, along with sporting celebrities, artists and other VIPs. It's a diverse mix, which is exactly how Mr. Houles planned it.

"Wine is like art," he says. "When you bring in someone to Claret Club, you make a statement about yourself—that this is something I enjoy and I want to share it with you." Other sumptuous events planned for this year will showcase wine from Château Cheval Blanc and Australia's Penfolds Grange, with the winemakers once again in tow.

OK. But with the economy only just emerging from its three-year funk, is this the right time for what sounds a lot like a bull-market concept?

The question is answered on the night. In the private lounge, waiters weave among the guests, refilling glasses with Dom Perignon 1990 Oenothèque, known for its exotic notes  
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Among those at the inaugural Claret Club dinner were, from left to right, Bob Covell of the consulting firm Makinson Covell, Diageo chairman James Blyth, and Eddie Jordan, principal of the Jordan Grand Prix Formula One team.

### Business Leaders Open Their Cellars

**W**ith such an impressive array of wines at the opening night of the Claret Club, we decided to ask five of the guests a few questions about their own palates and collections. We found their tastes ranged the whole wine world, from the grand châteaux of Bordeaux to eclectic offerings from South Africa and Italy.

For instance, Rob Hersov, CEO of MarquisJet, which sells airtime on private jets, counts among his favorites Cannonau wine from the Italian island of Sardinia. Andrew Heath—CEO of Protherics, which created the first new rattlesnake antivenom for the U.S. market in 50 years—has a soft spot for the classic Bordeaux Cheval Blanc. But who has the biggest cellar?



Rob Hersov

# At Wine Club, Power Brokers Do Business Through the Grapevine

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of spice and fruit. But the aromatic complexity may be slipping unnoticed past some of the early arrivals, who plunge into networking. In one corner, Rob Hersov, chief executive of MarquisJet, is locked in conversation with Formula One personality Eddie Jordan, who with his chalk-stripe suit and grizzled goatee looks like a cross between a City trader and an aging biker. MarquisJet sells airtime on private jets operated by U.S. company NetJet, with fees starting at €126,000 for 25 hours of flying. After several minutes of hushed negotiation, Mr. Hersov's face brightens. "I'll call you," he says, with a firm handshake, before bounding over to another group of minglers.

A quick glance at the room suggests no shortage of jet-setters. A couple of meters away, James Blyth, chairman of Diageo PLC, and Hans Snook, former head of mobile-phone company Orange PLC, stand in a group that also includes Steve Norris, the one-time Tory MP and now chairman of Jarvis PLC, the railway-maintenance company. Michael Marks, the former chairman of Merrill Lynch's European operations, seems grateful for a break from the toil of setting up his new business, a boutique investment bank called New-Smith Capital Partners. The firm, which he co-founded with two former Merrill colleagues, only recently got its license from British regulators after nine months. "It's a lot of work," Mr. Marks says, quaffing a mouthful of champagne. "We had to build an entire trading floor from scratch."

Mr. Houles, a former McKinsey consultant whose passion for wine was sparked by a motorcycle trip through Bordeaux as a teenager, looks a little tense as he ex-

plains his meticulous plan for the evening. "The idea is that guests meet people of their caliber, but maybe from a different background," he explains. "If you're a banker, maybe you will meet a top jeweler or an artist. There is a seating plan so I can mix it up."

If the guests are wowed, Mr. Houles hopes they will sign up as full-fledged members of Claret Club, shelling out annual fees of £1,000—or £1,200 for a coporate membership. Future dinners will cost £250 per seat, as this inaugural event did, and seats must be purchased in advance in packages of 12—leaving potential new members with a minimum bill of £4,000. The idea is that members can then allocate some of their seats to important clients whom they wish to impress. (The 80 or so potential members present include perhaps 20 women, but one early concern was that the club would become an old-boy's network. So Mr. Houles organized a one-time women-only evening last week at which guests wore red and were offered dazzling wines from Burgundy producer Domaine Drouhin and Italy's Tenuta Antinori. Liz Brewer, London publicist and author of the "Party Bible," was brought in to give the evening an extra dash of glitz.)

In the main dining room, the potential members at the inaugural event eventually take their seats. Mr. Houles introduces chef Michel Roux; Bernard de Laage de Meux, a director of Château Palmer; and David Peppercorn and Serena Sutcliffe—husband and wife and both Masters of Wine, the highest level of educational achievement in the industry. "They are here for you tonight and delighted by the opportunity to meet each

one of you," he says. "Thank you and bon appétit."

Over the next hour or so, Mr. Houles scampers around the room, checking the temperature of the wine, introducing the "wine celebrities" to guests and adjusting the décor. After booking the room a few weeks earlier, he decided that the blue color scheme wouldn't fit his red-wine-focused evening. So he bought dozens of red-linen sashes to drape over the chairs, and bundles of red roses and gerbera, in a shade known as "château," for the tables.

"Do you think it's enough?" he asks, of no one in particular. But the focus is shifting to the food, as waiters bring in dishes of pan-fried duck foie gras, with crispy pancake and port reduction served with cinnamon.

When chef Roux presented his menu to the 80 or so respectfully attentive guests a little earlier, he described it as "1,000 calories per spoonful," and he was barely kidding. The dishes, including woodcock and braised turbot, are cooked in lashings of goose fat and accompanied by crispy bacon and brie ripened with truffles.

But it's the wine that really stands out. As each course is presented, it's accompanied by a glass of increasingly spectacular Château Palmer, which results in a debate about the relative merits of the 1983 and the 1970. The 1983 still has a flush of youth, while boasting the finesse of a wine near its peak. The 1970 is less intense but fully mature with an amber tinge around its rim, sensuous perfume and long, mouth-coating finish. In the end, it's the 1970 that seems to win most votes—but not Ms. Sutcliffe's. For her, the 1983 is the star of the night—and the 1970

"is drying up a little."

Mr. de Meux of Château Palmer looks stunned. "Did you think the 1970 was drying up?" he eventually asks some guests, seeming only slightly comforted by repeated reassurances.

In the lounge, the Cuban cigars come out and guests are asked to choose between a 1959 Armagnac and two great vintages of Taylors port, from 1983 and 1970. As if on cue, the restrained mood is replaced with a more convivial atmosphere. Mr. Jordan links arms with two friends while the three of them bellow along to the jazzed-up version of "Danny Boy" being played by virtuoso violinist Ching. For a moment, it feels like being on a London Underground train after a soccer game. But the flashback passes and the singers run out of lyrics.

For Mr. Hersov of MarquisJet, the evening has been an unexpected success. "It was a very good lineup of senior level who's who," he says. "I ran into three people that I would have had to call and book a date to go and see."

In a corner, Mr. de Meux of Château Palmer sips a glass of Armagnac and muses on its "rustic" flavor. He seems to have recovered from the earlier slight against his revered 1970 wine. "I think it was quite successful for a first night," he says. "The idea to marry wine and food built by a great chef is a great idea and I think it could be developed further on this theme."

But did the guests fully appreciate his wines? Mr. de Meux purses his lips and considers. "I think they understood pretty well," he says. Then, mulling it over a bit more: "Maybe they didn't understand 100%."



## Andrew Heath

CEO, Protherics

**Best wine owned:** 1961 Cheval Blanc (Bordeaux). I bought it for 55 Swedish kroner (€5.99). I also have quite a few 1989 and 1990 Cheval Blancs.

**Most memorable wine experience:** a 1961 Cheval Blanc drunk at the Coq d'Or restaurant in Stockholm in the early 1980s. The bottle was shared between three of us and cost 400 Swedish kronor.

**Favorite regions, producers:** Bordeaux. I love both Cos d'Estournel and Château Montrose 1989 and 1990. My favorite up-and-coming wine is Château Pontet Canet after 1994. I also like the floral intensity that you get in Pomerols.

**Cellar size:** About 2,000 bottles. A lot of people overestimate how much they can drink. Anything more than 2,000 bottles you're going to have a lot of trouble drinking.

**Other clubs:** I belong to a wine-tasting group with a friend in Sweden.

## Executive Choice: Wines to Savor

### Rob Hersov

CEO, MarquisJet

**Best wine owned:** A South African wine called Rupert & Rothschild "Vignerons" 2000. Everyone who drinks it thinks it's fabulous.

**Most memorable wine experience:** Drinking fine wines accompanied by raw herring at the home of a wealthy Dutch family

**Favorite regions, producers:** South African and Italian wine. I like Cannonau from Sardinia.

**Cellar size:** I have a few bottles for drinking. I plan to invest in wine at some point. Right now I'm buying art.

**Other clubs:** None



### Angela Randolph

Partner, Grundberg Mocatta Rakison (law firm)

**Best wine owned:** Conte della Vipera, 2002 from legendary Italian producer Piero Antinori

**Most memorable wine experience:** I was in Budapest at the closing of a contract and we had some very old Hungarian Bull's Blood wine. I think it was a 1957. It was a very special night and a very special wine.

**Favorite regions, producers:** Rosé champagne, especially Pol Roger

**Cellar size:** No cellar, but I plan to start one someday. I have about a dozen wines at home, but unfortunately I drink them too fast to ever build up much more than that.

**Other clubs:** Royal Overseas League; Law Society Yacht Club; American Women Lawyers in London Club

### John Singer

Managing director, Advent International (private equity firm)

**Best wine owned:** Château Latour, 1961

**Most memorable wine experience:** Drinking a 1982 Château Haut Brion in the château itself. There was something about drinking the wine in its natural surroundings that was unforgettable.

**Favorite regions, producers:** I get my pleasure from finding the wines that most people wouldn't think of. I like quirky producers, like Silvio Jermann in Friuli, Italy, who combine grapes in a bizarre but very exciting way. They mix Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc and a local white grape.

**Cellar size:** I try to keep a balance for daily drinking—not investment.

**Other clubs:** Boodles, a gentlemen's club; the Hurlingham Club, a 17-hectare country club; Ordre Internationale d'Anysetiers, a medieval aniseed maker's guild that meets for informal dinners; Mark's dining club



### Martin Clarke

Partner, Permira Advisers (private equity firm)

**Best wine owned:** La Tâche, Domaine de la Romanée Conti, from the late 1980s

**Most memorable wine experience:** a 1911 Loire wine. It had lost its label and my friends and I didn't expect much from it. When we opened it, it was wonderful and fresh for about five minutes, but as soon as it was exposed to air it turned to sherry.

**Favorite regions, producers:** Château Latour in Bordeaux and wines from Domaine Leflaive in Burgundy

**Cellar size:** about 1,500 bottles. I have a country house with an original 18th-century cellar.

**Other clubs:** Harry's dining club, London

