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THE WINE DOG PRESENTS

# Wine in the Sky

words by Bob Ecker

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## LONDON, ENGLAND

*The Wine Dog recently conducted an experiment based on a curiosity about what happens to "Wine in the Sky," or wines served at an altitude aboard commercial aircraft. After all, at 35,000 feet in the air the barometric pressure, temperature, G forces, and humidity are all much different than on terra firma. Our noses and eyes react, our craniums tighten, our skin dries out, and our taste buds most assuredly change. But, what about the wine in the bottle? Unlike other beverages, wine is delicate and seemingly "alive." Wine undergoes evolutionary modifications from the minute it's created until the moment it passes our lips. How does flying affect it?*



FOOD & DRINK WINE DOG





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## *Virgin Atlantic shoots for a variety of styles including up and coming, lesser known, or undervalued appellations.*

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The tastings were conducted on the ground and in the air. I was off to London (on assignment) so Virgin Atlantic Airways, a premium airline, became my laboratory. I sampled all the wines (including economy wines) in the swanky Upper Class portion of the aircraft during my nonstop San Francisco-London flight. Then the identical wines were sampled at Berry Bros. & Rudd, the esteemed British wine supplier who administers the Virgin Atlantic Wine Program at their St. James Street office in London. To conclude, I sampled the wines once more on the journey home. They were interesting flights to say the least.

I met with Mark Pardoe, Master of Wine and Wholesale Director at Berry Bros. & Rudd, within the company's vast, three story London office. BB&R has existed at their location since 1698, so they know a thing or two about the wine business. Pardoe filled me in on the tendencies of wines he selects to be served aboard Virgin Atlantic flights.

"Most importantly, the wine needs to exhibit as much vitality and energy in the air as on the ground. It can't be dead," he said. This generally means that wines served on planes need to be expressive, big, and flavorful, not nuanced. In the air, everything is subtracted; flavor profiles, tannins, and acid perceptibly are reduced for our high flying palates. This means that elegant Bordeaux's, Burgundies, Oregon Pinots, and other beauties at home may be flavorless in the air. It wouldn't be the right fit. Virgin Atlantic shoots for a variety of styles including up and coming, lesser known, or undervalued appellations.

Tastefully decorated in purple, with beige and off-white accents, Virgin Atlantic's modern Upper Class seating is somewhat like sitting in a spaceship. The seats recline fully and plush duvets help induce sleeping on the 10+ hour flights. My first tasting, conducted at the intimate Upper Class bar, occurred at exactly 33,020 feet somewhere over Northern Canada. My return tasting took place above Greenland.

Some of Mark Pardoe's in-flight staples include wines with ample tannins, medium alcohol, low acid, juicy, and fruit-forward. "I also like to offer a quirky wine such as crisp Gruner Veltliner, a Sauvignon Blanc from Slovenia or a Cabernet/Shiraz blend from Brazil."

Not surprisingly, budget is an important concern for an airline's wine program, and Virgin Atlantic is no exception. For instance, the white wine list includes a bright and fruity 2008 Monterey County Chardonnay from Mountain View Vintners. This moderately priced California Chard was well balanced


with 100% malolactic fermentation but no oak barreling. It is an easy-to-drink, clean, fruit driven wine and is paired well with the creamy Yukon Gold Potato Soup. "I look for a wine that boxes above its weight," said Pardoe. I actually preferred this wine when in the air versus on the ground. It seemed more in balance when restrained onboard. I felt the same way about the French Marsanne/Viognier blend. It was so-so, a bit astringent in London, but in the air, nimble and different – a happy partner to the lighter cuisine served onboard or enjoyable by itself.

As for the Reds, the Argentine 2009 Vina Dela Malbec was consistently pleasing on the ground and in the air. It had a violet yet brambly nose and a big, bold fruitiness without overripe characteristics – a rugged but eminently enjoyable Malbec. Pardoe chose well. However, the 2007 Dano Crianza Garnacha blend from the Spanish Montsant region became too thin at this height. The wine's body was too lean and the nose suggested more than it delivered. At sea level this wine had more vibrancy.

Another important consideration for airlines is weight, and more and more wines are starting to appear in plastic bottles. Sure it doesn't look or feel as great as an impressive heavy bottle, but for an airline, every extra pound equates to fuel – and cost. Pardoe does the math: "Plastic liters offer an incredible weight savings – critical for airlines. Some of these are hugely successful such as some inexpensive Spanish wines. Next month we'll have two Aussie wines in plastic bottles. In the end, it's 5-10% cheaper than glass." I sampled and enjoyed the 2009 La Rosa Tempranillo, from Spain, housed in a plastic bottle. The wine was relatively simple, strong, and unobjectionable.

So, when you're traveling on holiday, business, commuting, or to an exotic location, will the wines taste better...or worse? That depends on how you fly. "A person's emotional and environmental factors tend to combine at altitude more acutely than on the ground," offers Pardoe.

Remember, when flying, even more than on the ground, dehydration becomes a huge issue. Keep your fluids up and drink plenty of water.

Raise a glass and toast your seatmates across the aisle, knowing that your wine in the sky has been thoughtfully chosen just for you. 

*Virgin Atlantic Airways flies nonstop from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other US cities to London. See [www.virgin-atlantic.com](http://www.virgin-atlantic.com) for details.*