

What wine do you love?

When a trio of top sommeliers get together to choose their favourite wines it's always going to be interesting. Christine Salins was there for this special event.

If you could select your favourite wines from top producers anywhere in the world, what would they be?

When three of the world's leading sommeliers had the enviable task of doing just that, the result was a mixed dozen of mostly French and US wines, with an Italian Barbaresco, Penfolds Grange and a German dessert wine in the mix as well.

The wines were put up for tasting in front of 50 attendees at the high profile international event the Hawaiian Food Wine Festival in October. The wine tasting was led by three sommeliers, Joseph Spellman, Roberto Viernes and Richard Betts, who all hold accreditation from the prestigious Court of Master Sommeliers.

Viernes, the general manager of American Wine and Spirits, got hooked on wine while working as an apprentice chef. Joe Spellman, a former sommelier for various Chicago restaurants, including Charlie Trotter's, is accounts manager and sommelier for Justin Vineyards and Winery in California. Richard Betts was "sommelier to the stars" at Little Nell in Aspen, founded a number of wine brands and has made wine in Australia.

Perhaps not surprisingly given that all three sommeliers work in the US, their "best of the best" list is skewed to the US rather than other New World regions.

First was Paul Lato 2009 Le Souvenir Chardonnay from Sierra Madre, California, described by Viernes as having "a beautiful essence of fruit. It's not overly tropical. It has one foot in the old world."

"We're always waxing on about terroir but here it is in its most extreme," said Viernes of the second wine, Domaine Francois Raveneau 2009 Blanchots, a grand cru Chablis. "When I smell that, it's like low tide in the ocean," he said. "It's really delicious. It's one of my favourite wines."

The next wine, Domaine Roulot 2009 Vireuils, was described by Betts as a "village-level Meursault": only about 150 cases are produced. "This is my favourite winemaker on the planet," he said.

One of the least heralded wines in the line-up was Domaine de Cherisey 2009 La Genelottes, a Meursault from a small winery that has flown under the radar. "The great domains have all been found but to find a small hamlet like this is an amazing thing," said Viernes.



Next up was another Burgundian wine, Domaine Coche-Dury Puligny Montrachet 2009 Les Enseigneres. This very compelling premier cru Chardonnay won the admiration of Betts. "He's making Chardonnay crack, man," he said.

When vines were planted in Carlisle's Sonoma Country vineyard in California in 1927, many of the varietals were unidentified. It's now known that many of these old vines are Zinfandel, although one vine still has a tag that says simply, "The Old Black Shirt". The Carlisle Vineyard 2009 Zinfandel is an aromatic, savoury wine that particularly appeals to Viernes. "It's not shy but it's not big and jammy. It's a seamless wine," he said.

Betts said if a wine "makes you smile, you should drink it" and that was the mantra adopted when Penfolds 2007 Grange was offered for tasting, even if it was "awfully young". Spellman described it as "one of the most historic wines in the new world, if not the world".

Then was an intensely aromatic Shiraz from the Rhone valley in France, Domaine Thierry Allemand Cornas 2009, which Viernes said "speaks of the earth".

A Hermitage from northern Rhone, La Pierrele by Kermit Lynch 2009, was described by Viernes as a "brilliant exam-

A few of my favourite things: (L to R) Joseph Spellman, Roberto Viernes and Richard Betts.

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ple of why so many producers worldwide have tried to emulate Rhone styles.

The Gaja Sori 2007 San Lorenzo was almost Burgundian in style rather than a fuller-bodied wine as might be expected of an Italian Barbaresco. It had a generosity of fruit, emanating from a visionary winemaker who put Barbaresco into the same league as the much-revered Barolo.

Chateau Bellevue Mondotte 2005 St Emilion is a Bordeaux wine with a cult following. Harvested at less than a tonne per acre, only 3000 cases are produced each year of this 90 per cent Merlot ten per cent Cabernet Franc blend.

The tasting ended on a higher note than even these experienced sommeliers might have expected, with Donnhoff Niederhauser Hermanshohle 2010 Riesling Auslese, a late-harvest German wine. With superb minerality and acidity, it had delicate passionfruit notes and beautifully balanced sweetness. "Try this with a nice lobster dish or fish," Spellman said. "I argue that it's better with shellfish than a barrel-fermented Chardonnay."

Viernes spoke for all three sommeliers when he admitted to being "a little awestruck" by the tasting. Needless to say, it was one where there was more sipping than spitting.