

The heights of good taste: Oz Clarke on demystifying wines and what to sip in the skies

From actor to TV wine expert and member of Singapore Airlines' Wine Panel, Oz Clarke discusses his fascinating career

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Class act: Oz Clarke was a star of stage and screen before becoming a professional wine expert | CREDIT: Singapore Airlines

Ask any casual wine-lover to picture a wine critic and the odds are the face they'll conjure is the mischievous, endlessly enthusiastic, ever-so-slightly elfin face of Oz Clarke. For four decades, across dozens of books, documentaries and TV series, Clarke has fostered excellence in the wine industry and demystified the grape for newcomers to the world of wine.

But during his childhood in Canterbury, Kent, wine was not a big part of his family's life. He developed his passion at university – though getting a girlfriend was as much a goal as becoming one of the world's foremost oenophiles.

“I thought knowing about wine would make me look elegant and smart and might get me a girlfriend. It absolutely didn't,” he says, grinning. “I took four girls to wine tastings in that first year and none of them ever spoke to me again. I still remember the first tasting I ever went to. The girl left halfway through, bored out of her wits, so I was there by myself, tasting these little glasses and thinking, ‘How do they make these incredible, paradoxical flavours of richness and dryness, to softness and bitterness?’ It set off some kind of explosion in my mind that was just waiting for the spark.”

A successful career as an actor followed – he was a regular on stage at the National Theatre and the RSC (and, yes, that's him being taken down by the Man of Steel in 1978's *Superman*). So, when TV producer Peter Bazalgette had to find a stand-in wine critic for his new BBC show *Food And Drink* he booked Clarke at the last minute, he recalls, declaring: “Get me that actor who knows about wine!”



Grape Britain: Oz Clarke showed the nation that good wine could be enjoyed by everyone | CREDIT: Getty

The result was a career as the TV face of wine appreciation. Together with his co-host, Jilly Goolden, he worked to banish the elitism that surrounded the drink and push the industry to ever higher standards of choice and quality.

“We thought that the wine world was very snobby and cobwebby,” he says. “And there was no good wine! It was horrible, filthy. The bottoms of the worst barrels in Europe, all thrown over to the British because we didn't know the difference. So we said there's an enormous market that's being locked out. And if we could just find hero wines that just taste good, we can bring them to an audience of 10 million or so.”



Expert panellists: Oz Clarke, Michael Hill Smith and Jeannie Cho Lee | CREDIT: Singapore Airlines

In 2014 Clarke was appointed to the three-person Singapore Airlines Wine Panel, a prestigious group that spends all year sourcing the best wines from around the world for inclusion on the award-winning airline's flights.

“It's a year-long process,” says Clarke. “I'm always on the lookout for wines that will excite our passengers. So, for instance, I might find something on my travels and I'll immediately send an email to the team saying: ‘I've found this incredible stuff from the Douro Valley in Portugal, why don't we have a look at Douro Valley wines this year? They might fit in and really excite our passengers,’” he says.



New horizons: Oz Clarke is always on the hunt for wines that will excite Singapore Airlines passengers | CREDIT: Getty

Clarke has become one of a handful of wine experts who is as knowledgeable about how a wine tastes in the unique environment of an aircraft cabin as he is about sipping and swirling it on the ground.

“Twice a year we have a full week in Singapore when we probably look at between 800 and a thousand wines,” he says. “And we cull those down to 15 to 20. But all the time we're asking, ‘Will it work in the air?’

“However good the aircraft's air system is, the air is always going to be drier. It means that the sense of smell is less sharp, and a lot of the experience of a wine is actually happening in the back of the nose.”

The wines that work best at altitude are those with a “lot of fruit”, he says.

“You don't want to serve anything too dry or lean. A modern chablis, for instance, is a really good one to drink on a flight,” he says.



Carefully curated: the wine served on Singapore Airlines' flights are selected with the high altitude in mind

For Clarke, the high-quality food and drink offering are only part of Singapore Airlines' famous world-class service. “It's the attention to detail,” he says. “Singapore Airlines makes a massive effort in making its passengers feel welcome. Every single passenger is made to feel special. You feel looked after and pampered. I love it.”

But his work doesn't stop when he steps onboard, even if he's heading off on holiday.

“I'll always go to the galley to talk to the crew. It's one of the ways of checking how we're doing. It just gives me great pleasure when they say, yes this wine is really working, the passengers really like it,” says Clarke.

Grape escapes

Fly with Singapore Airlines and your wine options go well beyond red or white. Along with fellow Singapore Airlines Wine Panel members, Australian wine judge Michael Hill Smith and Asia's first Master of Wine Jeannie Cho Lee, Oz Clarke meticulously selects the best wines to serve on the airline's flights. Plus, its on-board Air Sommeliers help passengers in business and first class find the best bottles to match their multi-course meals.

Icons of the sky

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