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Wine Delights At 30,000 Feet

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11/29/09 - Cover Stories: Wines on the Wing by Eunice Fried

A panel of 35 wine experts weighs in to declare this year's winner of *GT's* annual Wines on the Wing International Business Class Airline Wine Competition.

Montenapo, the elegant new Italian restaurant in Renzo Piano's New York Times Building, is a lofty space with towering glass walls that look onto a birch tree atrium. Sleek, modern and inviting, it combines cool steel and warm woods with accents of blue and cream. And it emphasizes Old World fine service, beginning with a warm welcome at the entrance, usually from owner/manager Jozef Juck.

It was here that 35 wine professionals gathered in the spring to taste and evaluate 134 wines submitted to *Global Traveler's* annual Wines on the Wing International Business Class Airline Wine Competition.

Judging wines demands the ability to discern and rate subtleties among similar wines. And this year, after the judges tasted and scored the wines of 27 airlines, the one that soared above all others was Qatar Airways.

"We go to great lengths to make sure our passengers are afforded an appealing array of wines and Champagnes," Tony Hughes, Qatar's vice president, Americas, said. "We want to ensure that even the most discerning taste buds enjoy the perfect wine complement."

The person responsible for choosing the perfect wine is Master of Wine James Cluer. As Qatar's consultant, he begins by defining the structure of the wine list and then collects samples of hundreds of wines. "I sort through them to create flights of appropriate wines and then, at quarterly meetings, Erwan Robert, Qatar's manager, in-flight product; Colin Boothe, general manager of an import company; and I taste the flights blind to avoid any prejudice to label or price," Cluer said. "We often taste more than 50 wines to find one winner. And there are occasions when we have not selected any of the wines submitted because none matches our requirements. I believe this is what makes the difference in the caliber of our program. We won't accept a wine unless we think it is of outstanding quality. We pay no attention to critics' scores. Instead, we talk about how it will taste in the sky." To check this last criterion, the three re-taste their choices in flight.

Cluer's involvement does not stop there. "I ensure that our suppliers deliver the wine to Qatar in optimal condition. I write the wine list so it gives passengers some interesting information about the wine they will be offered to drink. And I train the onboard staff."

Not only did Qatar's five wines add up to the highest score, but its Saint Clair Pioneer Block 18 Sauvignon Blanc 2008 from New Zealand was the highest-rated white wine. "True to its type, a classic," wrote judge Felicia Sherbert. Eric Woods also found it "a classic — fresh, focused, with good acidity." Qatar's other white wine entry, Berncasteler Riesling Kabinett 2007 Dr. H. Thanisch, was not far behind, finishing second among all whites. "Nice mouth feel, balanced, a little spice," wrote Don Dombrosky.

Just behind Qatar, Finnair won second place among airlines while its individual wines finished among the Top 10 Champagnes, Whites and Reds. "One of the important elements in our business-class concept is the wine we serve," said Magnus Hannukainen of Finnair Catering. "With good wines, we can be different from other airlines; and that is very important, especially during such tough economic times." He continued, "All airlines are going through huge saving programs, and we are not an exception. But price is not the key element in finding good wines. That element is to evaluate the style of wine demanded by your passengers and at the same time find wines that express their terroir, their origins. We must not forget about this and just look blindly at points and price."