

CHANTS WOULD BE A FINE THING

Zeren Wilson on how fine wine met football

"... They have a few drinks and probably the prawn sandwiches, and they don't realise what's going on out on the pitch" – Roy Keane

What happened to football? The first drink I had at a match as an eight-year-old in the 1980s was a scalding hot Bovril in a flimsy plastic cup, so hot to the hand it needed to be balanced on the seat in front of me: half-time, Dad nips off, comes back with beef stock. This was the routine.

Tottenham Hotspur. This is my club, my one and only club, to quote Bill Nicholson, the legendary former Spurs manager. So what's my club now saying on the drinks front? "Welcome to The H Club, a discerning private members club, thrust into the world of entertainment." Lordy. "Provisions will be made to store personal vintage wines, cognacs and liquors in our purpose-built, temperature-controlled on-site reserve." This is football? "Our knowledgeable sommeliers will help you perfectly pair each dish with our superb selection of vintages." This is a joke, right?

Of course, we're at the swank end of the season-ticket options, 180 seats on the halfway line commanding a £15,000 one-off membership fee each, before a ball has even been kicked in the new 62,020-capacity stadium. Michelin-garlanded chefs from the Roux family and Spurs fan chef/restaurateur Chris Galvin are also on board for hospitality; this emphasis on wine and fine dining has never been paraded so gleefully. Bovril is not welcome in this new world: Zalto are yet to introduce their 'meat stock' glass. Jog on, football fans of yesteryear, things have moved on; you're going to have to update your juice game. Will "Oi, did you spill my pint?" soon be replaced with "Pardon me, did you spill my Chambertin?"

on a raucous Saturday night out after the game?

A friend heard about the recently dispelled rumours of a cheese room in the new stadium offering "specially sourced half-time cheeses" and lost his shit, railing about how poncy the Tottenham had become. What's a half-time cheese, anyway? The best cheese to scarf in 15 minutes? Pass me the Dairylea, pop it in yer gob, minimal chewing; now where's my glass of Sauternes? I defy them to find a better half-time cheese. Don't overthink it, lads.

The Beavertown micro-brewery, also on-site, is a more sensible innovation for the football-watching experience; we're all over that – even in the cheap seats, we're getting a taste upgrade, local craft beer replacing 3.8% piss-water lager.

Brigadiers in the City of London is another marker of the new landscape. Ostensibly inspired by the army mess bars of a bygone India, the menu is a riot of tandoor and barbecue cooking, top-drawer wines and TV screens showing the beautiful game. If I can have a glass of Vocoret Chablis while chowing on beef shin biryani, then sign me up, pronto. Back of the net.

Esteemed wine merchants Farr Vintners sources the excellent Château Thenac Bergerac for Crystal Palace FC, its Eagle White and Red supplied and specially labelled for the club – classy touch. I remember raving about this wine on discovering it at the Quality Chop House, grandiosely declaring it to be the best-value/quality red under £30 on a London restaurant list. You can now drink this while bellowing profanities at a hapless referee? Joy. Another glass, please, Ron. Football and wine giving each other a big ol' celebratory hug.

I'm liking this new attitude, this new opportunity for me to weave together two of my greatest loves, wine and football. Over the years, there has seemed a juddering impasse



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between my pastimes – take my ongoing love affair with Californian wine – where an unfinished bottle of Littorai Chardonnay waited for me in the fridge as I skipped off for a Saturday afternoon of 90 minutes of tribal chanting, lager, and heated chat in the pub about injustices and offside decisions afterwards. Back at home, finishing the bottle, I felt like I'd been cheating on my favourite Sonoma winery. Forgive me, babe.

My desire to experience more connections between these two worlds takes me to Tast in Manchester, from Catalan chef Paco Pérez (Manchester City manager and fellow Catalan, Pep Guardiola is among the backers). It's a pleasant surprise to find a wine list making an effort to highlight the wines of Empordà, in the north-eastern corner of Catalonia. Among playful, modern riffs on the Spanish culinary canon, I sip 'Coma Fredosa', a ballsy 15% ABV blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Grenache, before being led through a few more by the ebullient Filippo Zito, an ex-sommelier now revelling in managing the floor. He beckons me upstairs to check out the temperature-controlled wine room: among the Catalan wines there are flashes of Ridge, Cos d'Estournel, Jean-Noël Gagnard and Tignanello. Your cellar is pretty decent, Pep.

Football's most high-falutin' have always dabbled at the finer end of drinking and dining, of course; the oodles of cash don't all go on fast cars and property portfolios. Sir Alex Ferguson was a loyal private customer of a wine merchant I worked at, religiously taking up his allocation of 20 cases of Sassicaia and *en primeur* Bordeaux First Growths; Gary Lineker likes a drop of good claret; José Mourinho is well known for his love

of Douro superstar red Barca Velha; Cristiano Ronaldo spaffed 27k on DRC's Richebourg and Petrus 1982, sitting at the bar at Scott's restaurant in Mayfair – the fact his party left in 15 minutes without finishing the wine, is not for us to judge.

The director's box is invariably where the proper drinking goes on, and if you're lucky enough to gain access to Manchester United's inner circle, you'll sup the likes of Domaine Leflaive's 1er Cru 'Clavoillon', Vega Sicilia, and Pascal Cotat's Sancerre – no reason to distract yourself with what's going on out on the pitch.

But do I want to be anywhere near a decent glass of wine at the football? I'm not so sure. Instinct tells me I want pints and bugger all food – this is no time to be eating – leaving the wine indulgences for their own, dedicated game time, away from the white heat of footballing emotion.

"Tell your mum, your mum, to put the Champagne on ice, we're going to Wembley twice ..." is a fondly remembered chant when Spurs were doing well in the cups in the early 1990s, before I'd even had a whiff of Champagne, but the sentiment still chimed with the 16-year-old me. Champagne and celebrating a win makes sense, feels right, with the film footage of George Best pouring Champagne into a tower of coupes an iconic image of its time. Maybe wine is a natural partner for football after all.

It began with prawn sandwiches and now we've eased into a world of wine, sommeliers, craft beer and cheese. Keano, you must be flippin' livid.

Illustration by Yoyo