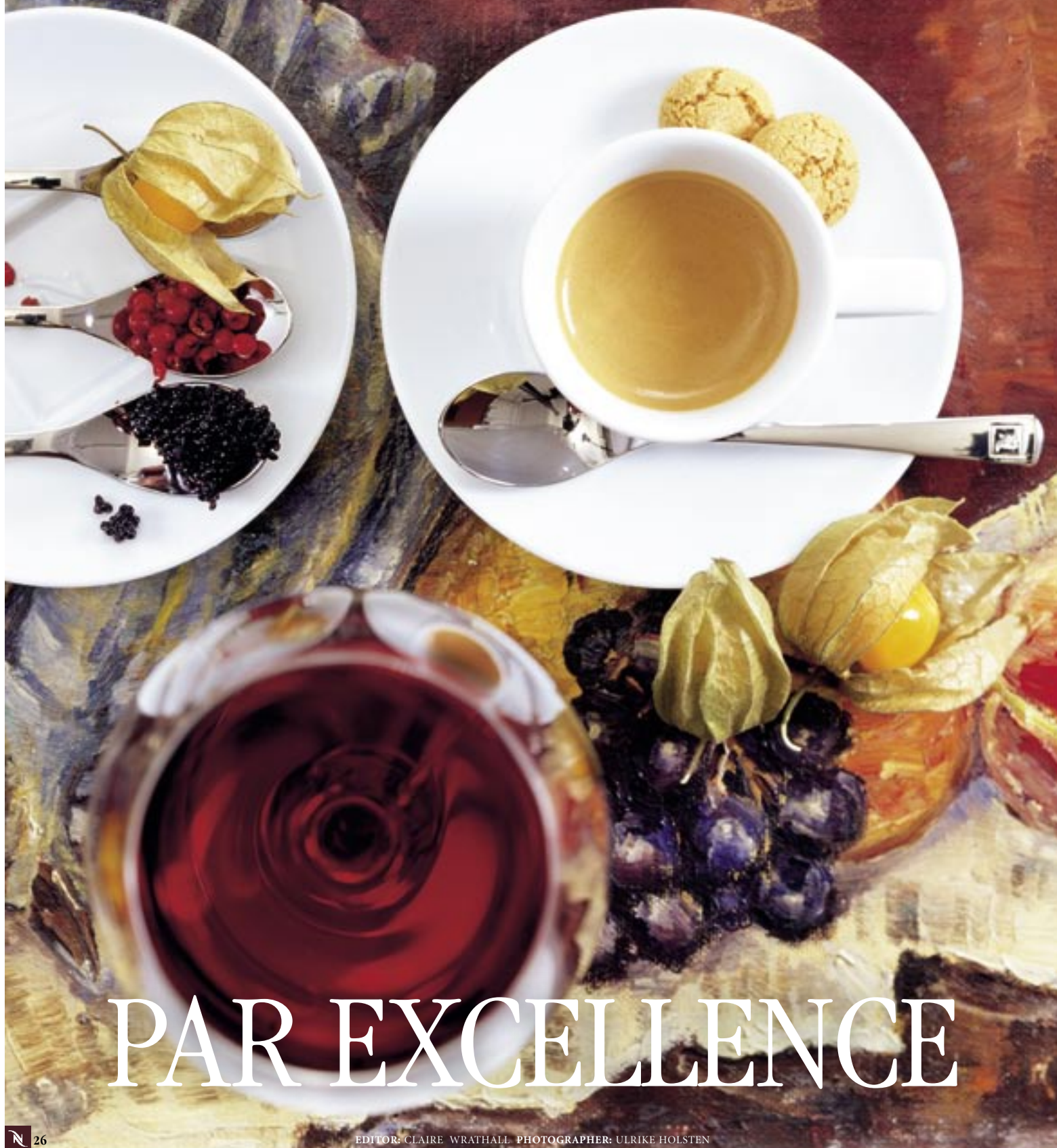


Cultivating Connoisseurs

Today more than ever people strive for excellence in all aspects of life. Lifestyle authority Claire Wrathall examines this global trend in connoisseurship and shares opportunities to train our inner expert.



PAR EXCELLENCE

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PLEASURE GUIDE

It's no longer enough merely to be familiar or acquainted with something; we want to know it. (The word connoisseurship is, after all, derived from the Latin cognoscere: to know.)

Sunday afternoon at Vienna's venerable Musikverein. You might assume that the invariably discerning concert-goers packed into the Goldener Saal for a matinee performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony are familiar with what they are about to hear. Not this time. Cognoscenti though they are, this is an audience attracted by the prospect of hearing a work they know in a rare arrangement by Mahler (the last time it was heard here, Mahler himself was conducting), a proper appreciation of which assumes a knowledge of Beethoven's Ur-version. As the conductor Kristjan Järvi told me: "I was drawn to Mahler's orchestration because it is the combination of two great masters' insight into probably the most monumental work ever written." Mahler's orchestration "does everything to enhance Beethoven's sentiments of salvation, redemption and heavenliness. I think it is absolutely thrilling to hear Beethoven through the ears of Mahler."

Ever since the Harvard Business Review coined the term "experience economy", think tanks have identified trends that suggest people are increasingly opting to spend money on acquiring knowledge and memories rather than things. "A trend towards inconspicuous consumption is emerging in the form of a general desire for people to express their identity in more subtle ways," reads a recent report by the London-based Future Foundation, rich in references to "cultural hunger" and "the pursuit of passions, new experiences and self-development". "Visible expressions of status are becoming less important," it continues. "Instead a more fluid concept of luxury is emerging – driven by consumer concerns about authenticity and individualism." And, it might have added, concern for the environment and sustainability issues, for another advantage of some sorts of cerebral stimulation – thinking, talking, reading, playing an instrument – is that they can be carbon neutral. Suddenly, it seems, we want to be connoisseurs; we crave expert understanding, a proper appreciation of the finer things in life. It's no longer enough merely to be familiar or acquainted with something; we want to know it. So increasingly professionals, decades out of formal education, are going back to the classroom. Witness the proliferation of courses for mature working adults in food, wine, art, music... tutored by Michelin-starred chefs, academics, auctioneers, virtuoso musicians. In London you can perfect your culinary skills in the kitchens

of the three-Michelin starred Restaurant Gordon Ramsay, with lunch thrown in, or in the kitchens of Eric Chavot at the Capital Hotel (two Michelin stars) or Angela Hartnett at the Connaught (one star). While those with more specialist interests can perfect their stir-frying technique, for example, in a two-hour tutorial with David Thompson, whose restaurant Nahm is the only Thai restaurant with a Michelin star. But these aren't courses for beginners; and nor are they just about cooking. "Many of our clients have their own chefs to cook for them," says Jarka Hinksman of the company Tasting Places, which organises all those mentioned above (Tel: +44 (0)20 8964 5333, www.tastingplaces.com). "Some of them love to cook because they find it relaxing. But others are people who simply enjoy food, who have really busy lives but love to entertain and be entertained. They've eaten in restaurants all over the world and want to understand how such meals are created."

In terms of impressing other wine aficionados, you're never going to do better than becoming, like the eminent wine writer Robinson, a Master of Wine, but in the 53 years since the international qualification was introduced, only 257 people (of 19 nationalities) have passed its exacting exams. Still, even Masters of Wine have to start somewhere. And shorter courses can at least avail you of a basic knowledge on which to build. In his new book *A Hedonist in the Cellar*, the American writer and oenophile Jay McInerney, recounts an anecdote in which the hostess at a formal dinner asked him to identify the wine in a blind tasting. "The sommelier handed me a glass and with a sense of resignation bordering on despair, I stuck my nose in the glass." He correctly identifies it as a 1982 Haut-Brion. "I sat down and basked in the general admiration without bothering to explain my methods ... I knew my hostess drank first-growth Bordeaux, and I knew she knew her vintages. But I was very lucky the wine was Haut-Brion, the most aromatically distinctive of all the first growths."

There is no shortage of courses – even those in which one gets to taste Haut-Brion and its like – run by wine merchants, auction houses (Sotheby's and Christie's) and colleges and universities, from Bordeaux, home of *l'Ecole du Vin* (Tel: +33 (0)5 56 00 22 66, www.ecole.vins-bordeaux.fr) and, for aspiring viticulturists, the Université Victor Segalen's oenology faculty, to Reykjavik, where Iceland's only wine academy Vínskólinn was recently established.



Perhaps the most intriguing educative wine experience to have been launched in the past year is the private cellar tour offered by Restaurant Alain Ducasse at the *Hôtel Plaza Athénée* hotel on Paris's Avenue Montaigne (Tel: +33 (0)1 53 67 66 65; www.plaza-athenee-paris.com), where the tutor is Gérard Margeon, born in Beaune in 1961 and therefore all but predestined to become a sommelier. Guests sample up to 11 wines from its cellar of 35,000 bottles, which contains examples of most of the Bordeaux premiers crus as well as the best Burgundy has to offer. (You can also attend cookery courses – in the hotel's kitchens.)

Food and drink are far from the only subjects to inspire individuals to want to quench their thirst for knowledge. Hence a proliferation of serious art courses likely to appeal as much to those wanting to further their art collections as add letters to their names. For example, *Sotheby's Institute of Art in London and New York* (tel: +44 (0)20 7462 3232 or +1 212 517 3929, www.sothebysinstitutelondon.com) now offers "Art Fair and Auction Visits", tutored trips to major art fairs.

These include TEFAF (aka the European Fine Art Market) in Maastricht in March, Art Basel in June, Frieze in London in October and Art Basel Miami Beach in December, as well as auctions in Hong Kong and Seoul, designed to augment collectors' experience of the arcane ways of the art world. The three-day trips involve lectures by both auction-house authorities and dealers, and afford, as the brochure puts it, "an opportunity to learn about art collecting and investment and take a look behind the scenes at these prestigious fairs," which can number 200-300 stands. "As well as an insight into investment potential, guests get introductions to gallery directors and dealers and invitations to VIP parties," says the Institute's marketing director, Claire Brown. "So it's a very good way for people with a strong interest in art to deepen their knowledge."

The British Museum (Tel: +44 (0)20 7323 8144, www.thebritish-museum.ac.uk), too, offers courses likely to appeal to connoisseurs. Its postgraduate diploma in Asian Art, which embraces Islamic, Indian, Japanese, Korean, South East Asian and

Chinese art, is aimed at "serious students, curators and collectors". For the subject is not merely vast and intriguing, the market is buoyant commercially. Certainly Heather Elgood, director of the British Museum course, believes the growth of the Indian and Chinese economies has boosted interest in Asian art, but she insists this is not the course's *raison d'être*. It may attract a number of lawyers and finance professionals, she says: "We had someone who'd started collecting while working for a bank in Hong Kong; a Chinese trader from Beijing who took a sabbatical in order to study; a dentist from Canada, who would go back and practise at weekends." But equally there are people just seeking "a new direction", drawn by the museum's reputation for scholarship, and the opportunities students have to handle works of art from the collection.

Music is a more challenging subject for adults to acquire a formal knowledge of unless they have been immersed – and ideally trained – in it since childhood. Most orchestras and opera companies run "friends" organisations and lecture programmes that allow members of their audience to gain in-depth knowledge of the repertoire and performing process. One of the more fascinating ways to acquire a level of musical connoisseurship – beyond listening and reading – is to attend, as an observer, masterclasses, during which an established art-

ist teaches a small class of young professionals. At the *Solti Accademia di Bel Canto* (www.accademiasolti.org), founded in memory of the conductor Georg Solti, which takes place in the Tuscan resort of Castiglione della Pescaia each summer, you can hear singers tutored by the likes of Kiri Te Kanawa and Mirella Freni. While in England, the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme, which is based at the home of the *Aldeburgh Festival* (+44 1728 687110, www.aldeburgh.co.uk) in Suffolk, and whose alumni include Thomas Adès and Ian Bostridge, features masterclasses throughout the year taught by international stars. Over the years, I've attended sessions given by, among others, the Romanian diva Ileana Cotrubas, the pianist Graham Johnson and the great Russian baritone Sergei Leiferkus. Each had a distinctly different teaching style, but all were illuminating in the details they revealed – technical, textual and musical.

The 2007 programme, incidentally, includes a course given by the Ulysses Ensemble on "the Viennese legacy", from Schubert to Schoenberg; and eight days of coaching on Strauss and Mahler Lieder from the dazzling American mezzo Michelle DeYoung. Both of which even the connoisseurs who frequent the Musikverein might find enlightening. ☕

Espresso Grands Crus

Each of the nine Espresso Grands Crus has its own unmistakable personality.

Ristretto is the typical Italian espresso. It is a short, strong, full-bodied espresso with a touch of acidity. It has a pleasantly lingering taste. *Aromas:* Mild chocolate flavours enhance the strong roasting aroma. *Strength:* 10



Arpeggio is a Mediterranean blend par excellence with a strong character, full body and long, exquisite aftertaste. Its thick, smooth crema remains to the last sip. *Aromas:* An acute roasting aroma with delicate woody and cocoa flavour. *Strength:* 9



Roma is the perfect combination of fineness, strength, and fullness – this an ideal choice for a short yet not too strong Espresso. *Aromas:* A mild roasting aroma, refined by a slightly acerbic taste. Sweet and woody notes. *Strength:* 8



Decaffeinato Intenso is an intense, rich taste with slightly levated acidity that gives this decaffeinated coffee all the strength of a genuine Espresso. *Aromas:* Roasting aromas and chocolaty flavours are perfectly complemented by a strong body. Crema and coffee have a remarkable wealth of aromas. *Strength:* 7



Livanto is a well-balanced blend with a characteristically dense and velvety aroma for a singularly rounded Espresso. *Aromas:* Fragrant woody notes with a delicate but noticeable grain odour, enriched by the roasting aroma. *Strength:* 6



Capriccio is full-bodied Espresso that it is simultaneously creamy, mild, and rich in flavour, with a crema so delicate it reflects the light. *Aromas:* Smooth grain flavours from the crema. *Strength:* 5



Volluto is lightly roasted and medium-bodied, with a round and fresh flavour with a cereal hint, reinforced by a touch of acidity. A fine aromatic balance of fruity and woody tones. *Aromas:* Well-balanced fruity aromas with hint of biscuit and woody notes. *Strength:* 4



Così is perfect for espresso lovers who enjoy a mild, smooth crema coupled with the refreshing acidity of a hint of lemon. *Aromas:* Aromatic lemon note. *Strength:* 3



Decaffeinato is the lighter and creamier decaffeinated blend, offering a rich and delicate balance between mildness and acidity. Decaffeinato's crema is distinguished by its hazel colour and consistent texture in the mouth. *Aromas:* Red fruits as those known from wines plus a sweet note with a soupçon of dried fruits and biscuit. *Strength:* 2

