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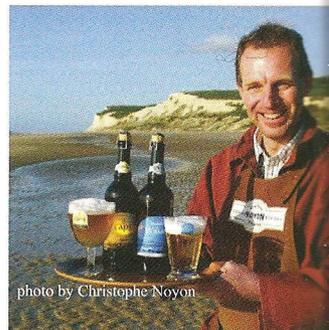


photo by Christophe Noyon

above left the view of the cobble square at Ardres from Boursot's Wine Collection **top right** wine tasting with Oz Clarke **above right** Christophe Noyon exhibits his artisan beers

WALKING THE PLONK!

Claire Tennant-Scull sails across the Channel and discovers fine wines and artisan beers ...

For many of us this year, a winter holiday may be an extravagance too far. But France is only 70 minutes away across the Channel and fares are remarkably cheap, especially for a day trip, so why not hop on a ferry and sail away on a mini adventure?

Recently I was fortunate to be invited by SeaFrance to do just that. We would be sailing to the Pas de Calais to taste French wines and beers with the inimitable Oz Clarke.

Oz grew up in Kent, and chatted enthusiastically about the incredible growth of winemaking in the region, where he has been touring with *Top Gear's* James May for their current TV series *Oz & James Drink to Britain*.

Just 15 minutes' drive from Calais is the pretty town of Ardres, home to Boursot's Wine Collection. No booze-cruise hypermarket, this is a proper wine merchant's, run by Guy and Sophia Boursot in a handsome 18th century building. Guy's family have been in the wine business for over 350 years. He is chairman of the Champagne Academy, and a member of both the Worshipful Company of Vintners, and Circle of Wine Writers, but don't be intimidated, the surprise in all this is that as well as offering vintage wines and champagnes, Guy also sources some amazing bargains starting at just €3 per bottle. The atmosphere is friendly, and customers can taste before they buy.

We tried four white and four red. Oz talked us through each one, pointing out that French wines really taste of the vineyards, (the terroir). The flinty soil of the Loire was evident in the crisp Sauvignon Domaine Octavie, Sauvignon de Touraine 2007, while my favourite was the earthy Rasteau de Ponce, Domaine des Escaravailles 2006.

It's a mark of Oz's immense skill that he explains the complexities of wine without patronising his audience. He's just published his guide to *250 Best Wines 2009* and he and Guy know that there are plenty of interesting wines, made with real care, and they're not necessarily expensive, we simply need to know where to find them.

Our reward for such hard work was a splendid lunch of local cheese and patés. It was described as "modest" by Guy and

Sophie, but then they organise exclusive wine tours and gourmet events at local hotels and chateaux.

Then it was on to Belle Dalle, a grand stone farmhouse where Christophe and Alexia Noyon make artisan beers from their own wheat and barley grown on land overlooking the sea. Christophe now sells to cafés, restaurants, hotels and shops all over the region, but also direct to the public at the farmshop, where we indulged in another superb tasting session.

First was La 2 Caps, a blond (pure malt) and very fruity beer, then La Blanche de Wissant, an aromatic wheat and malted barley white beer, Noire de Slack, a stunning black beer with hints of bitter chocolate, as well as Belle Dalle, a wonderfully spicy, "hoppy" triple blond ale, and finally, Frometon, commissioned by renowned cheesemaker, Philippe Olivier.

Christophe then presented us with a selection of beers to take home. I only wished I could have carried more, but having found how easy and delightful it was to sail to France, I have already planned my return.

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Boursot's Wine Collection, 9, Rue de L'Arsenal, 62610 Ardres, France. Tel: 0033 321 36 81 46 www.boursot.co.uk Email: ardres@boursot.co.uk Boursot's Wine Collection will be hosting a wine dinner at Château Tilques near Saint-Omer on Saturday 7th March. See the website for details of this and other offers.

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Oz Clarke's new TV series is *Oz & James Drink to Britain* and is on BBC Two. *Oz Clarke's 250 Best Wines Wine Buying Guide 2009* Pavilion Books £6.99. *Oz & James Drink to Britain* Pavilion Books £19.99. www.ozclarke.com