

Travels through time and space

“Doctor who?”... queried the flight attendant in that condescending manner reserved for the confused and elderly, for which I qualify on both counts.

“No, no! Not Dr. Who,...Dr. Penfold”, I replied, “ a glass of Dr. Penfold’s plonk, please”.

He had previously handed me the wine list that accompanied dinner and I saw that one of the choices was “Penfolds Bin 311 Chardonnay 2017”.

The Spirit of Dr. Who having been summoned, like a genie out of that particular bottle, to my own personal Tardis, hurtling through the stratosphere at Mach 0.82, and “*Ding*” (No VWORP! VWORP! sound effects here), I was immediately transported back to the Australian coast in the early ‘60s.

Those were the days of the ‘6 o’clock swill’, when the pubs would shut at 1800 and the 9-to-5’ers would cram all their drinking into one hour with indecent haste and with the inevitable consequences. If one wanted to continue drinking through the evening, the answer was, more often than not, to resort to a carry-out of a bottle of cheap domestic red wine, known derogatorily by all hands as ‘Dr. Penfold’s Plonk’.

As I continued to read the flowery description in the wine list I saw that the fruit was sourced from, among other places, ‘Tumbarumba’.

“*Ding*” and fast forward to 2004 on the Gold Coast of eastern Australia where my wife and I had spent a happy holiday. Tumbarumba wines were some of our favourites, probably due to the wonderful name as much as any perceived quality.

Sipping my glass of Penfolds ‘plonk’ I reflected on how one glass of wine could conjure up so many memories.

But plonk no more! In December 2018 a bottle of the first vintage (1951) of Penfolds “Grange” Shiraz sold at auction for \$80,386, that’s £62,350. The much more recent 2014 vintage is currently on offer from the Sunday Times Wine Club at £420 per bottle, a saving of £60. Elsewhere you can pay up to £650. Even the modest 2017 Chardonnay that I was drinking sells from £26 to £47.25, pretty good for an airline offering.

One more sip and “*Ding*”, I was transported back to the ‘60s again and another Aussie port, Adelaide. We were loading scrap metal and Wharfie rules dictated that all work would cease once the temperature tipped 100° F. They all repaired to the pub and, taking pity on us poor apprentices, would often take us with them.

The public bar was quite big, with a central rectangular island behind which were many chiller cabinets. But they didn’t contain any drink, just hundreds of chilled glasses. Your amber nectar was delivered right to the freshly chilled glass in front of you by way of a flexible hose and nozzle, like a miniature petrol pump. You ordered a ‘middy’ (½ pint) or a ‘schooner’ (¾ pint) for in those pre air-conditioned days any larger volume would have gone warm before you had time to drink it, a definite Aussie no-no.

The public bars were for men only, standing shoulder to shoulder, with nothing so effete as a chair in sight. ‘Sheilas’ were only allowed in lounge bars and had to drink sitting down.

Another sip, another “*Ding*” and I was in Sydney, in the Macquarie at Woolloomaloo. New South Wales was a more enlightened State and, in order to end the notorious 6 o’clock swill, had already amended their licencing hours in the previous decade to accommodate a more friendly 2200 closing time. That was back in 1955 and they called it ‘BE Day’, for Beer in the Evening. The public bar at the Macquarie Hotel was another great barn of a room and the trick here was to get as close to the bar as possible without of course blocking it off and interfering with the constant sale and flow of ‘Tooheys’. A fifteen minute drinking up time was permitted but before the 10 o’clock closing time the alarm bells would start ringing and the bouncers, without fear nor favour, would start ejecting those closest to the doors out on to the street. Hence the need to huddle near the bar in the hope of having the honour of being the last out.

It may appear from my recollections that we spent all our time ashore in the pubs and there is no denying that there was a strong drinking culture in British ships at that time. We would be in port for days or weeks at a time loading or discharging and had ample time to become familiar with the locals and their local pubs, even if we didn’t have ample money to fully enjoy them. It was always a good run ashore and I have nothing but happy memories of my time spent on the Aussie coast.

Back in the present, strapped in to my speeding time capsule, I was pleased that the proffered elixir had evoked such reminiscences.

“Another glass of Dr. Penfolds, please.”

Terry Clark