

Do doctors make the best winemakers?

Former doctors often have a nose for a good wine.

By Jonathan Ray

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I am feeling far from well (and look worse) and have a 9.15am doctor's appointment. A combination of too much sun, too much air conditioning and a hideously bibulous night at the *Spectator* summer bash has left me with a throbbing headache and a streaming cold.

The doctor and I have a brief consultation. He has a charming bedside manner and appears to be full of avuncular concern. "Summer colds can be very, very nasty," he concludes, stifling what I think might be a giggle. "Allow me to prescribe you some of this." He hands me a glass of ice-cold 2000 Dom Pérignon and instantly I know that everything is going to be OK. It is crisp, toasty and harmonious, with the most delicate of mousse and bubbles. What better medicine could there be?



A nose for a good wine: former doctor Nicola Allison and husband Sean at Chateau de Seuil in Bordeaux Photo: LAURENT THEILLET

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This enlightened physician is not my usual one, but Richard Geoffroy, DP's chef de cave and a qualified doctor. He's in London for a series of tastings, seminars and one-to-one chats and whether it's the doctor in him or the winemaker, he doesn't seem to think it strange that we are sloshing back champagne at such an early hour.

"That's because I have a rebellious streak," he says. "If, for whatever reason, you need a glass of Dom Pérignon at nine in the morning, then so be it. It was such rebelliousness that drove me to be a doctor."

Geoffroy is the seventh generation scion of a grape-growing, winemaking family in Champagne. He rejected his destiny by deciding to become a doctor. He studied medicine in Rheims for nine years but then, the very day he qualified, enrolled in an oenology course. His parents had been so proud of their doctor son and were baffled by his abrupt change of heart.

"I knew half way through my course that I was going to be a winemaker," he says. "I had to qualify, though, otherwise it would have been such a waste. But when you come from the land, you return to the land. It's atavism and it takes some people longer than others to realise."

Geoffroy was able to skip one year of his oenology degree thanks to the biochemistry he picked up studying medicine and he found other synergies, too. "I discovered that doctors and winemakers both need instinct and intuition," he says. "Also doubt. A doctor or winemaker without doubt is positively dangerous."

Down in New Zealand, John and Brigid Forrest followed a similar path. Doctors both, the Forrests had a midcareer change of heart and set up Forrest Wines in Marlborough in 1988. "Medicine certainly prepared us both for winemaking," John says. "The chief benefit of such a background is an inquiring mind. On one of my last jobs my boss made a note that I was too artistic to be any good at research. But you have to be artistic to be a winemaker. So I guess he got it right."

Brigid continued to work while John left his job ("Because it had made me such a grumpy bastard," he says) to learn winemaking from scratch. He quickly caught up and can be considered one of the pioneers of Kiwi wines. When the Forrests founded their winery there were only seven others in Marlborough and just 2,400 acres of vines; today there are 500 different labels and 74,000 acres.

The Forrests recently launched their Doctors' label as part of their campaign to promote the fact that wine is good for you. "I'm still a GP and patients always laugh when they come and have their blood pressure taken and ask if they can have a prescription for a bottle of red," Brigid says. "I encourage folk to drink wine. There is so much misinformation about its perils and I get so cross. Wine has been proven to be good for you so long as you don't misuse it."

Over in Bordeaux, Nicola Allison agrees. Originally from Wales – via general practice in New Zealand – she gave up life as a doctor to make wine on her parents' estate, Château de Seuil, on the banks of the Garonne.

"It was the best decision I ever made," she says. "And as a doctor and as a winemaker, I believe that wine in moderation should be enjoyed with pleasure. I drink no more than two glasses a day and I'm aware of the risks. However, the anti-alcohol lobby here has gone crazy and is trying to erode personal choice and autonomy."

Back at morning surgery, Dr Geoffroy is refilling my glass. "Look, as a doctor, I know that alcohol is bad for one," he says. "But as a winemaker I know that wine is good. And as a philosopher I know that since wine is a cultural thing, good for the intellect and bringing people together, it is good for one's wellbeing and therefore for one's health."

At home, I self-medicate with a bottle of 2008 Forrest Wines Doctors' Riesling. It's lovely aromatic stuff, light in alcohol, crisp, spicy and apricotty. I feel miles better already.

Like my medicinal morning DP, it was made with love and care and, as such, has to be good for body and soul.

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What the doctors prescribe

- **2008 Doctors' Riesling**

8.5%vol, New Zealand (£8.99; Adnams)

Marlborough might be best-known for its sauvignon blancs, but it's rapidly gaining a name for its high quality so-called aromatics, too. This kabinett-style riesling, from doctors John and Brigid Forrest, is a great example. It is perfect for summer, as it's light in alcohol, crisp and refreshing, with a dry to off-dry finish. Ideal picnic fare with goat's cheese salad.

- **2004 Château du Seuil, Graves Rouge**

13%vol, France (£13.99; Virgin Wines 0870 164 2031)

Welsh former GP Nicola Allison and Kiwi husband Sean are turning heads with their beautifully made wines on the banks of the Garonne. As well as a white and a sweet wine, they produce this elegant, ripe, yet earthy cabernet sauvignon/cabernet franc/merlot blend. It's drinking deliciously now and is a fine match for lamb cutlets and potato salad.

- **2000 Dom Pérignon**

12.5%vol, France (£100 reduced from £125 if you buy two as part of a mixed case until Aug 21; Majestic)

If this is the sort of medicine he prescribes, no wonder Richard Geoffroy refers to himself as Dr Feelgood. Not for the credit-crunched, sadly (since you're unlikely to get it on the NHS), but this is about as special a drop of fizz as you can find. With plenty of toast and *brioche*, and crisp, honeyed fruit, it's a true delight.

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