

Soothed Souls

It's not only food that can provide comfort in difficult times—a glass of the right wine also has that power

By Sarah Heller MW

A rare positive outcome of the pandemic—and one that seems likely to last—is our prioritisation of comfort. Comfortable clothes, shoes, hairstyles, homes and above all comfort food have helped make these difficult times a little more bearable.

One concept I have not really heard spoken of, though, is “comfort wines”, perhaps because of some (warranted) anxiety around recommending an alcoholic beverage as a means of solace. However, the comfort I know wine to be capable of delivering derives from more than its alcohol content.

There are a few things that “comfort wine”, at least as I conceive it, is not. Although their definitions probably overlap, comfort wine is not a “guilty pleasure”. It is also not quite the same as “everyday wine”. If you're trying to figure out what your own “comfort wine” is, it is not necessarily the wine you have the most of in your wine fridge or the wine you typically order when out for a meal.

To draw an analogy with the more familiar concept of comfort food, it might be helpful to look at some definitions of the latter. Merriam-Webster calls it “food prepared in a traditional style having a usually nostalgic or sentimental appeal”; the Cambridge Dictionary's definition, meanwhile, feels particularly current: “the type of food that people eat when they are sad or worried, often sweet food or food that people ate as children”.

It's true that, in a wine context, these don't make much sense on a literal level: most of us didn't drink much wine as children and, although a lot of us first experience it as a sweet-ish beverage, many feel no affinity with sweet varieties at all. “Traditional style” doesn't get us that far since in many wine regions that

term denotes the kind of austere, aloof wines that are not in any obvious way “comforting”. And what about those of us who don't come from countries with traditions of winemaking or consumption? Most of us in Asia do not; are we therefore to be denied the heart-warming salve wine can offer?

Besides, as culinary demigod Yotam Ottolenghi wrote in his *New York Times* article on global conceptions of comfort food, it's debatable whether it need be something we eat only when sad or worried. Is any of us ever so completely at peace that we cannot benefit from a little gustatory balm?

Tradition of some description probably does play a role for many people in dictating what makes a wine “comforting”. I'm thinking, for example, of two recent encounters I had with homesick Europeans, an Italian and a Spaniard, for whom the mere whiff of Chianti Classico and Rioja respectively triggered delighted smiles and hastily wiped tears—even if the Spaniard remarked that this particular bottle was a mere “supermarket wine in Spain”. In fact, maybe it was the supermarket factor—the ubiquity, the lack of pretension—that made the wine so poignant.

Others—and I speak from my own experience—probably latch onto the first wines we encounter that seem possessed of a kindred spirit. Throughout my childhood, my parents would give me occasional sips of the juicy American or Australian reds they favoured, but similar wines today leave me cold. Instead, my heart feels that tug of recognition when I lower my nose into a glass of barolo or barbaresco in a style dating to the late Noughties, when I first visited Piemonte. It's the dewy, medicinal, floral note, like cyclamens or oleanders, and incandescent raspberry redness that do it. Prunotto

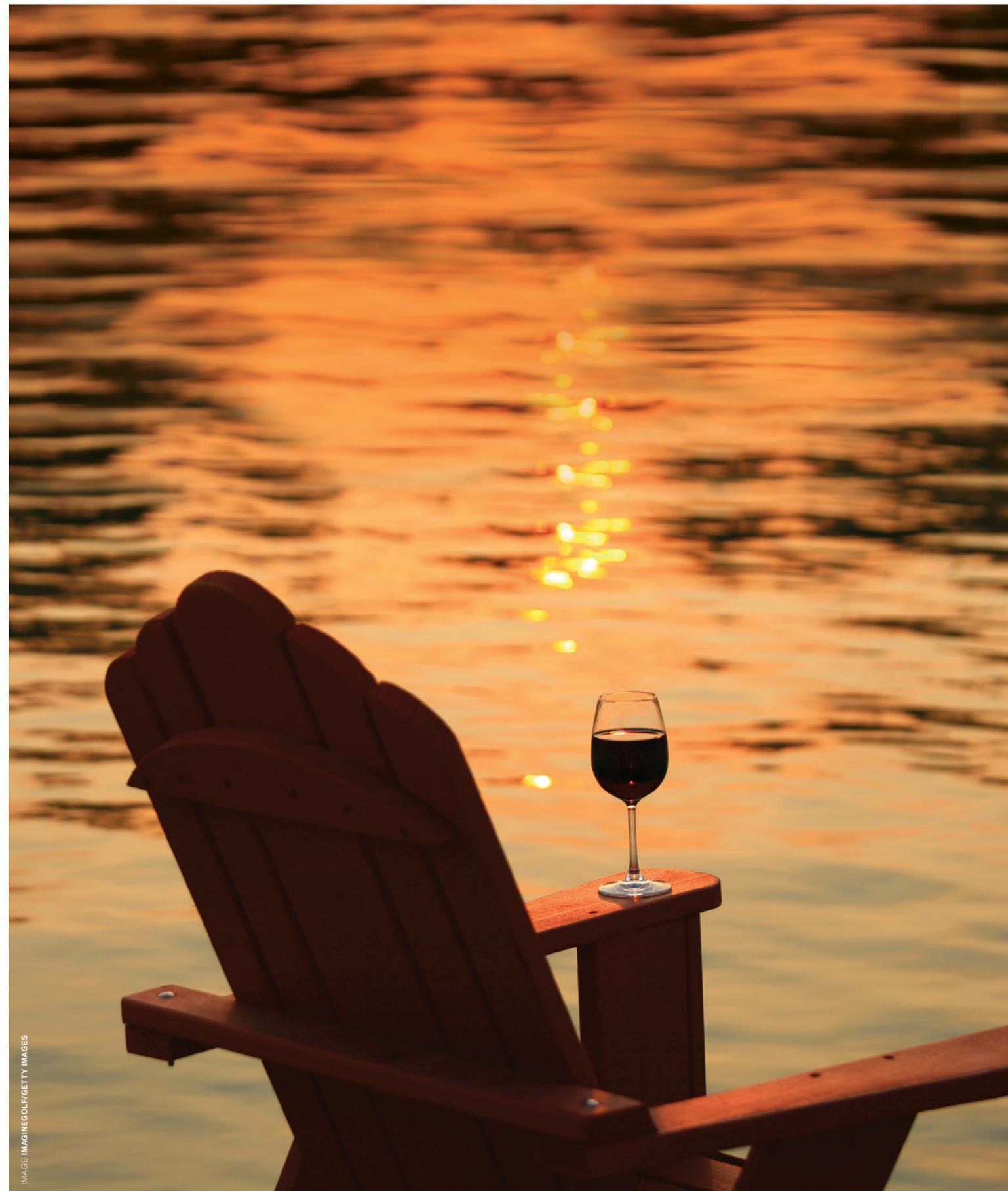


IMAGE: IMAGINEGOLF/GETTY IMAGES

Clockwise, from top: Sarah Heller's comfort wine is made by Prunotto, a vineyard in northern Italy; a bottle of Prunotto Bussia; inside one of the vineyard's tasting rooms



Bussia 2004 is the one I remember drinking most: a single whiff is all it takes to make me feel a little bit more complete than before.

It's not only that it takes me back to that particular moment in a Proustian madeleine time warp, although being restored to my early twenties full of enthusiasm for the wine world I was just then entering is no doubt intoxicating. It's that it also connects every moment from my past when I recognised that aroma, creating a sensorily-induced string of pearls through my personal history, restoring and reintegrating all the fragments of who I have once been.

Is it contradictory to the spirit of comfort wines to feel this way about what is decidedly not an omnipresent, "accessible" wine? I would argue it's all to do with context. Barolo and barbaresco are definitely not the quotidian wines of Piemonte (that would be barbera or dolcetto), but the ambitious tastes of my employers there, their friends and their customers ensured that they were for me (it's a hard job, but somebody had to do it). The fact that they are not "quaffable" wines doesn't negate their ability to give succour.

Equally, there will be readers for whom comfort wine is a classed growth Bordeaux or grand cru Burgundy because it is the wine responsible for their earliest meaningful drinking experiences. If that is the case for you, yours is an enviable lot; I suggest only that you stock up before rising prices make revisiting it too costly to enjoy regularly.

I see comfort wine as something that reconnects us with ourselves, our history and our origins. It nourishes rather than distracts or numbs: the wine equivalent of your mother's homemade dumplings rather than a tub of Ben & Jerry's. We probably shouldn't drink it too frequently, because by doing so we fail to stretch ourselves with more diverse experiences, but it is of great service to our wellbeing to identify our personal comfort wine so we can turn to it whenever we begin to feel a pressing need to be made whole.

Below, I've asked a few fellow MWs from around Asia about their own comfort wines.



JEANNIE CHO LEE

My comfort wine would be Maison Leroy's 2009 Bourgogne Rouge. When it was released, I bought many cases of it and it was my "house wine" for several years. I gave it to many friends and often opened it while cooking for my family. It was delicious on release, and even nearly ten years later (when I drank my last bottle) it was delicious.

The wine makes me think about all the friends I shared it with, and the meals all six of us shared as a complete family when they lived with us in Hong Kong (my children are now all abroad). The wine also reminds me of my friendship with Madame Lalou Bize-Leroy, who is an inspirational woman and has always been very kind and generous spending time with me whenever I am in Burgundy.



GUS ZHU

I would say my comfort wine is Verdelho Madeira. The aromas remind me of huang jiu (Chinese yellow rice wines), and the touch of residual sugar balanced with the

great acidity makes it very [pleasant] to drink as well. It's also [a comfort] because it can be kept for a long time after opening; I don't need to consume a bottle all at once.



KENICHI OHASHI

In 2000, I was invited to New Zealand after winning [the Best Wine Merchant award from] the Japan Sommelier Association.

I was so excited to visit for the first time. On my flight to Auckland, I studied the wines a lot, but arriving in New Zealand I immediately felt so relaxed. When I arrived at Cloudy Bay's guest house, James Healy (now an owner of Dog Point) served me their 1995 Pelorus. I was so surprised at its quality and started writing my tasting note (for my studies!), but once I went out of the guest house, the country view with all the large vineyards was spread out in front of me. I felt so relaxed, I took off my shirt and really enjoyed this wine with the beautiful view. James is still one of my best friends in the wine industry.



SONAL HOLLAND

This may come as a surprise, but sipping on a nicely chilled glass of German kabinett riesling is comforting to me. German rieslings, in general, may incite

debate among drinkers, but I find that the kabinett styles are non-fussily light, fresh and easy-drinking with reassuringly uplifting flavours of peach, apples and jasmine, the often soothingly off-dry sweetness offsetting the invigorating acidity—the perfect tippale on a balmy day in Mumbai.