

WINE & SPIRIT (UK) – JUNE 2008

# WINE & SPIRIT

JUNE 2008  
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## MAKING SENSE OF WINE

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WINE ✿ SPIRITS ✿ BEERS ✿ COCKTAILS

# Silence is golden

He's one of the world's most famous hoteliers and wine educators – who just happens to be deaf. **Fiona Sims** meets Roberto Wirth and finds he's far from being disadvantaged when it comes to wine appreciation

**R**oberto Wirth is best known for running one of Rome's most lavish hotels and wine academies. It's a testament to his passion and drive that he has reached this position despite having what some might call a disability. Because, Wirth is deaf, but rather than be hampered by this impairment, he's turned the tables and even claims it's a positive quality when it comes to wine appreciation.

Wirth's home is the Hassler, in Rome – voted best hotel in the city by the likes of Condé Nast Traveller too many times to mention. Since its doors opened in 1893 at the top of the Spanish Steps, a stone's throw from the Villa Borghese, it has continued to host kings, queens and presidents. And Tom Cruise, when he's in town.

Not that this fazes Wirth. His family has operated luxury hotels for five generations. And this really is his house, so to speak; his family bought the hotel back in the 1920s. When Wirth took the Hassler's reins from his father at the age of 32, Rome's press called him the youngest and hottest manager of a top class hotel in Italy.

And like any great host, Wirth wants to share his passion for art and fine wine with his guests. So, you're in luck if you're a wine lover staying at the Hassler. Just a few steps away is Il Palazzetto Restaurant and Wine Bar, with its 400-bin list. And one floor down is the International Wine Academy of Roma (IWAR), with two smart tasting rooms at the ready, of which Wirth is president.

## Wine courses for the deaf at the Wine & Spirit Education Trust

A familiar face at London's Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET), Erica Dent has just set up a new company teaching wine classes for the deaf called Wine & Sign ([wineandsign.com](http://wineandsign.com)).

A seasoned lecturer on wine, Dent first got into sign language through her sister, Jo, who had a deaf flatmate. "She persuaded me to come with her to sign language evening classes, so I started with level one, and I'm doing level three now," says Dent.

After being asked to arrange a wine class for the deaf for a charity event, the interest snowballed. Now her company, set up last September, is promoted on the Royal Association for the Deaf website; and request for similar events are rolling in.

For more details call 07966 499 589.

Wirth had always wanted to open a wine academy – for experts and enthusiasts alike, and when a neighbouring property came up for sale at the foot of the Spanish Steps in 1999 he snapped it up – bringing in wine heavyweights such as Hugh Johnson and Steven Spurrier to advise. And, yes, he has put on wine classes for the deaf.

We meet on a warm spring day in the hotel's Salone Eva, with its sumptuous drapes, button-backed banquettes and crisp white linen. In a dog's tooth-checked jacket and co-ordinating silk handkerchief, Wirth cuts a dashing figure. He lip reads in Italian and English, as well as a little French and German, and signs in American and Italian.

It was his wife who got him into wine. "My wife is the one who first introduced me to true wine appreciation. She had attended courses at a sommelier school, and had a true passion for wine – even collecting important bottles at home," he reveals.

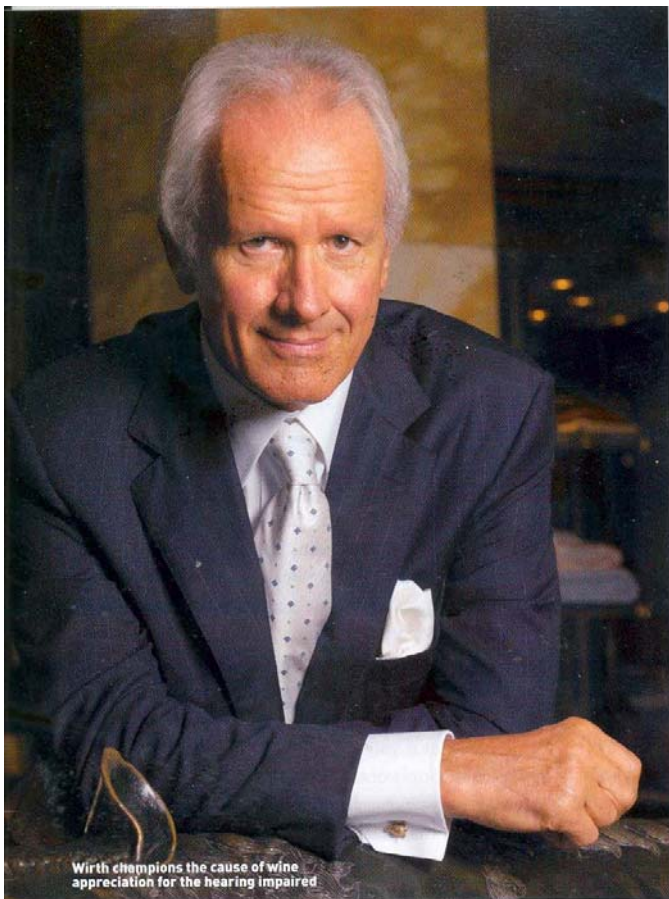
Does Wirth think the hearing impaired approach wine differently? "Yes – their other senses are more developed," he explains. "I like to smell a wine when it is served, and can detect a lot of its hidden nuances in this way, as well as by its taste."

A heightened sense of the experience of wine replaces discussion, Wirth explains. "When a deaf person, such as me, tastes a wine, we are more focused on our other senses – on its texture, smell and taste. I have an emotional response to what I taste – immediately trying to associate it with other flavours I know, of ripe fruit, of oak, of berries, etcetera, and maybe we focus on this more than on the more technical aspects that may come through a long discussion."

Wirth talks about how he learned to live with his disability to run a prestigious 82-room, 13-suite hotel, and how he coped with resistance from his father, who thought that the job of running hotels would be far too difficult for someone who is hearing impaired.

"The 'hotel' has always fascinated me – right throughout my childhood. I knew from the very start that this was what I wanted to do. Even when my father attempted to discourage me, explaining that there was a lot of verbal and telephone communication involved. The imprint in my mind was set, and there was no dissuading me that this was to be my life," explains Wirth, who is most proud of his work with the deaf, over and above any awards or gongs. The Roberto Wirth Fund has been operating for 10 years now and has gone a long way to improve the lives and opportunities of deaf children in Italy.

While there are no regular courses for the deaf at the IWAR (of which



Wirth champions the cause of wine appreciation for the hearing impaired

Wirth is president), they are easily created on request. For example, one of his legions of sign language interpreters (Italian and English, plus other languages) will interpret the words of the expert leading the class.

Romans and a fair number of the international community make up the bulk of students at the academy. Its director, Ian D'Agata, writes on wine for various publications, as well as publishing a guide to Italy's best wines (visit [wineacademyroma.com](http://wineacademyroma.com)). And the IWAR hosts its share of wine glitterati from Pétus winemaker Jean-Claude Berrouet, to IWC co-chairman, Charles Metcalfe.

Whom does Wirth admire most in the wine world? "Oenologists. I like to see how they make wine, and how they work to ameliorate the quality of wine, always searching for the best flavours," he replies. "I particularly like the wines of the Lazio region, and I'm actively trying to promote them as they have been developing very well in recent years. I also like the wines of Tuscany, Umbria, and Campania." One of his favourite wine and food matches is a red from Lazio with roasted wild salmon. And for everyday drinking he prefers a red from the Monte Argentario area of Tuscany. "It retains some of the flavour of the sea, which is close to the vineyards."

Wirth has just launched a wine weekend package at the Hassler. The two-night deal (two sharing), includes two 90-minute wine classes (one is An introduction to Italy's Greatest Reds and Whites), a four-course dinner for two at Il Palazzetto, and a couple of D'Agata's wine books.

Why now? "We have noted that there is a rise in wine tourism, and also that Italy is producing more and more wines of great quality, and we want to have a part in presenting these to the wider international audience through our wine weekends," replies Wirth. [www](http://www)

**WHAT'S NEXT?** How the taste buds react when wine tasters kick the smoking habit

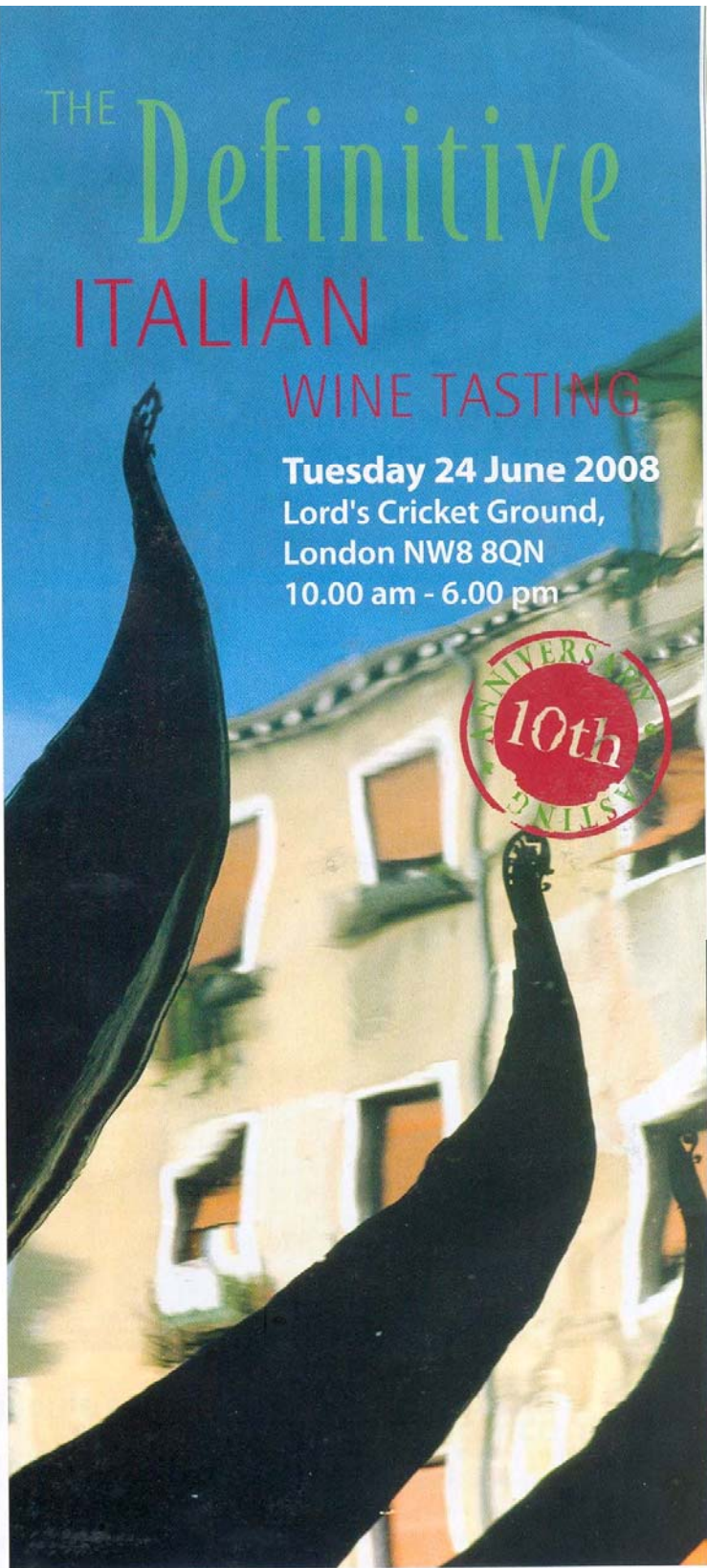
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