

# World's finest wine?

WHEN THE TIDES of supply and demand are merciful, **Peter Sisseck's** Pingus is the most expensive wine in the world. Charles Ferro uncorks with the Dane who is a master balancing act himself. Pictures by Per Morten Abrahamsen



**F**ine glasses clink as they are placed on the table before us. Peter Sisseck pulls a Marlboro Light out of the packet, lights it and takes a drag. Pushing my eyeballs back into their sockets, I just have to ask him: “Isn’t that a mortal sin at a time like this?” as he exhales the first puff of smoke. “It’s horrible, but ...,” he replies with an uncompromising smile and a shrug.

You see, we’re about to exercise our taste buds on some wine. Big deal, you may think. But it is a big deal, for Pingus is sometimes the most expensive wine in the world and Dane Peter Sisseck crafts it with a flair that would make the Roman god of wine, Bacchus, drool.

Sometimes the most expensive – because it’s a simple matter of supply and demand, determined by a market that trades in less than two percent of the world’s finest wine. From his vineyard in Spain, Sisseck puts out 4,000-9,000 bottles each year at his standard price. Wine traders then hear about the vintage through the grapevine and demand creates the price. This is the nectar of royalty, privilege, or liberal expense accounts.

**WE’RE SEATED ON OLD WOODEN PINGUS** crates lined up on the crushed-stone floor of Jørgen Christian Krüff’s L’Esprit du Vin, the Danish importer of Sisseck’s wine. There’s a spittoon on the table before us, raising the spit-or-swallow dilemma. But spitting out Pingus would be akin to burning money. Sisseck tells about the first time American wine guru Robert Parker tasted Pingus and remarked: “This is too good to spit out.” When Parker talks even Bacchus listens and his nod of approval helped thrust Pingus to the stars.

I inquire about the spitting thing. “It’s OK to do so, but not at the dinner table,” is Sisseck’s wry reply. “Seriously though, I’m leaving for South Africa soon to taste wines with eight others and we’ll be sampling eight hundred wines in five days, so you have to spit it out.”



“Most of the things I do are based on common horse sense”

*In vino veritas* the saying goes, and the truth of the matter remains: The grape – in this case *tinto fino* – reveals the truth that will be within a wine. Cellar processes between harvest and bottle are secondary, Sisseck maintains. While the wine-producing industry has developed loads of gimmicks for hurrying or improving lesser vintages, Sisseck uses methods as old as agriculture. “The transformation from grape to wine is something I do by natural means,” he says. “Most of the things I do are based on common horse sense, practices they used in the old days. It’s all about how the sap circulates through the plants.”

Sisseck devotes four of his 20 hectares to Pingus, with harvests from other areas going into the lesser – though

very impressive – *Flor de Pingus*. His vineyard *Dominio de Pingus* at *Pesquera* near the *Rio Duero*, a couple of hours north of Madrid, runs entirely on biodynamic methods of agriculture – that’s as organic as you can get.

“It took around four years to realize the true effects. Before that it was an almost insurmountable amount of work, but it has become easier and easier through the years. It looks as if the plants have found the right natural balance,” Sisseck says. In a nutshell – instead of trying to cure a disease, you develop strong plants that are able to cure themselves.

“I’ve learned nothing is right and nothing is wrong. There are no rules to follow slavishly. I can’t explain it, but it works and as long as it works ...”

**SISSECK USES THE WORD BALANCE A LOT** to describe methods, the fruit and of course the wine, while he does a balancing act himself. His wrist moves like the works of a fine Swiss watch as he swirls the purple liquid in its glass.

The wine turns the glass into a translucent jewel. It’s a ’98, not the ’96 that Sisseck requested, saying “I haven’t tasted the ’96 in 100 years.” But Krüff, our host, was afraid the temperature wasn’t precisely right for the ’96, the second bottling of Pingus and the one dubbed the most memorable to date. >>

# “Wine tastes pretty damn much like wine”



## THAT'S MR. PINGUS TO YOU

**NAME** | Peter Sisseck

**ALIAS** | Pingus, after a comic-strip character

**OCCUPATION** | Vintner, maker of Pingus

**AGE** | 40

**BORN** | Denmark

**FAMILY** | Two daughters, 9 and 10, who live in Denmark

**LIVES** | Dominio de Pingus at Pespquera, Spain, where his Dominio de Pingus vineyards are located

**CAREER START** | At his uncle's vineyard in Bordeaux

**CREDO** | If you're careful enough it's possible to make a natural product

**LATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT** | Pingus '02, to be out in 2004

» “Balance is something you can't arrive at technically. Only the grape can deliver,” Sisseck states, then sums it up: “My most vital task is, Don't screw up!”

His deft hands turn the glass to a horizontal position, not an easy feat to imitate. He studies the fruit of his labor the way a true craftsman beholds what his hands have created, a suspicion of a smile on his lips as he observes how the wine acts in the glass. He's working, but it's obvious he's enjoying how his grapes have been transformed. Sisseck admits it's a labor of the heart, but the palate functions as the instrument of quality control throughout the growing and cellar processes.

The soul of Pingus comes from toils of the heart, the mind, the mouth and lots of hands. Grapes are hand-sorted on the vine, then again while being picked. “With Pingus we take an extra step – we inspect them grape by grape,” Sisseck says. “It's a hell of a job. You could use a machine, but you can only sort bunches.”

Curiosity forces me to ask about another part of the body: Why do you crush the grapes with your bare feet? “Because I'm goofy,” he quips, but then adds as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, “No, it's because I can feel the grapes better.”

**PINGUS BEARS SISSECK'S NAME.** He was nicknamed Pingus by his uncle Peter, who ran a vineyard in Bordeaux where Sisseck learned some of the ropes – or vines – of winemaking. With too many Peters at the yard, his uncle began calling him Pingus after a Danish comic strip character. Coming from a home where good wines were served at table, Sisseck had ambitions of becoming a vintner, but he had reservations about taking a formal education. So he didn't. “You can't learn it in school, you have to taste, taste, taste, and work in the cellar,” he insists. “And you have to have sampled the best wines to recognize the best.”

### WHEN HE MOVED TO SPAIN 12 YEARS

ago – first as a consultant, for the '95 Pingus debuted in 1997 – he didn't set out to make one of the world's best wines. He simply wanted to make an ideal, honest, natural, balanced wine. “My criteria were: an older, local vine, the proper soil and correct nurturing of the plant.”

The result sways in the glass before me, and I honestly don't know what to expect.

“I think a lot of people not into wine get confused by all that's said and written. But wine tastes pretty damn much like wine, although it gives associations to other things,” Sisseck holds.

Sisseck uses a process he calls “200 percent oak”, which involves starting with a new oaken barrel and racking (pouring) the wine into another new barrel later in the process. So Pingus is not an oaky wine. When asked why this is, Sisseck shrugs as if to say, “That's just the way I do it.”

“A truly great wine demands materials, ambition and talent. Some vintners have one or two of these elements, but Peter has all three,” Krüff notes. “Together they create a sublime wine in which the characteristics of all three complement each other.”

Pingus has been described as containing associations of bacon, black olives and buttermilk. Buttermilk!

“I can't see the buttermilk,” Sisseck chuckles. “It's a likening I've only met in Denmark.” But he agrees with the bacon and olives, and as he tries to relate the experiences of his own taste buds, other descriptions sort of dissipate with a shrug. Instead he raises the glass to toast the moment of veritas. ●

### CHARLES FERRO

is an American writer/journalist living in Copenhagen. Regarding his encounter with Pingus, he can only quote Smokey Robinson (& the Miracles) “... a taste of honey is worse than none at all.”  
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