



Above: an unparalleled vertical tasting of Vega Sicilia's Unico in Hong Kong was attended by winery owner Pablo Alvarez with Jeannie Cho Lee MW

Vega Sicilia: 35 vintages of Unico

Unico celebrated its 150th birthday with a vertical tasting stretching back to 1941. Jeannie Cho Lee MW reports

SINCE PABLO ALVAREZ took over the management of Vega Sicilia in 1985, this 150-year old winery has been going through a quiet revolution. Higher quality and greater consistency since the 1986 vintage is evident in its flagship wine, Unico. A tasting of 35 vintages of Unico in May in Hong Kong, organised by The Fine Wine Experience, proved that Unico is among the most ageworthy red wines in the world, with a lifespan of 40 to 80 years.

After the Alvarez family purchased the property in 1982, it introduced greater precision in the vineyard, the winery and the wines. Plots are meticulously sub-divided by soil and microclimate, with corresponding vats – 54 stainless steel and 19 wood – that are housed in a high-tech, gravity-flow winery. Fewer than 8,000 cases of Unico are produced every year and the wine is released only after 10 years of ageing: seven years in wood, including American oak barriques made by in-house coopers, and three years in bottle.

The 1990s saw changes in the style of Unico, making it more approachable at a younger age, with a stronger focus on Tempranillo. The modern blend is approximately 80-90% Tempranillo with the rest composed of Cabernet Sauvignon; Malbec and Merlot are no longer used. In the 1980s and 1970s, Tempranillo made up between 60-70%.

This remarkable vertical tasting left no doubt that Unico is not only ageworthy, but also highly consistent. Among the wines tasted, there was only one corked and one tired bottle. Both the 1941 and 1942 vintages tasted like they were frozen in time, with freshness and lovely evolved, sweet flavours. All the wines were under their original cork and were ex-cellar.

Unico's personality shines through in all the vintages – that blend of ripeness contrasted with restraint; freshness and generosity; the combination of dried black tea leaf, sweet ripe blackberries and roasted herb flavours. Unico only starts to peak at around 30 years of age, and it's worth the wait, as your patience will be well rewarded.

2004 17.75/20pts (92/100pts)
£199-£289 **Bancroft, Berry Bros & Rudd, Corney & Barrow, Goedhuis & Co, Hedonism, Jeroboams, Justerini & Brooks, Latimer Vintners, Waitrose Cellar**
Approachable and sweet, with dried prunes and dates on the palate plus a hint of mocha. Full bodied, generous and very ripe, this is a voluptuous, richer style than the Unicos of the past. **Drink** 2026-2045 **Alcohol** 14%

1999 18 (93)
£679 (magnum) **Hedonism**
Tannic and young with savoury herbs and sweet spices. Will need at least a decade in

bottle to enjoy. Beautiful wine with great potential for ageing. **Drink** 2024-2048 **Alc** 14%

1998 19.25 (97)
£2,477 (jeroboam) **Hedonism**
Youthful nose with primary fruit and sweet oak, the palate reveals the wine's incredible intensity and depth. Great potential to age beautifully. **Drink** 2026-2048 **Alc** 13.5

1996 18.5 (95)
£199 **The Wine Society**
Tightly knit and articulate with layers of savoury, earthy and dark berry flavours. More restrained than some of Unico's best vintages, but the intensity and depth reveals its potential over the next few decades. **Drink** 2026-2044 **Alc** 13.5%

1995 17.75 (92)
£265-£270 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Hedonism**
Tannic, tightly wound Unico with lovely wood, roasted herbs and savoury spices. Great concentration with focus and firm tannins, and a long finish. Wait at least a decade to enjoy this wine. **Drink** 2024-2040 **Alc** 14%

1994 19 (96)
£272 **Fine & Rare**
Complex, with delicate flavours. Extremely youthful and will bloom with more time in bottle. Classic Unico flavours of pu'er (Chinese, dark) tea leaves and tobacco with sweet oak lurking behind. **Drink** 2024-2045 **Alc** 13.5%

1991 19.25 (97)
£220 **WinePro**
Gorgeous composition; firm tannins, layers of flavours and nuanced detail even in its youth. Firm, supple tannins, intensity and focus. Beautifully crafted. **Drink** 2014-2044 **Alc** 14%

1990 18 (93)
£233 **Hennings**
Savoury with dried black tea leaves, tobacco and firm tannins. Still tightly knit – will benefit from at least 4-6 more years in bottle. Youthful and tightly wound. **Drink** 2019-2034 **Alc** 13.5%

1989 18.5 (95)
£225 **WinePro**
Beautiful Unico with complex layers of dried tea leaves, dried flowers and herbs. This wine has a sensuality despite its youth, and persistent length. **Drink** 2018-2045 **Alc** 13.5%

1987 18.25 (94)
£199 **Portland Wine Co**
Sweet, fragrant and opulent; seductive with generosity, depth and supple tannins. Youthful and vigorous, should open up further with an extra decade in bottle. **Drink** 2022-2045 **Alc** 14%

1986 19.5 (98)
£989 **Hedonism**
Seductive nose with intense flavours of violet, plum, date and sweet oak. This is a gorgeous, complex Unico with great intensity and depth and a very long finish. One of Unico's best vintages. **Drink** 2016-2050 **Alc** 13.5%

1985 17.75 (92)
£235 **Huntsworth Wine**
Tannic, tightly wound with blackberry and cocoa flavours. There is density and power here with tannins that should soften after more time in bottle. **Drink** 2017-2035 **Alc** 13.5%

1983 18 (93)
£355 **Hedonism**
Intensely concentrated with blackberries, roasted herbs and aged pu'er tea leaf notes. Youthful and vigorous, this needs another 10 years of ageing before it mellows into a classic, elegant Unico. **Drink** 2022-2038 **Alc** 13%

1982 17.75 (92)
£577 **Hedonism**
Youthful and vigorous, this wine tastes barely 20 years old. Primary dark fruits and tobacco leaves dominate with firm tannins and an earthy finish. **Drink** 2014-2034 **Alc** 13.5%

1980 18.25 (94)
£315 **Fine & Rare**
Intense and powerful at 34 years of age, this is an impressive Unico with notes of dried blackberries, dates and white tea leaf flavours. Long finish. **Drink** 2014-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

1979 17.5 (91)
£275 **Christopher Keiller**
Earthy, dark mushroom, forest notes with lovely dried red berries in the background. Tannic and tightly wound, this wine will benefit from at least a few hours of decanting. **Drink** 2014-2021 **Alc** 13.5%

1976 16.5 (88)
£422 **Hedonism**
A weaker Unico with quite thin flavours. This bottle is not in perfect condition, with oxidised notes and unfresh flavours. Finish is dry and quite modest. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

1975 18 (93)
£446 **Hedonism**
Wonderful intensity and youthfulness given its age. Impressive wine with very long length. Classic Unico. **Drink** 2014-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

1974 18 (93)
N/A UK **www.vega-sicilia.com**
Velvety textured with dark, savoury flavours and a hint of tobacco. This is a savoury, herbal Unico but still retains its charm and unique identity. **Drink** 2014-2029 **Alc** 13.5%

1973 16.75 (89)
£281 **Fine & Rare**
A lighter, weaker vintage, this is medium bodied with firm tannins plus flavours that lean towards earthy, savoury notes. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** N/A

1972 17 (90)
£291 **Fine & Rare**
Beautiful perfume of dried tea leaves, dried flowers and savoury herbs. Lacks the depth of the best years but still intense and offers great drinking pleasure. **Drink** 2014-2024 **Alc** N/A

1970 19 (96)
£780 **Hedonism**
Layered and complex, this Unico is incredibly youthful given its age. Gorgeous, filled with savoury herbs and sweet oak flavours and a persistent finish. **Drink** 2014-2030 **Alc** 13%

1969 18.25 (94)
£345 **Fine & Rare**
Coffee and roasted herb flavours with sweet cedar notes. This is a complex, layered Unico with a meaty, generous palate. Long finish. **Drink** 2014-2028 **Alc** N/A

1968 18 (93)
£1,310 **Hedonism**
Savoury and restrained, this Unico is less sweet and expressive than the 1966 or the 1964. Closed and quite tightly wound with firm tannins and black tea leaves on the palate. Drinking well now. **Drink** 2014-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

1967 17.5 (91)
£504 **Hedonism**
Savoury and herbal with a lean palate, this is quite thin. Wonderfully supple and great with food to enjoy now. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** N/A

1966 18.25 (94)
£376 **Fine & Rare**
Beautiful, with sweet oak and dried red berries on the nose. Palate offers layers of delicate, persistent flavours and long length. A great Unico at its peak. **Drink** 2014-2028 **Alc** N/A

1965 17.5 (91)
£381 **Hedonism**
Restrained and savoury with roasted herbs,

black tea leaf and earthy notes. Amazing vitality for its age. **Drink** 2014-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

1964 19.5 (98)
£469-£595 **Hedonism, World Wine Consultants**
Seductive with dried floral flavours and sweet spices. The aromatics and profile are more floral and sweet than many others in this decade. A magnificent wine at its peak that is hardly showing its age. **Drink** 2014-2029 **Alc** N/A

1962 18.5 (95)
£660 **Fine & Rare**
Elegant and refined with lovely firm tannins and structure surrounded by layers of subtle dried black tea leaf flavours and savoury herbs. Long length. **Drink** 2014-2027 **Alc** 13.5%


1960 16.75 (89)
£478 **Hedonism**
A weaker vintage with dried tobacco and tea leaf dominating the flavours. Holding up well but starting to fade. **Drink** 2014-2018 **Alc** 14%

1957 18 (93)
N/A UK **www.vega-sicilia.com**
Restrained flavours with roasted herbs and earthy flavours. This is a firm, tightly wound Unico with savoury characters and a fairly long finish. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** N/A

1953 19.25 (97)
£690 **Hedonism**
Sweet and opulent with plenty of intense sweet, dried fruit notes. Seductive and sweet with generosity and depth. Gorgeous, drinking beautifully now. **Drink** 2014-2024 **Alc** N/A

1948 17.75 (92)
£919 **Fine & Rare**
Tobacco, herbs and sweet spices on the nose followed by firm tannins and quite a tannic grip. Less sweet and more savoury with dried tea leaf character. **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** N/A

1942 19.25 (97)
£962 **Fine & Rare**
Lovely silky texture on this 72-year-old wine under its original cork. Dried autumn leaves accented with sweet oak and vanilla. Incredibly fresh and lively; impressive. **Drink** 2014-2023 **Alc** N/A

1941 18.25 (94)
£704 **Fine & Rare**
Savoury herbs with sweet cedar flavours mingle in this elegant wine under its original cork. Classic dried tea leaf notes of Unico with firm tannins. Still vibrant and holding up well. Impressive for a 73-year-old wine. **Drink** 2014-2021 **Alc** N/A 

For full details of UK stockists, see p90

Jeannie Cho Lee MW is co-chair of the Decanter Asia Wine Awards