



Les Caves de Pyrene - February Newsletter

Another week, another newsletter and no apologies for focusing on natural wine here. Check out the third article and click on the natural wine web site www.thenaturalwinefair.com for daily changing details about the fair, the natural wine fortnight, the growers and the people behind the project.

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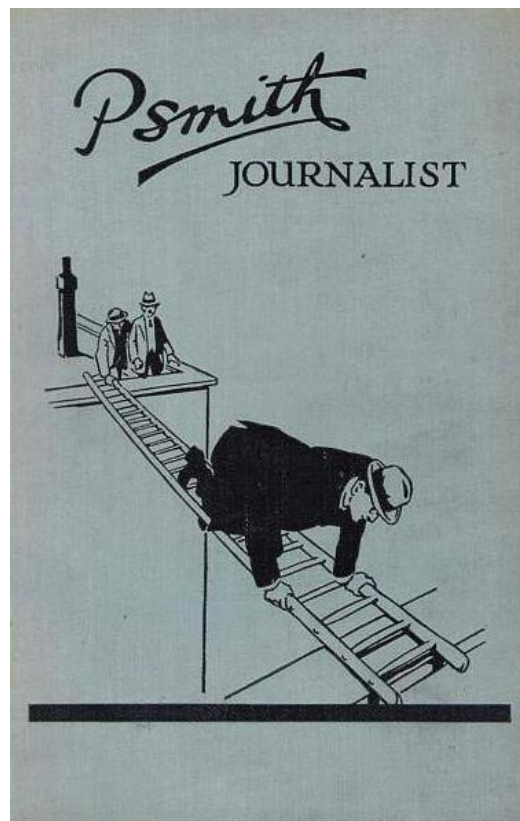
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Critique of pure natural wine “raisin”

There was once an editor of a paper in the Far West who was sitting at his desk, musing pleasantly of life, when a bullet crashed through the window and embedded itself in the wall at the back of his head. A happy smile lit up the editor's face. "Ah," he said complacently, "I knew that Personal column of ours was going to be a success!"

Psmith, Journalist – PG Wodehouse

You sometimes wonder whether anyone gives a rat's tush for the thing you are passionate about and then, as you feel the breeze of the bullet as it whizzes by your ear, you know someone somewhere has taken umbrage, and suddenly your existence makes sense.

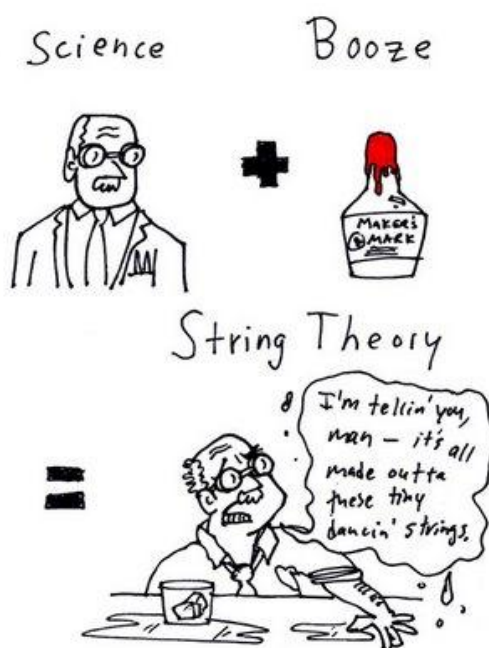
It is not only stuck up stickybeats and Bufton Tuftons who inveigh against natural wine, but also the new establishment who feel deeply threatened by what they don't understand and challenged by what does not accord with their world view.

Naked/Scantly clad vino versus wine-dressed-to-the-nines

In the wine universe there are individual growers who try to capture the flavour of the place and the vintage in the bottle, and there is precious world of flying winemakers with their no-risk-and-little-interest wines, wines that do not taste of the terroir but rather of the winemaker's scrubbed hands, wherein you can taste the fruit (from cultivated yeast flavours), or the fermentation aromas, where singularity is cleaned and nullified through filtration and fining, wherein all semblance of life has been removed and where nature has been excised with a battery of winemaker's stock

devices and vinification techniques. This is not about stability, as has been asserted, but dull purity as a form of zero-defect culture, the most reductive form of winemaking “I know best”. It is an exaltation of mediocrity, a justification of insipidness – it is nothing to do with the vineyard or the love of the wine and everything to do with creating a the common denominator market of consumer acceptance. Great wine, I would like to think, is both uncommon and variable. As soon as the winemaker starts interpreting what is acceptable to his audience he or she is imposing his/her personality on the wine. Whilst there are always decisions and revisions to be made, wholesale interventions are inimical to the entire notion of terroir expression. The oenologists (and I have tasted wines from a number of them) have their trademark touch, sometimes deft, sometimes clunky, but I would always prefer to taste the vineyard in the wine and not the editorialising technique.

If I sterilise my kitchen it may be clean but I am not a better chef because of it. If my studio is tidy I am not a better artist because of it. Because I may have a range of modern equipment in my winery that does not make me a better winemaker. Equating terroir with absence of quirks and flaws makes no sense. When I think of the exuberance and thrilling experimentation of Natural Selection Theory (<http://www.naturalselectiontheory.com>) in Australia I know that stifling conservatism has but one purpose and that is to unleash counterbalancing creative energy from talents who wish to do carve their own niche.



One of the mantras quoted by the see-no-evil-smell-no-evil-taste-no-evil conservatives is that wine would turn to vinegar were it not for human intervention (for which read technical human intervention). Once upon a time before technology could effectively eliminate the flawed human factor there were wines that could be drunk. Indeed, great wines were being made. Winemaking interventions didn't suddenly make wines great – it made them consistent and, to a certain degree, more uniform.

The ascription of faults solely to natural wines is to miss the point by several parasangs. Faults can occur in either natural or conventional wines. I have tasted bad examples of brett from avowedly “non-natural” winemakers – so what does that prove? Natural winemakers don’t want to make vinegar any more than conventional winemakers; they are however, more likely to work without safety nets or obvious manipulations, in other words in a fashion that renders outcomes uncertain. To paint all natural wines as faulty because wild yeasts are used, or because they may have low sulphur regimes, is facile. There are no inevitabilities in wine – other than that people will make pseudo-scientific assertions based on what they like to drink.

There is a further charge that can be levelled at the natural wine naysayers and that is their attempt to annex the high ground of terroir. Terroir is not just about clean fruit; if you concentrate exclusively on cultivating the fruit flavours in the winery you lose the back story which is the very signature of terroir. Certain wines are as prosaic as the ingredients that might be written on their back labels. Functionality is their function. Stability is not enough, per se, the wine has to be true, and if you strip away the elements you don’t like then you tend to strip away the essence of the wine and achieve a highly filtered reality.

Wine should be considered in the round, not by virtue of its clarity (how does that affect terroir?), or by this aroma or that flavour. I have mentioned previously, for example, that VA and reduction can enhance terroir character. I have also said that there are by products of vinification that contribute to the identity of the wine in a particular vintage. The nature of the grapes themselves determine the nature of the vinification; the conventional winemaker tends to eliminate all the variables that terroir has given whilst the natural winemaker will work with those variables. Occasionally, there have to be modifications – a little sulphur might be introduced to rescue a vat that might otherwise spoil, but the intention is always to guide the wine from the vineyard to the bottle with the fewest possible interventions.

I bridle at an attitude that *suggests* hundreds of winemakers and thousands of consumers who cherish and drink natural wines are culpable either of fraud, stupidity, or bad taste. There are wonderful wines and bad wines – I judge a wine mainly not on the way it is made but the way it tastes. Poor grapes make poor wine, clumsy winemaking makes poor wine, by which I mean introducing extraneous flavours, the very high use of sulphites (which can still be tasted in the wine), the stripping of the wine through over-enthusiastic filtering and fining. Each degree of intervention removes the wine one step further from its origins. Those who espouse the safety-first heavy-hands-on-approach will be content to dwell in their own world of irreproachably confected wines, whilst those who risk the lighter touch will be able to feel the underlying connection between the wine and its origin.

The Rationale of Real Wine

“Whatever people in general do not understand, they are always prepared to dislike; the incomprehensible is always the obnoxious.”

~Letitia E. Landon, author (1802-1838)

A few years ago we put together our inaugural tasting of real wine, inviting small independent growers from France and Italy to display and discuss their wares. Few trade tastings have a focus so we decided to look for a specific strong theme. All the growers seemed to be very much “growers” rather than “winemakers”. They would rather talk about the particularity of their region and their vineyards than discuss vinification techniques. They were all to a man and woman adamant about promoting biodiversity, all of them eschewed chemical treatments in the vineyard and many were active in various organic and biodynamic movements. To call them organic growers, however, would not be strictly accurate - “organic” has become a vacant political buzzword and the intellectual property of bureaucratic agencies - without proper certification, even if they were purer than pure and holier than thou, the term wouldn’t legally stick. Besides, the word organic diminished rather than elevated the enterprise in question; organic is a proscriptive term; most of the growers in question were considerably more proactive in the vineyard with sustainable methodologies promoting biodiversity. Several were working en biodynamie. But then biodynamics is a complex philosophy from which even its most ardent proponents tend to cherry-pick certain aspects.

The word “natural” was bandied about. Natural wines referred to specific group of growers and whilst we admired them greatly we didn’t wish to confine ourselves at the stage to very low sulphur wines. Eventually, we settled on the expression “real wine” which had both positive connotations, but also made the important distinction between the products that we were showing and standardised, over-manipulated wines.

So what is Real Wine? In one sense Real Wine is the antithesis or antidote to mass-produced, branded wines and the prevalent pretentious modern style of over-manipulated, over-flavoured, over-acidified, over-harvested, over-filtered and over-oaked wines that seem to dominate the shelves of the supermarkets and high streets.



I can taste the special banana-flavoured yeast used in this wine

Real wine, however, is not simply a broad counter-blast; it is a set of ideas underpinned by certain strong ethical principles. Although the practices in the vines

and the cellars could never be codified in a strict charter, there is a rational attempt to tie together essential common practice. The priorities are: the life of the soil; a search for terroir; selection massale; the attachment to historic grape varieties and the refusal of the increasing trend to plant standard varieties; the use of organic treatments; the search for good vine health through natural balance; the refusal of GMOs; the prudent use of chemical plant treatments; the search for full maturity; manual harvests; the respect for the variability of vintages; the refusal to chaptalize systematically; natural fermentations; a sparing or zero use of SO₂; minimum or no filtration; the refusal of standard definition of taste of wines by certain enological or market trends; the possibility of experimenting and questioning different aspects of work; respect of history, of roots.

“Realing us in”

It seemed a good idea to unite growers who practised these principles under one flag, but what was initially a feel-good notion began to assume clearer intellectual shape over the course of the next few months. Such crystallisation linked into and was reinforced by a clearer understanding of the nature of our wine epiphanies; those sublime moments when you are drinking something and are pulled up short by the sheer deliciousness of the wine and emit an uncritical joyful wow! The simplicity of the reaction somehow testifies to its immediacy: “You would want to drink the whole bottle” as our Eric saliently observes, or, as a winemaker famously said: “The best bottle on the table is the empty bottle”. In a certain respect we were beginning to taste wine in a more intuitive and less evaluative fashion.

We began to identify certain organoleptic similarities between our favourite wines. Displaying lightness and purity of the fruit and exalted levels of acidity, these were nutritious wines that skated lightly and brightly across the palate as opposed to the mesomorphic, lignified, indigestible specimens designed to acquire trinkets at tastings. In an age where wines were naturally reaching high levels of alcohol, we were discovering that some wines could be lean, fresh, mineral and utterly satisfying, and that certain growers, by using plot-by-plot knowledge of their vineyards and by having an acute awareness of their diverse microclimatic subtleties, could produce gentle, restrained, expressive wines no matter how difficult the vintage. The true grower was also one who would restrict or eliminate invasive interventions in the winery and we increasingly identified with vigneron who would use oak sparingly (or not at all).

The further you venture into the world of real wine the more layers of artifice you want to strip away. Ideally, real wines would have nothing added but also nothing taken away. The fermentations would use natural yeasts and the wines would neither be filtered nor fined and the additions of sulphur would be either minimal or zero.

We began tasting wines that were either protean, shifting according the mood and the weather, or were vital, prickly, tricky, edgy. Of course, you could identify technical flaws if you were so minded: some volatility here, some reduction there, but they tasted real and alive with their own blood pumping through them as opposed to the pinchbeck wines that we had grown accustomed to and somehow formerly revered as stylish and polished.

Once you get over the notion that wine has to be somehow perfectible and can be pieced together by laboratory clinicians like a chemical jigsaw puzzle then you can accept the wine for what it is. Human beings are not flawless; where is the rule that says that wines should be?

Partisan about the artisan...

The winemakers, sorry, vigneron, under the real wine banner, are as part of an extended family. Unlike movements which promote only narrow regional interests these farmers are creating a substantive alternative ethical platform. They are passionate, even religious in their non-conformist conviction that real wine is made in the vineyard and the result of their endeavours is kind of natural truth: to restore true knowledge and to bring terroir back to life so that winegrowers and consumers can rediscover the pleasures of finding authenticity in wine. The growers are quite prickly about the critics, consultants and wine-buyers whom they view as apologists for globalism and consumer acceptance panels. One can understand their antipathy; they see an incestuous relationship between corporate interests and the media. They read about spoofed up, manufactured wines that receive critical plaudits, whilst their own wines are often dismissed patronisingly as being “quirky” or “commercially irrelevant”.

It is fashionable to debunk terroir. A lot of scientists think it's a myth and yet educated consumers and producers are finding out that the taste of wine, its harmony, its beauty and its elegance stem from a qualitative world whose origins are intangible. These qualities cannot be slapped onto a wine as one replaces a layer of paint. “Quality comes from an organised and intangible whole, which extends to the grapes only when certain laws that generate life on earth are respected. It is the aggregate of all the things that are not done to the wine with nature's sublime genius (if you will) that makes the wine more real”. Real wine is about naked typicity, the ultimate respect for the processes of nature.

Real wine was a feel-good judgemental phrase invented by us to provoke a reaction; natural wine, conversely, has a coherent philosophy as well as a set of practical guidelines to follow. It stipulates that wine is a product of nature and the work in the vineyard should reflect that, and that winemakers should use the minimum number of interventions in order to preserve the natural flavour of the wine.

The Natural Wine Fair 2011

www.thenaturalwinefair.com



The Natural Wine Fair UK Ltd is a company formed by Isabelle Legeron M.W. and five sympathetic small (and very small) wine merchants with the binary aim of hosting a tasting to showcase the wines of their growers as well as educating the public and trade about natural wines and stimulating a wider debate.

Bringing together different people with different ideas and trying to form a particular collective agenda meant that we initially had to agree about the objectives for such an event. We decided that a consumer element was imperative, giving a unique opportunity for the public to engage with the wines and the growers, thereby broadening the appeal of what is critically considered to be a narrow, even cliquey movement. Truly, only by tasting the wines shall ye know them.

We tried to arrive at a definition of natural wine without precluding the right of the grower to express his or her individuality. There is, and always will be, a fine line here – a manifesto should lay down a series of requirements without insisting that every precondition is followed to the letter of the law (or to the very milligram of added sulphur). Many of the growers whom one might most closely identify as the movers and shakers of natural wine movement find measurements and targets a kind of anathema, and to a certain extent the (pure) intention is father to the deed. We have to establish guidelines, whilst respecting those that operate within the spirit of natural wine; trust is integral to natural wine. Because it is not a movement which demands certification, the growers and winemakers tend to be refreshingly candid about their methods.

In the end it is more appropriate that a natural wine fair should absorb diverse growers making wine in different styles. If we lay down the law too much we are putting ourselves above the growers and their wines; however, if we do not devise targets (most of which our growers reach and surpass in any case) the notion of natural wine becomes diluted and meaningless. The web-site www.thenaturalwinefair.com has details of the charter and profiles of the participating growers.

The venue chosen for the fair was Borough Market. The association with artisan products made this a plausible location in terms of the spirit of the enterprise, although logistically it has provided its fair share of administrative headaches! One of the original suggestions was that we go under the auspices of a larger event (such as the Food Festival), but we felt that we should be entirely independent, and not cast adrift in some corner of a vast exhibition space such as Earl's Court or Olympia. The Natural Wine Fair is not just off the London International Wine Fair at Excel; it is an alternative to what is a huge corporate event. In short it is all about the growers and their wines.

The success of the Natural Wine Fair won't simply be measured by how big the splash is at the time, but the subsequent ripple effect. Or to use another analogy it is not just how briefly and brightly we flower but rather how deep we lay down the roots for another, bigger event. There is no reason why London cannot be a throbbing pulse of the natural wine movement; at the moment the potential is largely untapped.

Communication about natural wines has to be strong and imaginative. We hired a Nudge PR (<http://www.nudgepr.co.uk>) to help publicise the fair in selected trade and non-trade journals and to set up interviews in the media; a web site was designed to advertise the fair and ancillary events as well as to outline the charter and to make accessible profiles of the various growers; Isabelle is networking the

various media; using twitter, face book and compiling short videos to talk about the project specifically and natural wine in general. At the same time - collectively and individually - we are organising growers' lunches, mini-tastings, master-classes and winery visits for customers and journalists and gradually building momentum in communicating about natural wine.

Because events, even relatively big ones, are circumscribed by numbers. As communicators and wine sellers we want to reach a greater audience and further demystify the wines which is why we decided on a promotional "natural wine fortnight", involving a wide range of restaurants, bistros and gastropubs. The idea is to ask restaurateurs to highlight natural wines by giving space on their wine lists to them, to carry a minimum of two examples by the glass (and hopefully several more) as well as any number by the carafe or bottle. The response has been encouraging; whilst restaurateurs often don't like being removed from their comfort zone, many are searching for a point of difference and want to list wines that tell a story. Natural wine fortnight is the opportunity to go beyond second-guessing the preferences of their customers and screw their courage to the sticking place – nothing ventured etc. etc!

The success of relatively humble establishments such as Terroirs and Brawn as well as Artisan & Vine, Green and Blue and Bar Battu helps to bring our message to thousands of customers every week, whilst Isabelle's efforts in transforming the tenor of the wine list at Hibiscus shows that Michelin stars don't simply have to twinkle for the classic names alone. I profiled Peter Hogarth last week who is doing great retail work at Wholefoods in Kensington, and further proof that the natural wine is developing roots throughout the capital can be seen, for example, in the excellent wine lists of Brula <http://www.brula.co.uk>, compiled by owner Lawrence Hartley, and in Malcolm John's various restaurants (Le Vacherin, La Cassoulet, Fish & Grill) which focus on artisan growers and their distinctive wines. And wherever you find wines from our partners-in-natural-wine-crime (Dynamic Wines, Aubert & Mascoli, Wine Story and Yapp Bros) you can be sure of tasting something interesting and individual.

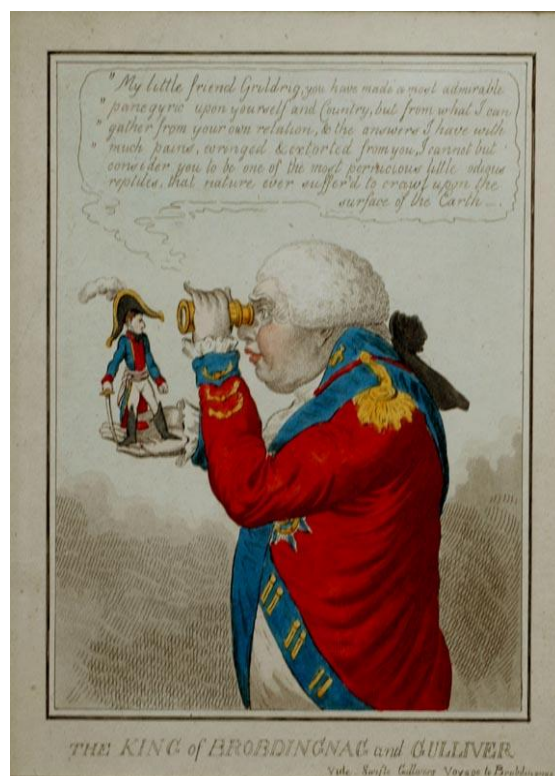
The Journey to Natural Wine...

... is not so much about discovering a style of wine called "natural wine" but rediscovering (even retuning) one's palate so that you find wines that you enjoy drinking.

Once, there were the big wine fairs. And then there were salons off the fairs. And finally there were the hemi-demi-chambres off the salons. Then we end up completely smashed, drinking wine around someone's kitchen table while the one-eyed winery dog bounces up and down and an accordion reels out French folk songs.

You look for the wines that express (simply) the sense of terroir. Terroir is a tricky, emotive word. Truer, livelier, less fuddled and muddled by technical tricks and high profile oak regimes these are the wines that slake the thirst whilst sharpening the appetite.

Whilst Damascene conversions do occur you are unlikely to wake up one day and think I am going to drink natural wines (whatever they may be). The conversion is gradual; you find yourself buying wines that you enjoying drinking. Which is as good a reason as any. A pattern emerges. The wines which made us sit up (or knocked us on our ass, as Eric would say) were natural wines, and even then it was not a universal, uncritical adoration but a conversion grower by grower and wine by wine. We didn't suddenly abandon our sense of taste or proportion, but started to taste wine in a different way. This was to be a ride of all time, without handrails, without rules, with plenty of people shouting from the sidelines that we didn't know what we were doing. I'm glad we did because these naked wines excite me and make me feel positive about a business that has become bigger, brassier and more commercial over the years.



The British wine establishment examining the tiny phenomenon of vins natures

Wine Labelling – To list or not list ingredients

Part of me wants to serve the interventionist winemaker with the lengthiest of self-inflicted writs –that they must stick (or swathe) a gigantic label detailing their 100 plus additives on every bottle of wine and then discover whether people still want to pour it down their gullet. The other part of me believes that labels are essentially meaningless, providing lists rather than qualitative information. And how much information is too much? Does one list the yeasts and enzymes in a wine on the back label? Is acidification an additive or a wine making technique?

Will all winemakers have to declare everything? Will not the ones who put nothing on their labels become guerrilla winemakers, the champions of natural wine? Real winemakers are, after all, vigneron not lab technicians.

I wouldn't trust any governing body to administer this sympathetically. We've seen, for instance, how consumer acceptance panels in SA refused to certify low sulphur wines. Labelling creates extreme burdens of proof for the grower (like trying to prove a negative), but also presupposes that those issuing certification have a clue what they are doing.

It also invites conformism. My comrade rival would have us label natural wines: "Contains sulphides, may contain high levels of VA or Bret." I might label his or her wines: "Contains arguably no terroir expression whatsoever."

One of the reasons why people support labelling is that they want to warn us off the wines that they don't like drinking.

Crazy Grapes: Gringet



Un oeuf already! Gringet fermenting in alien pods

I think we can claim that this will be one of the more extensive analyses of the Gringet grape.

Gringet is reputed to be either a clone of the Traminer grape from northern Italy or Savagnin Blanc, the famous grape of Jura, but ampelographical testing suggests that it is, in fact, an older variety. Dr. Jose Vouillamoz of the University of Neuchâtel has carried out the DNA analysis of the Gringet grape and this is his take on it.

"Le Gringet est un cépage rare (15 Ha environ) de la vallée de l'Arve en Haute-Savoie. Il est cultivé en particulier dans la région d'Ayse où il produit des vins effervescents et tranquilles de grand caractère."

Now the grape has virtually disappeared from Savoie with only Domaine Belluard holding any significant quantities: a mere 8ha. Most Gringet goes into the production of sparkling wines which are a local speciality and likely to remain so.

“Dominique Belluard, for it is he, expounds on his dislike of oak (it deadens the flavour) whilst pouring us some Gringet from the tank. He’s not a fan of stainless steel either, believing that it doesn’t allow the wine to breathe properly. As a result he has installed oval cement betons. All the wines we tasted were fantastically pure, especially the mineral Gringet from the *Terre de Feu* terroir. No malolactic fermentation here the fruit is beacon-bright, crystalline and the acidity sings. The wine conveys initial aromas of white flowers and jasmine, is citrus-edged with a hint of white peach, jasmine and violet and a twist of aniseed to finish. The latest Gringet cuvees from the egg-shaped tanks were more emollient and slight more textural as if the lees contact had smoothed some of the stony aggression.

“A wine with this kind of brilliant acidity would surely go well with river fish such as pike or trout and with cheeses from Savoie and Jura.”

Donald Rumsfeld's maxims for natural wine



And another thing...

On the unclear outcomes of wild ferments...

There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.

On using sulphur...

If in doubt, don't. If still in doubt, do what's right.

On critical disapproval of wine pundits

If you are not criticized, you may not be doing much.

Of Stately Pleasure Domes, alternate realities and integrity...



You probably remember that apocryphal Fitzgerald-Hemingway exchange: “The rich are different than you and me. Yes, they have more money.” There is a evidently breed apart of wine critic – one pictures them swanning around in the Xanadus of various Bordeaux chateaux (or breezing through Californian faux-chateaux) or taking tea with admirers of Mussolini in ravishing but chilly Tuscan palazzos.

I haven't been following the recent burlesque featuring odd characters such as Doctor Miller, Sancho Panda MW and Sir Robert de Parker, but they sound like abbots grown corpulent on the hospitality of many a monastery. Most wine writers that I know tread that fine line between accepting trips and entertainment whilst retaining an open mind pretty well. One wonders parenthetically, however, whether being intensively exposed to certain kinds of wines conditions one's palate and creates a liking for them. Certainly, drinking wine in the vineyard and amongst the people who are responsible for making it, gives us context, context gives us understanding and sympathy, and sympathy makes us think better of the wines in question. That is as it should be. To be truly objective our objectivity has to be a little compromised; we need to enter into the spirit of the wine.

Having said that wine buyers have one critical advantage over journalists and that is the license to be highly critical. Their hard commercial mission is to find something to buy that stacks up against wines from other countries and regions; they cannot be flattered or simply be shown the best of the best to coo over. Journalists need to be optimistic and encourage good practice when they find it, whilst avoiding the inclination to write advertorials for the country or region they visited. Context is everything. The wine buyer's view of a particular country is influenced by all the factors that make his or her job easy, and the sheer quality (or otherwise) of the wines available.

News in brief

Terroirs Wine List

They're changing the guard at Buckingham Palace and more important a lot of newbies have surged onto the list at Terroirs. If you fancy a glass of Luxembourg Riesling, or glacially pure Blanc de Morgex from Valle d'Aosta, or an extraordinary Menu Pineau called Brin de Chevre from Thierry Puzelat or a cloudy amber mineral-packed Fiano – amongst many new delights - hurry down to Charing Cross.

Brawn in dispatches

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/feb/24/new-york-london-dining-experience>

(just a mentionette in the final para)

<http://www.charlescampion.com/hot-picks/brawn-terroirs-pig-charcuterie-restaurant-french-mongetes-bio-dynamic-wine.htm>

<http://www.esquire.co.uk/2011/02/restaurant-of-the-week-brawn/>

<http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/a20110223.html>

Nick Lander on the tale of two regional chefs

Panevino – bread basket-case

These wines brought great joy to anyone who had the fortune to drink them last year. Unfortunately, hail prevailed in 2009 (evidently praying to Bob Dylan didn't work) which meant that the grapes had to be juggled across certain cuvees which are therefore named after where the barrels sit in the winery (eg top left, bottom right, at the back). Logical, really.

2009 Is de Mesu

2009 Is de A' Nanti

2009 Kussas Intrendu A Manu'E Mancu

The Tri-Nations are coming !

Les Caves de Paarl, Les Caves de Wagga-Wagga, Les Caves de Hobbitshire – we look forward to welcoming some exotic strangers to our shores. We've dipped an experimental toe in wines from these countries before, now we are up to our oxters in the stuff. Details to follow in the next newsletter.