

Vienna 2002 – The Changing Face of Wine
A Special Report

Session 1

The Search for Quality in the 21st Century, Anthony Hanson MW

Our first quality-seeker was Hubert de Boüard of Ch Angélu. He laid out the classic, French philosophy of terroir as applied in Saint-Emilion, then made the case for going against the grain of conservatism by the application of technology and the changing of attitudes. For instance, the old division of responsibilities between vineyard manager (chef de culture) and cellar-master (maître de chai) had had to be addressed by the majority of Bordeaux properties. Interestingly, he stated that overripe grapes gave wines with chocolate or prune aromas, lacking acidity, elegance and aging potential.

One imagines that this insight may have partly come to him following the disastrous hailstorm which forced earlier picking at Angélu, in 1999. He ended with a plea that excesses and standardisation be renounced, and harmony encouraged.

Jim Clendenen spoke eloquently, from his personal experience as a maverick wine-maker defining a sense of place for his wines, at Santa Barbara's Au Bon Climat. He gave us a new definition of wine : "Fruit spoilage under controlled conditions." He insisted that the ability to communicate passionately about a winery, or a region, is just as important as quality in the bottle. He railed against the appearance of big corporations pursuing profitability at the expense of quality. "The school of bigger is better has a place in the industry, but not at the quality pinnacle." He described how he had crossed swords with, but also benefited from, wine critics. Continuing the quality quest, and re-investing, were essentials to continued success. "Spain has been the New World of the Old World", said Victor de la Serna, Deputy Editor of Madrid's El Mundo He explained why Spain's red wine styles had been arrested in a 'Rioja mould' for so long. He astonished us with the news that tempranillo plantings had expanded so fast that they now occupy a larger global surface than chardonnay. He described how four key innovators – Alejandro Fernandez in Ribera, Carlos Falco of Toledo, Miguel Torres of Penedes and Alvaro Palacios, now of Priorat, had emerged as leaders. He told the story of the emergence of Priorat, and of the influence its success was having along Spain's eastern coast. Reading the full summary of his talk (see Proceedings) is surely essential for anyone interested in today's, and tomorrow's, best Spanish wines. He concluded thus : "Many more vineyard-orientated estates of much smaller size will be needed for a truly qualitative, deeply-rooted revolution to take hold in Spain."

Ch'ng Poh Tiong, publisher of Singapore's The Wine Review, gave us insights into a wide variety of Asian wine consumers. "Asia is not one big homogeneous market" he reminded us. He talked about Asian attitudes to packaging, plastic corks, high prices, scarcity, status and wine journalists. We learnt about Shark's Fin Syndrome, as it applies to Screaming Eagle or Le Pin. He finished by warning us against big, awesome, monster wines, and in particular the influence of "stomping" American wine writers, who have encouraged production of "Hollywood Effects wines." He detected a soft-drinks approach to wine by many producers, who cater for sweettoothed consumers. We should not allow wine to be Coca-Colonised. He urged all consumers to "Calm Down. Cool it a bit," when faced with huge, extracted wines.

Session 2

Viticulture in the 21st Century, Jean-Michel Valette MW

Moderator Jean-Michel Valette, MW welcomed and thanked the panel, noting that the speakers represented a broad diversity of perspectives – Old World and New World, academics and practicing viticulturists from small and large wineries. Moreover, Mr. Valette noted the importance of the topics discussed stating that “vineyards are the next frontier of quality in the wine industry.”

World-renowned viticultural consultant and author Dr Richard Smart began the proceedings with a discussion of “New World Responses to Old World Terroir.” Contradicting some in the New World, Dr. Smart asserted that terroir differences do exist and can be related most importantly to the water retention properties of the soil. While sometimes masked by irrigation regimes, terroir effects are increasingly gaining the attention of many New World winegrowers. New approaches discussed by Dr. Smart include soil mapping to determine irrigation and other viticultural decisions, the use of detailed homoclimate databases to match varieties to climatic conditions and understanding the impact of ultraviolet light on grape maturity and quality. Daniel Bosch, Vineyard Technical Manager for the Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville California, followed with a presentation on “Using Aerial Photography to Divide Vineyards for Harvest.” Beginning with a historical summary of Mondavi’s collaboration with NASA, Mr. Bosch detailed current practical results of such – most notably the identification of vigor differences within blocks. With this information in hand, Robert Mondavi have modified irrigation, cover crop and harvest timing practices in specific areas within vineyard blocks leading to substantially more fruit achieving reserve wine status.

University of Milan Professor Osvaldo Failla then presented a paper written in collaboration with colleague Professor Attilio Scienza entitled “Tradition and Innovation in Italian Viticulture in the Face of National and International Markets.” Prof. Failla identified two differing viticultural approaches in modern Italy; “terroir viticulture” focusing on the characteristic of a delimited area and “variety viticulture” centered on achieving varietal typicity. In support of both approaches, the University of Milan among others have pioneered “viticultural zoning.” Using 5 years of empirical data relating to vineyard performance (growth, yield, quality) from selected plots in a given area, such “zoning” help determine proper delimitation’s for both viticultural approaches. Important secondary benefits were outlined as well.

Finally, Andre Ostertag, proprietor of Domaine Ostertag in Alsace, described his personal experiences with biodynamic methods in “Breakthrough or Snake Oil – Un Dialogue de Vignerons Autour de la Biodynamie.” Acknowledging an initial degree of scepticism, especially as relates to the lack of scientific understanding of the methods first proposed by Rudolf Steiner, Mr. Ostertag described the astonishing empirical observations he made at Domaine Lafon in Burgundy that led him to adopting new approaches in his own property. He outlined the principal compounds and practices central to biodynamics that have led to improved grape maturity and vineyard health as well as the economic and other burdens of what remains a little understood but increasingly discussed approach to viticulture.

Regrettably, owing to time constraints created by an extended lunch, there was no opportunity for audience questions.

Session 3

Winemaking in the 21st Century, David Lake MW

To judge from many subsequent comments, this session was considered by many to be the most thought-provoking of the Symposium.

At the outset, the moderator expressed the views of our absent panelist, Alberto Antonini, that undue manipulation of the winemaking process would destroy the mystique and charm of wine's unpredictability. While this degree of control might well be desirable for mass-market wines, it could erode the image of wine as a natural beverage, dependant upon terroir, chance and the vagaries of the vintage.

Dr. Sakkie Pretorius spoke passionately and persuasively about the enormous potential in his controversial field, the genetic modification of yeasts and grapevines. He contrasted the traditional method of plant-breeding, crossing one vine-variety with another, when each contributor brings undesirable as well as desirable characteristics to the offspring, with the new, targeted techniques of transferring just one desirable trait, such as resistance to Powdery Mildew or Pierce's Disease. He admitted that the current opposition to any type of genetic modification rendered it unlikely that these techniques could be accepted in the immediate future. His reasoned and authoritative presentation, however, helped the audience to form a more balanced appreciation of this emotive issue.

In her enlightening and amusing presentation, Dr. Monika Christmann reviewed a range of new technologies, from concentration techniques to oak chips to spinning cone columns. As a participant in many international forums and committees she was able, also, to comment on the legal and ethical implications of many of these newer directions.

Underlying all of these presentations was the thesis that the modern wine world is driven not by the producer but by the consumer. From Dr. Terry Lee came an intriguing talk about consumer preference research being carried out by Gallo to discover exactly what style of Chardonnay the American customer wants, and developing this into a profile. Not surprisingly, this turned out to be at variance with what the producers and pundits considered to be optimal!

To say the least, all of this may have important implications for the model, modern M.W. of the 21st Century!

Wine and Philosophy, presented by members of the Académie Internationale du Vin (AIV)
Hugo Rose MW

Very much a stand-alone session, not only for the fact that it was presented in the language of the Académie (French, with simultaneous translation) rather than in the language of the Symposium (English). The AIV is dedicated to studying and promoting the cultural significance of wine and inevitably this session provided a profound contrast with the empirical, scientific or commercial discussions which preceded it.

Bruno Prats introduced the work of the AIV, explaining why French served to express the message of the Académie better than English. Language is not culture-neutral and many terms have different meanings in the two languages. There remains no English word for terroir, for example, a concept of central importance to the Académie. And in English a 'light wine' is a perjorative term whereas in French 'lightness' is an esteemed quality, the opposite of heaviness.

According to Prats 'a big wine' is a compliment in American terminology, but the French translation 'un gros vin' has a very different connotation.

The work of the AIV is both scientific and philosophical, and this session exemplified both strands. A paper from Professor Claude Bourguignon, former researcher at the (French) National Institute for Agronomic Research and now with his wife running his own soil laboratory, outlined his thesis that modern viticultural practices have the potential for destroying the quality of a terroir through their impact on microbiological activity and on soil structure. And a video recording of an AIV panel discussion where wines were selected to match gourmet dishes prepared by Master Chef Alain Senderens reflected the role of intuitive knowledge in the study of wine. The leading member of the televised panel, Jacques Puisais, Head of the Oenological Laboratory in the city of Tours and a poet and gastronome by inclination, was also a session speaker. Prats explained the meaning of Natural Wine and Noble Wine, concepts that the AIV was dedicated to protect. Nobility in a wine implied first a cultural context and second a moral attitude, 'wise wine-making' rather than simply profitable winemaking, according to the AIV's current chancellor Pierre Perrin. Citing Le Rochefoucaud's statement that "a great name lowers those who cannot support it", Prats asserted that through excessive yields, and despite 'camouflage oenology', there was a risk of loss of the personality of a great terroir, leading to wines which only expressed varietal character.

Natural Wines are those which respect the ecological environment and preserve the future of the vineyard, a subject later addressed in detail by Professor Bourguignon. Prats noted the risk in the search for genetically modified organisms (eg yeasts) of the disappearance of naturally occurring moulds, and the appearance of tastes alien to wine as currently known.

Turning to modern day wine consumption Prats asserted that the role of wine as a simple but important foodstuff has almost disappeared in Latin societies. Wine is now a 'universal culture', a culture of luxury and a symbol of social status. The best wines today are not necessarily those best suited to individual lifestyles (as in the past) but frequently those identified by powerful critics. One outcome is that there is evermore discussion of wine amidst falling consumption. The AIV believes it has a duty to encourage consumption, but only in the context of history and culture, therefore in a morally appropriate environment.

Prats contrasted this approach with 'industrial winemaking' and wine made for contests, this latter a 'pernicious evolution'; he claimed that contest wines had characteristics which were the antithesis of those preferred by people who drank wine with meals. Contest wines often lacked the quality of 're-demand', a concept returned to by the next speaker Jacques Puisais. According to Prats the power of the critic has led to imitation and sameness, wines made to a recipe rather than to the traditions and styles dictated by terroir. He echoed Jancis Robinson's observation of 'more choice, less variety', and urged countries with a wine history to conserve indigenous vines. The session proved controversial and stimulating as perhaps the Symposium Steering Committee had hoped. The contrast with the more empirical approaches of many speakers was evident, but few delegates appeared to dissent from the view that the study of wine was multifaceted and in the important study the human dimension of wine, both intuition and philosophy are important tools.

As a footnote it can be noted that the food-and-wine matching experiment which featured in the video clip was reprised in actuality for a number of Masters of Wine at a dinner prepared by Monsieur Senderens in Vienna. According to those polled the combinations of each of the dishes and its selected wine were both original and sublime.