

The Coca Colonisation of Wine & The Search for Quality in Asia

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The first part of the title of my speech concerns what I consider to be an increasingly soft-drinks approach towards wine. However, before I present my thoughts on that, I would like first to address the second, longer part of the speech, which has to do with the attitudes of Asia with regard to quality, “The Search for Quality in Asia”.

Before a search can begin of anything, we must first know what it is that we are looking for. We have, of necessity, to identify the object or subject.

To be able to identify quality in wine, we must first know what a wine should look, smell, taste, even feel like, texturally. How else would we be able to say if we have in fact located quality?

This may sound all too obvious and easy for all of you whether you are determining what should pass off as a worthy Médoc, Vosne-Romanée, Chateauneuf-du-Pape, Loire Valley Vouvray, Chianti, Rioja, Vintage Port, Hungarian Tokaj; Hunter Valley Semillon, Sonoma County Pinot Noir, Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, or a Riesling from the Mosel or, for that matter, from Alsace.

On the other hand, for the vast majority of people in Asia, from India in the west to Japan in the east, China in the north to Indonesia in the south, they wouldn't have a clue as to how all those wines should taste, so cannot make qualitative judgments. Basically, it comes down to this.

If you have not tasted something, you cannot identify it. If you have not experienced quality (or a pain in the neck for that matter), you wouldn't know what it is. You would have to rely on someone to tell you what you have been missing out on. You would have to receive the necessary wisdom before you can form, or give, an opinion.

Wine aside, an Indian can expertly determine the very best northern Indian tandoori or southern Marsala chicken dish; or a Japanese of a blind tasting of tuna sushi; a Thai of several servings of tom yam kung; a Chinese of various slices of Jing Hua dried ham and therefore, by extension, probably also of Parma and Serrano; and a Korean of different bowls of their delicious fast-food, bim-bim bap.

If any of those dishes sound foreign to you, you can well imagine what the names of wines can amount to, or amount to nothing, for many potential wine consumers in Asia.

In taking those dishes as examples, I am also fleshing out the fact that Asia is not one big, homogeneous market. Even within a country, there are differences in taste from one part of the country to another, one race to another, and one dialect group to another. Often times, even within the same family, any family in Asia, taste in food and beverages differ from one generation to another, one gender to the next.

Take for example, Shanghai and Beijing. Their respective populations are about 18 and 14 million. The Shanghainese prefer chicken, the Beijing people their famous Peking Duck.

So, if you are Kentucky Fried Chicken and want to set up stores across China, you know where you should start up first. But since wine is the subject here, the moral of the story is that if you are pushing your wine say, in Shanghai, mention how well it goes with chicken rather than duck. And profit from it accordingly.

Perceived as Much as Real

Quality in a wine, in Asia, is as much perceived, as it is real.

A high price, for many Asians, equates to quality. Why else would the wine be expensive in the first place? This, for many Asians, is what defines a good wine. Paradoxically, for a people who are, generally speaking, so good at trading and business, it seldom occurs to many Asians that what could bump up the price of a wine are such mundane concerns as marketing, positioning, packaging and a general desire to turn in a good profit.

“If it is expensive, it has to be good” sounds only too logical for many Asians. Extend that to “the higher the price the better the wine”.

Packaging is Important

If a producer says his wine is good, wouldn't he package it accordingly? Quality, surely, must be respected, particularly by the people producing it.

Just as you would dress up really nicely for your own wedding or birthday reception, so the consumer expects you to dress up your own wine adequately.

The label, the foil, the overall look and feel of the bottle, even the weight of the bottle, they all go to reinforce or refute quality. There's of course no substitute for the taste of the wine itself but there is no denying that appearance counts and is very important. If, on the other hand, a wine is presented in a very rustic or minimalist way, it doesn't mean that it won't be taken seriously except that some explaining has to be done for the unorthodox presentation.

The Asian people who place the greatest premium on packaging are the Japanese. To be sure, no one else on earth wraps things up like the Japanese. It's a skill bordering on art. Tempering on obsession. What is packed is again packed into another package, often into one more, just in case the first falls out of the second.

A lot of what the Japanese go through has to do with the fact that the object will be presented as a gift. The whole, seemingly unnecessary and tedious, presentation underscores the fact that what we have here is something of a high quality. Every effort at packaging and new layer of wrapping thickens the quality.

Evidence of this can easily be found at DFS duty-free shops in Asia where we can take the case of Cognac Camus (now that cognac is no longer so popular) which packages twin bottles of 500 ml Bordeaux Superieur that sell for prices which would make a well-respected Cru Bourgeois blush with envy.

As we are on the subject of packaging and what Asians regard as quality in a wine, we should also consider the question of synthetic corks.

Whilst the consumer may start to accept – given the overall smart look of the labelling and bottle – that plastic corks are good enough to seal a wine that is of overall decent quality, no one is willing to associate plastic or synthetic corks with high quality or great wine.

It will, for example, be very, very difficult – well near impossible – for a Bordeaux chateau of Cru Bourgeois classification and above to persuade the consumer that the wine is so good even though it does not use a tree cork to seal it.

Small Quantity Equals Quality

This view is held, I believe, as much in the rest of the world as it is in Asia. It's a simplistic but effective argument even though not always true.

If, for example, you produce only 2,000 bottles of wine, then your two thousand bottles must be better than another producer who churns out 20,000 bottles. The “logic” is so simple to understand.

If small quantity equals quality, then minute quantity which results in scarcity takes on a whole new dimension because we now have something that can be used as an expression of one's money. The wine becomes a status symbol. It becomes what I call, the “Shark's Fin Syndrome”.

The bigger and rarer the fins, the better it must be because it is so darned expensive. Quality is considered a given as far as these rare and, like the fins, mostly big wines are concerned. Value has no significance anymore because any dumb millionaire will know that you can get better value elsewhere.

It's only the multi-millionaire who is involved in the game here whether the wine is Screaming Eagle or Le Pin's 20-barrel production.

Received Wisdom

Screaming Eagle or Le Pin may or may not be worth their prices but one thing is certain. The vast majority of the 2.5 billion people in Asia - Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, Japanese, Koreans, Thais, Burmese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Malaysians, Taiwanese and Singaporeans – they won't be having the Eagle that Screams or Jean-Marie Le Pen for dinner tonight.

That said, the majority of people in Asia are becoming more and more interested in wine. Their views on what is a wine of quality, what is worth buying, what is worth drinking, what is worth giving and what is worth storing away, all those decisions are almost always based on a recommendation.

The people who influence their decisions include wine writers; producers; representatives of the producers whether marketing or sales people; informed distributors; sommeliers; wine promoters at point of sale; a friend, even a family member.

For most Asians, wine buying remains an activity beset by chance. After all, unless you have some idea of what the wine is about before you pick out the bottle, by the time you open it, it is already too late.

The Asian consumer therefore relies on received wisdom to make a choice. They need another person to interpret quality. Given that producers, their representatives and their distributors all have a vested interest in promoting the wines that they are involved in, it is the journalist who is the most highly regarded for interpreting what is a good wine.

Journalists, some more than others of course, remain, in whatever medium they communicate their opinions, the most influential voices in wine in Asia. This situation will not change. What may change, literally, is the complexion of the situation. As more and more local wine journalists come on stream, Asian countries will have greater recourse to home-grown voices, not just opinions from beyond their shores.

Even in the case of foreign wine writers, Asian wine consumers recognize the cultural and national idiosyncrasies that the writers bring into their writing. This is most evident where the wine writing is in the English language. A clear line is seen between British and American wine journalism. Generally speaking, points aside, one is seen as the more subtle and the other the more stomping. For those same reasons, different people in Asia prefer one or the other.

Wine writing in other languages, whether French, Italian or German is unlikely ever to take hold in Asia.

Cultural Differences

Anyone who has made a visit to Asia know that in such things as language, food and architecture, differences abound. Globalization and standardization are of course providing serious competition to cultural individuality but those differences remain and, hopefully, will always be there.

As far as wine is concerned, access to a language plays the greatest role in how and what becomes “received wisdom” in wine.

For countries such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, English is practically a second language. Even in China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Thailand, many a present and potential wine lover is at home with the English language. Wine literature in English and publications in the local languages will define quality for wine buying. In Asia, Japan remains the most important and sophisticated wine market. Here, the cultural differences are most conspicuous.

The Japanese, even with the inroads of New World wines, continue to worship Old World, particularly French and Italian, wines. That market is greatest in celebrating subtlety in wine, not least, I believe, because of the huge pool of women wine drinkers and women wine writers.

The Japanese, unlike the rest of Asia, are not just interested in wine per se, but also in the culture that surrounds the wine. Nowhere else in Asia, do consumers engage with

the wines that they enjoy, wishing at the same time to be familiar with the history, culture and cuisine of the country or place of the wine.

As for the rest of Asia, particularly the Chinese in China, the approach to wine, as with how the Chinese approach everything else, is very pragmatic. The Chinese absorb things and influences and turn them to their own device or 'vice', depending on your view.

China came up with the idea of blending red wine with Sprite and white wine with Coca Cola. They did the same with cognac, adding lots of ice and water with it, regularly downing two or three bottles at a dinner table.

Although statistical evidence is not available, there is certainly conspicuous, corroborating visual evidence that more red wine is consumed away from food amongst the Chinese people – in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore – than elsewhere in Asia.

Conclusion

How the Asian consumer defines quality is a task that they will continue to leave to received wisdom.

This is not to suggest that they do not know a good wine when they taste it. They just do not yet have the greater confidence– that comes with greater familiarity with the product– to strike out on their own. And even when they do, as can be seen throughout the world, wine writers will always have a great say in what is quality. These opinion leaders won't always have a field day since we wine writers are ourselves so divided on what counts for quality or greatness in a wine.

Quality continues to be defined, re-defined and re-re-defined again. There's no end to the discussion or debate. The best that you, the producer can do is to provide variety for the consumer. The moment you stop doing that, you may as well ask us to drink Coca Cola.