

Fiat Vinum - Salvum Mundus

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Abstract: *More than mere sustenance, food offers a source of identity, community and tradition, and a catalyst for reflection, exploration and exchange. This is likewise true of wine, a gustatory pleasure whose distinct values – somatic, aesthetic, cognitive – make it a particularly ripe lens through which to examine the broader value of gastronomy. Looking at wine’s role in history, philosophy, and daily life, and examining the powerful role critics have played in its reception, I present a model of appreciation that, in begging thoughtful, measured participation, elucidates its value as a catalyst for personal growth and robust aesthetic experience.*

Keywords: *somaesthetics, wine history, philosophy of taste, Brillat-Savarin, high and low culture, inebriation, Hume’s standard of taste, nouveau riche drinking habits*

Some people have a foolish way of not minding, or pretending not to mind, what they eat. For my part, I mind my belly very studiously, and very carefully; for I look upon it, that he who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else.

–Samuel Johnson, from James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791)

What do you think of when you think of wine? Inviting intoxicant or intimidating mystery? Elegant Old World labels and vineyards, or \$5 bottles with yellow kangaroos? Convivial evenings shared amongst friends, or nauseous mornings spent near a sink? Do you greet tastings with an open, inquisitive spirit, or anxious uncertainty? Do you think high or low, wine snob or wino, unmitigated pleasures or unrelenting headaches?

Wine critics – academic and nonacademic alike – rarely help settle matters. Rather, in positing their subject as a rarefied locus of aesthetic study they obscure its accessibility and charm. Wine becomes a pop quiz for which many fail to properly study. And in the process of tasting, the hunter becomes the hunted or, rather, the judger becomes the judged. Can you identify styles, countries of origin, or varietals? Are you versed in a highly technical yet unfailingly subjective vocabulary of description? Can you parse distinct notes in the symphony of flavors? Or are you what Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin dismissed as a person who “neither separate[s] one sound from another nor appreciate[s] what they might thus hear”? Are you, in brief, refined or coarse? Educated or ignorant? Grounded in knowledge and experience? Or dull in taste and intellect alike?

Beer and liquor carry little such angst. The nomenclature associated with each underscores this point: oenological discourse simply conveys far more gravitas. You never “shoot” or “slug” wine, as you would, say, whiskey or beer (or both, with a pickle juice “chaser”). You would never stop for a “cold one” of Vermentino or Viognier on a hot day, or bring a six pack of Gamay to the Big Game. Nor, confronted with a bottle of Barolo, would you deign to “put one back” to

get “wasted.” The language associated with its consumption demands wine is taken *seriously*: sipped, sniffed, observed, discussed, debated, ruminated on, *appreciated*. If beer is, say, the slovenly joker, and liquor the exuberant wild card, wine is the high-profile guest you cannot help but feel mildly intimidated by. It puts you on stage, which, as an object of aesthetic appreciation, rings counterintuitive.

Why all the fuss? For literally thousands of years, the fermented juice of grapes has been uniquely idolized, and granted a dynamic role in social life, economic affairs, religious rites, and learned discourse. Wine is considered spiritual, nourishing, enlightening, exciting, cultured, “the intellectual part of the meal,” Alexandre Dumas mused, distinct from its “merely... material parts” such as meat.¹ Yet it has also fallen into periods of acute disrepute, dismissed as everything from sinful and proletariat to pretentious and old-fashioned, receptions spurred by global trade and fraud, agricultural blight, and, most notably, historically capricious standards of quality and consistency (ancient wines were typically non-potable without the addition of water, sweeteners, and/or spices).

Since the Enlightenment, philosophers and gastronomes have played prominent roles in salvaging wine’s reputation and clarifying its virtues. Yet their influence has also fostered a culture defined by hierarchy and exclusion, particularly in a contemporary age when high-profile critics, reductionistic ratings systems, and swollen economic interests reinforce, rather than dismantle, the barriers restricting wine’s appeal. After all, wine gratifies on at least four levels: experiential (good times), somatic (the physical sense of well-being), intellectual (stimulating reflection and critical inquiry), and social (promoting conviviality). By contrast, high-cultural defenses – as in America, where wine is often viewed with an inchoate mix of reverence and suspicion – render its appreciation a pleasure of the dullest sort: strict, monologic, desexualized, and deaf to its most untamable virtues.

To be clear, tradition, context and cognitive awareness can stimulate wine’s appreciation. Yet unlike, say, Sapphire Gin – whose reputation rests on its ability to consistently deliver a proprietary flavor profile of “10 exotic botanicals” over time and space – its joys lie in its dynamism and unpredictability. Wine’s manifold variables, evident at every stage of production and consumption, promote a uniquely vibrant, exploratory opportunity for absorption and engagement. And in the most rewarding instances, wine begs robust conversation, a point obscured by top-down mandates of standards and quality.

To best appreciate wine we might therefore reconsider our approach to render its virtues more accessible in theory *and* practice. Towards such end, I will trace wine’s historical and philosophical evolution, examining its development as a living narrative grounded in both tradition and innovation, and guided by ever-evolving standards and open, mediated experience. In so doing we might thus reclaim wine, not simply as a locus of aesthetic merit and philosophic inquiry, but also as a catalyst and guide for willful action, engaged dialogue, and a bit of fun to boot.

“Human beings,” William B. Fretter argues, “have valued wine for thousands of years, as they have valued painting and sculpture.”² Why so? “[A]n eye for brightly colored fruit, a taste for sugar and alcohol, and a brain attuned to alcohol’s psychotropic effects.” These predilections, Patrick McGovern speculates, impelled our hominid ancestors to move “beyond the unconscious craving of a slug or a drunken monkey for fermented fruit to the much more conscious, intentional

1 Alexandre Dumas, *Alexandre Dumas’ Dictionary of Cuisine*, trans. and ed. Louis Colman (London: Spring Books, 1958), 267.

2 William B. Fretter, “Is Wine an Art Object?,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), 97-100.

production and consumption of a fermented beverage.”³ Evidence of human experiments with fermented fruit juice date back to the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods,⁴ and a wine cellar with jugs to hold over 500 gallons was recently uncovered near a 1700 BC Canaanite banquet hall in northern Israel.⁵ Wine was also a centerpiece in Anatolian and Mesopotamian feasts, rituals and ceremonies.⁶ In Babylon’s *Epic of Gilgamesh*, King Jamsheed fortuitously ‘discovered’ its curative properties, and quickly ordered production to commence.⁷ And in Protodynastic Egypt, King Scorpion was buried with over 300 jars – presumably for a festive after-party in the afterlife.

Wine is, of course, a natural product: break a grape, leave it in a container, and it will ferment, thanks to the residual yeast “bloom” on its skin.⁸ Yet in ancient cultures, this transformation seemed a gift from the heavens. As Paul Lukacs writes, “people believed that wine came directly from their gods, [and] valued it... for its apparently divine origin.”⁹ Wine was sensual, mesmerizing, *mysterious*. Harvested from vines reborn each spring, it imparted a jovial buzz, carried deep, bloody hues, and came from fruit (whose temptations, Adam reminds us, have proven irresistible to the human palate, consequences be damned).

We know that Caesar celebrated triumphs and toasted Jupiter with the finest draughts of Chios.¹⁰ Virgil wrote of divine Olympian feasts where “crystal vases fill with gen’rous wine.”¹¹ Athenaeus noted their digestive, “nourishing” qualities, while Horace and Pliny sang the praises of refined reds from Piemonte to Campania. “When [Mediterranean] civilization disappeared with the barbarian invasion,” Dumas laments, “wine, the measure of civilization, disappeared too.”¹² (Barbarians apparently prefer cider and beer.) “Sophocles,” he adds, “calls them Zeus because, he says, like the king of gods they give health and pleasure, the finest gifts the gods can give.”¹³ And in Plato’s *The Symposium*, wine is the catalyst for Socrates’ extended meditation on love and self-possession.

Treasured for its intellectual, physical and cultural properties, wine has also proven economically lucrative. The Greeks introduced grapes to the Romans, who planted vines and exported barrels of fermented juice throughout their empire, including territories in modern-day Loire, Burgundy, Champagne, Bordeaux and the Rhone.¹⁴ Such robust trade spurred a new class of connoisseur, wealthy enthusiasts who thirsted after high quality regional vintages like the Falernum “Opimian” of 121 BC.¹⁵ And citizens of all income brackets shared the joys of

3 Patrick E. McGovern, *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 12.

4 *Ibid.*, 11.

5 John Noble Wilford, “Wine Cellar, Well Aged, Is Revealed in Israel,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 22, 2013. Accessed December, 2013 at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/23/science/in-ruins-of-palace-a-wine-with-hints-of-cinnamon-and-top-notes-of-antiquity.html>.

6 Paul Lukacs, *Inventing Wine: A New History of One of the World’s Most Ancient Pleasures* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 11.

7 McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4. See also: Liz Thach, “The Ancient Connection Between Women and Wine,” *Wayward Tendrils Quarterly*, Vol 18, No. 2 (April, 2008).

8 McGovern, *Ancient Wine*, 8.

9 Lukacs, 1.

10 Dumas, 268.

11 From Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Book VII, quoted in Launcelot Sturgeon, Esq., *Essays, Moral, Philosophical, and Stomachical, on the Important Science of Good-Living, Second Edition* (London: G. & W. B. Whittaker, 1823), 78.

12 Dumas, 268.

13 *Ibid.*, 268.

14 Lukacs, 19.

15 *Ibid.*, 20.

consumption in the stimulating, learned banquets or *convivia* praised by Cicero and Plutarch.¹⁶

Not that it was *all* fun and games. As Livy reminds us, Dionysian and Bacchanalian cults brought wine's self-destructive potential to a decadent, unfettered fore. The Roman Senate eventually outlawed such festivals in 186 BC, presaging a rise in both sober, clinical defenses of wine (epitomized by Galen's cautious notes on blood production and nourishment)¹⁷ and, more powerfully, the Christian asceticism of Augustine and Athanasius. Restraint proved a compelling response to the broader excesses of Roman society. Wine usage was soon contained, harnessed by rites and rituals imbuing consumption with severity and gravitas. Following the doctrine of transubstantiation, for example, wine is literally absorbed as the blood of Christ, a testament of our ontological guilt and the possibility of redemption through submission, and a sharp rejoinder to the loosely celebratory models of communion cherished in Ancient cultures.

In codifying wine's ceremonial role, the Church nonetheless proved an ironic catalyst for wine's reintroduction into quotidian life. Beyond the strict confines of Christian dogma, consumption in the Middle Ages flourished from poorhouses to noble palaces. Furthermore, the rise of world trade and correlative birth of an independent merchant class spurred a new market driven by entrepreneurs with increasingly urbane tastes. From the 12th to 14th Centuries AD, the apex of Genoan and Venetian dried grape vintages, wine commanded sustained interest as a status-laden global commodity.¹⁸ Its quality, luster and appeal broadened, and critics again sought to explicitly identify its merits. In his c. 1256 *Le Régime du corps*, Aldobrandino da Siena thus championed "wine in moderation, in accordance with the needs and capabilities of... nature [and] custom" for providing, in measure, "good blood, good color, and good flavor," adding that "it will strengthen all bodily virtues and make a man happy, good-natured, and well-spoken."¹⁹

Da Siena here linked wine to a widely accessible *eudaimonia*, a good-naturedness of body and spirit alike. Yet, as Odile Redon, Françoise Sabban and Silvano Serventi note, drinking patterns were increasingly drawn along class lines: "People chose their wine on the basis of their social standing, their occupation, their age, and their constitution."²⁰ The rich savored delicate, refined clarets and whites, for example, while physical laborers consumed heavier reds for their purported promotion of musculature.

Inequalities notwithstanding, the popularity of wine far outpaced beer – this, despite the hop-fueled 13th century rise of German commercial brewing. Almost 22 million gallons (over 111 million bottles) of Bordeaux were shipped yearly by the early 1300s, largely to England.²¹ And this success induced corruption. Unscrupulous tavern owners adulterated imports and sold swill as hi-priced claret, a fraudulent practice particularly rife during the English Civil War. Yet wine enthusiasts had already been introduced to finer products, and were developing increasingly sophisticated palates to match, a point illustrated by Richard Ames' lament that the "Wine with which we now engage, Has not that body, taste or age, It had before the War began."²²

16 Ibid., 23.

17 Lukacs, 29; Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs*, Owen Powell, tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149-150.

18 Lukacs, 48.

19 Odile Redon, Françoise Sabban and Silvano Serventi, *The Medieval Kitchen: Recipes from France and Italy*, Edward Schneider, tr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 15-16.

20 Ibid., 15.

21 Lukacs, 60.

22 Richard Ames, "A Farewell To Wine, By a Quondam Friend to the Bottle" (1693). Accessed December, 2013 at: <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/richard-ames/a-farewell-to-wine-by-a-quondam-friend-to-the-bottle/>.

Conflicts notwithstanding, a vocal connoisseurship was taking shape.

Four additional technological, cultural and scientific innovations spurred wine's ascension as an object of increasingly rarefied appeal. First, during the Middle Ages, Cistercian Monks pioneered meticulous studies on varietals, yields, soil content, weather, growing conditions, plotting, harvesting and grafting, applying their empirical research towards radically improved methods of production.²³ Second, the introduction of coal furnaces, leaded glass, and advanced shaping moulds in 17th century England yielded stronger, more uniform, shatter-resistant bottles, an innovation that enabled producers to create rich, complex vintages for aging and storage in private cellars.²⁴ Third, the rise of the restaurant in 18th century France heralded the democratization of gastronomy,²⁵ providing a newly public forum for wine consumption that facilitated its role as a vital constituent of fine dining. And finally, 18th and 19th century research conducted by Adamo Fabroni, Louis Jacques Thénard, Joseph Gay-Lussac, Antoine Lavoisier and Louis Pasteur on fermentation, yeast, sulfur and sugar helped vintners better understand, and subsequently command, flavor profiles, preservation methods, and product stability.

Equally, two prominent currents in Enlightenment thought spurred wine's legitimization as a subject of critical inquiry. First, the rise of scientific rationalism shed new attention on dietary and culinary habits. George Cheyne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, championed the somatic and moral virtues of a lighter, less ostentatious, more elegant cuisine, at once theoretically "populist" correctives to decadent royal traditions and healthy alternatives to waves of cream and butter. Born of the vines ubiquitous throughout France, increasingly delicate and refined, relatively unadulterated and unprocessed, wine paired well with this newfound embrace of, to borrow Susan Pinkard's term, "simplicity and authenticity."²⁶ Second, and more significantly, the philosophic examination of concepts such as beauty and taste came into vogue during the 18th century. Following Hutcheson's *Inquiry* (1725) and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's master's thesis (1735), and in rebuttal to Plato's ancient denigration of art as anathema to the philosophical life in *The Republic*, Hume, Rousseau, Diderot, Voltaire, Schiller and Kant reclaimed aesthetics as a field of philosophic inquiry on par, and often overlapping, with politics and morals.

Amidst this climate, Hume famously introduced his 1757 study of standards with an empirical observation: tastes are ubiquitous, diverse, and generally dissentious, and we all think ours to be *good* – a "self-conceit" nourished amongst even "men of the most confined knowledge." Yet because judgments – aesthetic and moral both – presuppose an ability to discern right from wrong, or virtue from vice, lack of consensus is tantamount to moral indeterminacy. In seeking a standard, Hume therefore sought a practical and virtuous corrective, one that satisfied our "natural" human impulse to establish moral and critical boundaries in polite, learned society.

Against Plato, Hume contends that concepts such as "beauty" are determined empirically, via experience and observation, rather than conceptually, via imagination and pure reasoning. In the absence of universalist standards, aesthetic rules must necessarily be "drawn from established models, and from the observation of what pleases or displeases."²⁷ We can reasonably praise

²³ Lukacs, 39 & 71-74.

²⁴ Aged wines were so popular that, in his 1823 *Essays, Moral, Philosophical, and Stomachical, on the Important Science of Good-Living*, lawyer Launcelot Sturgeon notes: "It is commonly said, that new wine, a family dinner, and a concert of amateurs, are three things to be equally avoided." Sturgeon, 16-17.

²⁵ This brought to the public sphere what had previously been restricted to royal and aristocratic households, who alone could afford the ingredients and staff needed to prepare elaborate *ancienne cuisine*.

²⁶ See: Susan Pinkard, *A Revolution in Taste: The Rise of French Cuisine, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Chapter 6.

²⁷ David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 235.

Homer, for example, because *The Iliad* is still roundly celebrated after thousands of years. And we can confidently serve a \$2,400 bottle of Chateau Margaux, knowing it has, since the 1600s, delighted everyone from Richard the Lionheart to Friedrich Engels.²⁸ Historical reification and common accord therefore legitimize aesthetic judgments and cultivate immunity to the distortive whims, trends, prejudices and jealousies that characterize the “variety and caprice of taste.”

Following Rousseau, Hume believed that natural human sentiment, pure and unclouded by mediation, is “always real” and “never errs.” Yet our apprehension and articulation of these sentiments is fallible, swayed by external stimuli and individual biases. In art as in life, prejudice perverts; and only critics, those “easily to be distinguished in society, by the soundness of their understanding and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind” might offer enlightened guidance.²⁹ Possessing the “delicacy of imagination... required to convey a sensibility of those finer emotions,” critics maintain minds “free from all prejudice”³⁰ characterized by clarity (of conception), precision (of distinction), and vivacity (of apprehension).³¹ As Hume concludes, it is a matter of “fact not sentiment” that questions of taste must therefore be entrusted to this expert class.³²

At face value, the contemporary wine world seems to have absorbed much of Hume’s counsel. Delicacy, clarity, vivacity, and an empirical approach to learning dominate the language and disposition of formal tastings. Consensus and traditions of excellence uphold the reputations and exorbitant prices commanded by some of the world’s most prestigious chateaux. And the wine critic’s prominence has swelled since the 1970s, directly influencing production and consumption patterns. Together, these developments suggest Hume may have underestimated the constrictive influence of literally and metaphorically placing the critic above the general populace. To borrow Montaigne’s simile,³³ our increasing reliance upon expertise has fostered a culture wherein wine critics train wine *parrots*, creatures far better suited to mimicking, rather than participating in, sustained dialogue on wine’s role in society. In application, Hume’s standards have therefore fostered subservience; and they certainly don’t allow wine the opportunity to *breathe*.

As wine further evolved, in Kantian terms, from a source of “agreeability” to something approaching a symbol of “pure” aesthetic beauty, its evaluations increasingly relied upon objectivity as a requisite of legitimacy. This is particularly evident in the rise of the “rational epicure,” a phrase coined by William Kitchiner in the preface to his 1830 edition of *The Cook’s Oracle*.³⁴ Kitchiner’s temperate vision of the gourmand combined scientific reasoning, medical

28 A. Craig Copetas and Guy Collins, “Chateau Margaux: Luxury Liquidity Is Pricey at \$2,400 a Bottle,” *Bloomberg Luxury*, October 3, 2011. Accessed January, 2014 at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-10/chateau-margaux-s-mature-luxury-liquidity-comes-pricey-at-2-400-a-bottle.html>.

29 Hume, 243.

30 Ibid., 238-239.

31 Ibid., 240.

32 Ibid., 242. Clearly, Hume does not subscribe to the notion “à chacun son gout,” a position Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) similarly dismissed as “a common error of ignorance” some three hundred years prior. Alberti categorically dismissed the contention that standards are “changeable according to the taste of each individual and not dependent on any rules.” In brief: rules matter. Quoted in Dabney Townsend, *Hume’s Aesthetic Theory: Sentiment and Taste in the History of Aesthetics*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 66.

33 See, for example, “Of pedantry” and “Apology for Raymond Sebond” in: Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Donald M. Frame, tr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

34 William Kitchiner, *The Cook’s Oracle and Housekeeper’s Manual, 7th and Final London Edition*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1830). First edition published in 1817.

authority, and a somewhat rigid *bon vivant* Epicureanism bound by rational “rules and orders.”³⁵ If the *Oracle* rang a bit self-important, it was partly a sign of the times: the nascent field of gastronomy ascended mightily during the 19th century, precipitating the proliferation of self-conscious, systematized guides.

Earlier, and to greater effect, the self-described “*vieil amateur*” Grimod de la Reynière published his yearly *Almanach des Gourmands* from 1803-1812. A *locus classicus* of modern food writing, Grimod’s work heralded a changing cultural climate in which gastronomy held a central role. As he observed, “Hosts have come to consider the dining table a serious matter, guests have become more refined in their tastes,”³⁶ and the table had become “the linchpin of political, literary, financial, and commercial matters” alike.³⁷ This was particularly true in Grimod’s Paris, where *nouveau riche* “cellars and larders [were] far better replenished than their libraries.”³⁸ Grimod’s eight-volume *Almanach* took note, serving as treatise, chaperone, testimonial and trailblazer of the gastronome’s exploratory appetite and rising influence.

In a similar spirit, Brillat-Savarin, an aristocratic ladies man with a penchant for pornography who wrote the notes for his *Physiognomy of Taste* while serving as a judge in Versailles, wholeheartedly promoted gastronomy as a vibrant new field of scientific, sociological, historical and theoretical inquiry. As Roland Barthes put it, The *Physiognomy* remains “the great adventure of desire” personified.³⁹ Employing a mixture of aphorism, intimate narrative, travelogue, and speculative science, it paints cuisine as an art of universal appeal: one as ancient as the world itself (even “Adam must have been born hungry”) that merits heightened attention on multiple fronts, from experiential and cognitive to economic and interpersonal.

Others explicitly applied this ethos to wine. André Jullien, a Parisian-based Burgundy-born merchant, scribed the earliest modern guide devoted exclusively to its consumption.⁴⁰ His 1816 *Topographie de tous les vignobles connus* provided rules and rationale on standards and tasting practices. Echoing his more food-obsessed contemporaries, he described taste as a cultivated quality apprehended, and enhanced, through education. This was particularly true of wine, an object of aesthetic appreciation that demanded ruminative experience to grasp its virtues. In publishing the *Topographie*, Jullien disseminated his model amongst the public sphere, codifying rules for assessment and enjoyment epitomized by the practice of *savoring*.

If erudition was again posited as a requisite to sound judgment, it would also be identified as a form of fraud protection. As Cyrus Redding argued in his *History and Description of Modern Wines* (1833), “the best test against adulterated wine is a perfect acquaintance with that which is good. Those whose test of wine is the degree of spirituous strength it affords, may remain satisfied with wines as they are.”⁴¹ In other words, drunks need not fret; but for those who aspire to greater sophistication, wine study can elevate your sense and sensibilities alike.

Connoisseurship thus presented an increasingly aspirational model of tastefulness and cultural savvy. Yet wine still proved difficult to master, a source of some agitation to would-be

35 As a Doctor and man of faith both (his work was subtitled “a Complete System of Cookery for Catholic Families”), wine is conspicuously absent from Kitchiner’s diagnoses. His Preface also suggests “[t]he most useful art” was teaching readers to combine the “*utile*” with the “*dulce*,” “to increase their pleasures, without impairing, their health, or impoverishing their fortune... and, with a little discretion, enable [them] to indulge occasionally.”

36 Quoted in Lukacs, 137.

37 Quoted in Denise Gigante, “Romantic Gastronomy: An Introduction.” Accessed December, 2013 at: http://romantic.arhu.umd.edu/praxis/gastronomy/gigante/gigante_essay.html.

38 Ibid.

39 Barthes, 251.

40 Lukacs, 138.

41 Cyrus Redding, *History and Description of Modern Wines* (London: Whittaker, Treacher, & Arnot, 1833), 341.

experts. Writing on his peers, influential Victorian wine merchant Thomas Shaw observed that:

the character of these old [quality] standards is a guarantee of goodness, but it also shows very distinctly the little confidence which the oldest and most experienced wine merchants have in their own judgment; and they are right, because it is utterly impossible for anyone to avoid being often mistaken, even if the wines tried were always the same, but such is not the case.⁴²

As Shaw makes plain, wine eschews absolute proficiency. A dynamic, living, breathing product, it is governed by variability in everything from varietals, harvests, weather, soil and *terroir*, to production techniques, storage conditions, and the tasting environment itself.

Such unpredictability was only compounded by a wave of 19th Century threats, most notably diseases imported on New World vines which riddled the continent with rot and fungi, temperance movements (also generated in America), and rampant adultery and fraud. Without much warning, wine quickly found itself in the metaphorical gutter once more; and again its revival was linked to a new breed of critic – this time hailing from America.

Working at the intersection of taste and commerce, author, importer and marketer Frank Schoonmaker became one of wine's most influential pundits. He possessed what American consumers generally lacked: expertise, erudition, an ability to communicate standards of appreciation, and a wholehearted willingness to debate his peers.⁴³ He wrote on American wine traditions as early as 1936 (before there was much to speak of),⁴⁴ completed two ambitious, comprehensive tomes (*The Complete Wine Book* in 1935 and, in 1980, *Frank Schoonmaker's Encyclopedia of Wine*), proffered purchasing advice to readers of his *New Yorker* columns, and, in founding Frank Schoonmaker Selections, made vogue the practice of importing wines *mis en bouteille à la propriété* direct from producers. Schoonmaker therefore served a Humean role with a commercial twist. He established wine's validity as an object of aesthetic appreciation, constructing – much like James Beard did for cuisine – a distinctly “American” history of wine production and hierarchy of standards, while helping build a sustainable national market. This was no mean feat during an epoch of cocktail vogue, when wine was viewed with increasing suspicion as stuffy, old fashioned, and (worse yet) *European*. Schoonmaker nonetheless sparked a cultural dialogue on wine that simultaneously identified, and established, its role as an esteemed, achievable object of desire in mid-century America.

A second, more sudden turning point occurred with the 1976 Judgment of Paris, a blind tasting in which Californian upstart Stag's Leap Cellars defeated some of Bordeaux's most prestigious *premier cru classés* including Haut-Brion and Mouton-Rothschild. The Judgment proved influential beyond its years, challenging both heretofore European-dominated standards of taste and, more broadly, the objectivity of existent aesthetic hierarchies. California's victory suggested that the New World could produce, and also consume, with the best of them, thereby sparking America's thirst for wine. Yet as Lukacs notes,

these new wine drinkers also wanted guidance, and they soon turned to a new kind of expert to get it. Promising impartiality, critics supplanted merchants (whether at the wholesale or retail level) in providing both counsel to individuals and direction to the marketplace.

⁴² Thomas George Shaw, *Wine, The Vine, And The Cellar, Second Addition* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1864), 17-18.

⁴³ See: Raymond Postgate, “Snobbery of the Vine and Table Cloth,” *The New Yorker*, November 20, 1937; and Frank Schoonmaker, “Department of Correction, Amplification, and Abuse,” *The New Yorker*, December 11, 1937.

⁴⁴ Frank Schoonmaker, “The Ups and Downs of Vinland the Good,” *The New Yorker*, September 5, 1936.

They assigned allegedly objective scores or grades to wines, and those numbers, when high, propelled sales like nothing else.⁴⁵

Three points here merit consideration, two of them ironic. First, the American public quickly turned to critics who purported to represent precisely the sort of objective standards of wine tasting so recently subverted by the Judgment. Second, these critics – theoretically autonomous, uncompromised arbiters – shaped the 20th century wine market, at times single-handedly. And finally, the resultant rise of wine drinkers generated additional demand for guidance – namely, more critics.

Unlike the Bordeaux Classifications of 1855 (public, joint, government-sanctioned codifications of centuries-old traditions), *individuals* set America's standards. And on this front, no one proved more influential than Robert Parker. A former lawyer who started his *Wine Advocate* newsletter in 1978, Parker positioned himself as a sort of consumer watchdog. An “advocate” in both senses of the word (fighting on the public's behalf, and upholding higher laws of quality and taste), he entered wine writing as a part-time consumer hobbyist.

Parker rose to prominence largely on the appeal of his 100-point ratings system. Arbitrarily inflated to a 50-100 point scale (in contrast to the 20 point models favored in France, and by English authority Jancis Robinson), and marked by broad descriptions (terms such as “profound,” “character,” and “flaws”), this formula was embraced by wine sellers for whom neatly accessible numerations proved remarkably lucrative consumer stimuli. Indeed, by most accounts Parker's ratings have dictated production and consumption patterns in both the New and Old Worlds, ushering the market saturation of high-alcohol, fruit-forward reds, creating sustained demand for previously unheralded producers, and fomenting the rise of a costly new category of “cult wines” including Ribera del Duero's Pingus and Tuscany's Tenuta dell'Ornellaia.⁴⁶

In brief, Parker's ratings foster a cult of personality as oblique as it is dominant. Objections to his critical qualifications have subsequently mounted in recent years, largely in reaction to his overwhelming influence, focused (some claim narrow) palate, and oblique financial interests.⁴⁷ As author and Berkeley importer Kermit Lynch recently put it, Parker “is the only person in the wine world who does not think there is a Parker palate.”⁴⁸ Dismissing the “label-oriented” Bordeaux market Parker helped revive as a distraction from “what counts” (namely “what is poured into the glass”),⁴⁹ and citing “the incredible power the wine journalists have gained in the marketplace,” Lynch argues that adopting such critics as guides yields little more than “an ulcer.”⁵⁰ His dismissal of the hyperbole epitomized by ratings scales is rooted in experience: “seventeen years in the wine trade, has taught me never to reject a vintage out of hand, and never go overboard with enthusiasm.”

More pointedly, Lynch believes the concept of a purely objective “best vintage” is categorically amiss; to repeat, when it comes to wine simply too many variables lay at play. As he writes, your

45 Lukacs, 279.

46 See: <http://www.wine-searcher.com/robertparker.lml>

47 See, for example: Per-Henrik Mansson, “Robert Parker's Bordeaux Assistant Faces Criminal Charges: French police charge the wine critic's tasting coordinator with forgery, in connection with allegedly billing a winery on Wine Advocate stationery,” *Wine Spectator*, Posted: January 30, 2003. Accessed January, 2014 at: http://www.winespectator.com/webfeature/show/id/Robert-Parkers-Bordeaux-Assistant-Faces-Criminal-Charges_21528.

48 Kermit Lynch and Daniel Duane (Interviewer), “Kermit Lynch Knows the Terroir,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2013. Accessed December, 2013 at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/20/magazine/kermit-lynch-terroirist.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=1&pagewanted=all&#h\[AWIJm,2\]](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/20/magazine/kermit-lynch-terroirist.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=1&pagewanted=all&#h[AWIJm,2]).

49 Kermit Lynch, *Inspiring Thirst: Vintage Selections from the Kermit Lynch Wine Brochure* by Kermit Lynch (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2004), 100.

50 *Ibid.*, 170-172.

experience ultimately “depends on YOUR palate, the cuisine you are matching, the maturity of the wine when you uncork it, and the particular domaine or château.”⁵¹ Furthermore, overreliance on critics yields little in the way of confidence, education or gratification. “You consumers,” he suggests, “for the most part, are ready to let journalists decide what goes into your cellar and glass before you are ready to trust... even your own palate. I think I understand why. You don’t trust your own palate as much as you trust a rating or numerical score.” Yet placing such faith in a formula denudes us of wine’s most distinctive pleasures.

As Terry Theise argues, “Wine can be a bringer of mystical experience.”⁵² And while he suggests “there are no invalid moments of pleasure” in its consumption, the rise of the critic has molded a consumer culture which privileges status and cost above all else.⁵³ We treasure wine’s “financial jujū,” Theise laments – the value and cachet certain vintages convey – above the specific tastes, experiences, histories and narratives it imparts.⁵⁴ (Consider this the “Johnnie Walker Blue” approach: purchase the nicest looking, most expensive brand-name bottle you can find, present it with a flourish, and bask in the awe of your peers.) Theise instead suggests we distinguish between “higher and lower pleasures, [and] delineate the distinctions among inadequate, ordinary, good, fine, and great—or between mass-produced ‘industrial’ wines and small scale ‘agricultural’ wines.”⁵⁵

At face value, his point reads blunt and dichotomous: good versus bad, high versus low, local versus corporate, agriculture versus technology. Yet it also provides a call to arms, a suggestion that wine might offer so much more than we expect; we simply need to rethink our modes of appreciation and consumption. The impetus, in brief, lies on us. After all, wine’s pleasures, are often uncovered on winding roads both literal and metaphorical, shared with friends or in contemplative solitude. The rise of critical mediation and, more specifically, rote, delimiting models of taste has nonetheless denuded us of these firsthand experiences. And while Lukacs argues that “when all is said and done, pleasure in all its various forms—spiritual and communal, then secular, intellectual, emotional, sensual, aesthetic, and more—remains the only reason why anyone has ever cared about wine at all,” history suggests otherwise.⁵⁶ But the future is still very much of our molding. To effectively realize wine’s potential as a source of gastronomic, social, cultural and aesthetic appeal, we must therefore reorient our approach.

Towards this end, Richard Shusterman offers insight. His study of somaesthetics demands reclaiming the body as a “locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning.” Stressing the value of lived experience, he argues that “improved awareness of our feelings [provides] greater insights into both our passing moods and lasting attitudes.”⁵⁷ Greater understanding thus stimulates the will, serving as a catalyst “to correct the actual functional performance of our senses by an improved direction of one’s body,”⁵⁸ and yielding “joys and stimulations... intensified or more acutely savored through improved somatic awareness

51 Ibid., 171.

52 Terry Theise, *Reading Between the Wines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7.

53 As Fretter notes, “Just as all paintings are not works of art, so all glasses of wine are not works of art.” Some taste mass-produced; are thoughtless and bland, or poorly executed. But no matter your tastes, still aesthetically rich experiences to be had. See: Fretter, 97.

54 Theise, 112.

55 Ibid., 101.

56 Lukacs, 314.

57 Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 139.

58 Ibid., 138-9.

and discipline.”⁵⁹ This, in turn, bears fruits consistent with a more robust model of wine appreciation: knowledge in the form of sensory perception (attentiveness to wine’s symbiotic cognitive and physical effects); self-knowledge accrued from improved physical awareness (greater attentiveness to the process of tasting); enhanced will engendered by “right action” (emphasizing the value of concerted choice in enriching the experience of wine consumption); and a revival of the ancient philosophical quest for the good life (the realization of pleasure and joy with heightened intensity).

In addition, somaesthetics “offers a way of understanding how complex hierarchies of power can be widely exercised and reproduced without any need to make them explicit in laws or have them enforced,” revealing how “entire ideologies of domination [have been] covertly materialized and preserved by encoding them in somatic norms.”⁶⁰ In other words, power relations, as Foucault and Bourdieu likewise understood, are reified unconsciously, particularly in the case of wine. As we have seen, hegemonic and cultural forces from ancient rulers to pagan cults, pious Christians to bourgeois mercantilists, colonial forces to intellectual and critical elites, have shaped the manners in which we define and appreciate its virtues. What we think of and feel about wine has therefore been directed by forces – instrumental, expectant, economic, status-driven – remote from, and often at odds with, the pleasures it imparts.

Yet taste, Barthes rightly insists, is far richer and more complex: it is “that very meaning which knows and practices certain multiple and successive apprehensions: entrances, returns, overlappings, a whole counterpoint to sensation.”⁶¹ And while taste requires “*discernment*,” scrupulousness and training,⁶² the process itself imparts “a kind of enchantment; the first moment, the first time, the freshness of a dish, of a rite, in short the *beginning*, [which] refers to a... state of pleasure: where all the determinations of a felicity combine.”⁶³ A revised model of criticism must facilitate this felicitous moment, engendering the “rehabilitation of earthly joys” without sacrificing thoughtfulness or depth.⁶⁴

Alas, as Dumas notes, “The arts of eating and drinking are not learned overnight,”⁶⁵ and solutions are far from simple, let alone compact or formulaic. So where to begin? Perhaps with raised glass, and a revival of what the ancients intuitively grasped, free of self-doubt or irony or pretense: that the beauty of wine lies in its inherent mystery, in the unique combination of social, intellectual, somatic, aesthetic, sensory, and gustatory experiences it engenders. The more routes that lead us down this path, the more we might appreciate the journey.

Notes

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⁵⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 140.

⁶¹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 250.

⁶² Ibid., 257.

⁶³ Ibid., 264.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 270.

⁶⁵ Dumas, 267.