

On the 'judgement of Paris'

Complexity, subjectivity and snobbery in the consumption of wine

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In May 1976, there was a wine tasting in Paris which shook the world of wine. Organised by the young English wine merchant, Steven Spurrier, the event pitted some of the most distinguished French wines against some up and coming Californians, mostly from the Napa Valley. The tasting was to be “blind” — i.e. the tasters would not know the identity of the wines they were tasting — and the tasting panel consisted of some of the most eminent French wine experts, including Odette Kahn, editor of *La Revue du Vin de France*, Aubert de Villaine, owner of the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, the most prestigious vineyard in Burgundy, and Christian Vannequé, head sommelier of the Paris restaurant La Tour d'Argent.

The panel was asked to score all the wines, and they all (Spurrier included) fully expected the French wines to get the highest scores. To their amazement, this didn't happen. Californian wines came top both in the white wine category (Chateau Montelena Chardonnay 1973) and the red (Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon 1973). Every single judge had rated a Californian chardonnay as the best. The panel was horrified. Odette Kahn demanded her scorecards back. Spurrier refused. (Kahn's somewhat confused criticism of the whole tasting was that it was “false” because “California wines are trying to become too much like French wines”.) George Taber was lucky to be the only journalist at the event. His article for *Time* magazine was given the inspired title “The Judgement of Paris”, and the name stuck. The dramatic quality of the whole occasion — as well as the opportunity to cut between equally breathtaking shots of Paris and the Napa Valley — made it ideal Hollywood material. The enjoyable 2008 film *Bottle Shock* told the story, more or less accurately, and Spurrier had the lucky distinction of being played by Alan Rickman.

Some argued that the French red wines needed more time to develop and mature, so Spurrier repeated the tasting for these wines only (but with some different judges) in 1986, and

again in 2006. On both occasions, Californian wines came top. There was no getting away from it: the Judgement of Paris was not an accident.

“It was all a bit of a surprise” Spurrier remarks in his charming memoir. “I did not expect the Californian wines to get the results they did. All we were after was recognition that there were some very good wines coming out of California”. But Aubert de Villaine was more forthright, describing the 1976 tasting as “un coup dans la derrière pour les vins Français”. Spurrier agrees that the event was a necessary and beneficial turning point for the French wine industry. With scrupulous fairness, he points out that in a later tasting of wines from the 2000 vintage, Bordeaux wines “wiped the floor” with their Californian competitors. His judicious conclusion is that “in the early 1970s the benchmark Bordeaux were resting on their laurels and by the late 1990s, so were the classic Californians”.

The Judgement of Paris is sometimes offered as evidence for the view that the worldwide respect given to French wines is mere snobbery. But this would be a mistake. Even in the original tasting, three French red wines were in the top five selected blind by the judges. And in any case, the fact that some famous wineries were resting on their laurels in the 1970s does nothing to undermine French wine as a whole. One of the two largest wine-producing in the world (the other is Italy), France still makes many of the greatest wines and the variety of wines produced there is endless. There is also the irony that the Californian wines which were underdogs in 1976 now cost hundreds of dollars and some are available only “by subscription”.

Nonetheless, the charge that the appreciation of wine has a large component of snobbery is hard to shake off. Certainly in Britain, wine has been associated, at least till very recently, with upper and middle class socialising, and the whole business of drinking wine has been cloaked in obscure terminology, unexplained practices and arcane knowledge, making it a perfect breeding ground for poseurs and charlatans. Wine still can make people nervous and insecure — I have lost count of the number of times someone in Britain has responded to the question “do you like wine?” by saying “yes, but I don’t know anything about it”. Few would respond in this way to a question about beer or coffee, or even cheese.

What is snobbery, exactly? In the abstract, it is the intellectual vice of attaching the wrong kind of value, or an inappropriate level of significance, to things which really should be evaluated in other terms. Social snobs evaluate people in terms of their social standing, ignoring other genuinely important characteristics; musical snobs evaluate music on the basis of what they think it

shows about their sophistication; and so on. A wine snob, then, is someone who attaches the wrong kind of significance to a wine — they enjoy it because it is expensive, or prestigious or perceived to be sophisticated — rather than appreciating it for its purely vinous qualities, whatever they may be.

Sometimes a snob is described as someone who believes they know more than other people about some matter, or that they are in a better position to make judgements. But this can't be right, since this is not, in itself, a vice. It is not snobbish to prefer the better to the worse, to spend time and money to find out what is better, and what one enjoys (which are not always the same thing), and therefore to know that you know more than other people about something. Wine is a hugely complex phenomenon, and it can take a long time to find out what it is all about. But the attempt to do this can encounter the other main charge that is thrown at wine experts: that there isn't really such a thing as objective quality: "it's all subjective". And strangely enough, some wine writers themselves agree.

If all judgement about wine is subjective, then why do wine enthusiasts bother reading books by experienced and well-informed tasters like Spurrier? Barry C. Smith has pointed out that there is something of a paradox here: if a wine-writer tells you that their judgements are simply recording what they like, and there is no objective basis for choice, then how can they also persuade you that we should read their books? Yet the fact is that we trust those with a wide experience, a good memory and a good "palate" (basically: the ability to make and describe fine distinctions among flavours), and we come back to them for advice.

Despite the ill-conceived "it's all subjective" or "it's all snobbery" ideology that persists in some journalism, books on wine by experts continue to be produced and their views are taken seriously. Catherine Fallis's *Ten Grapes to Know*, is a readable short guide to ten famous wine grapes (chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir etc). It is geared towards an American readership (otherwise why would zinfandel be one of the ten grapes?) and there is little in it for wine nerds (no nebbiolo, no chenin blanc, no riesling). That's OK; these nerds are not the intended readership. It's a good, clear book. But all short introductions to wine will have a hard time competing with Jancis Robinson's brilliant (if mis-titled) *24 Hour Wine Expert*.

In the UK, Oz Clarke is someone who has done an enormous amount to democratise wine drinking and to counter, with his unpretentious charisma, all the arguments about snobbery. Clarke, a former actor in musicals and a TV star from the 1990s show *Food and Drink*, is a great

communicator and a gifted wine taster. He also writes well. In the 1980s Clarke was the first person to do a blind tasting on live TV, and he tells the story brilliantly. He guessed the wine correctly by a process of elimination (ironically without even tasting it). Clarke manages to be both authoritative and relaxed, causal and educational, as he takes you on a tour of the wine regions of the world. To my taste, introducing wine through the places that produce it makes the details easier to learn than by being given descriptions of grape styles. The same applies to restaurant wine lists: I want to know where the wine is from, not whether the restaurant considers it “fruity” or “aromatic”.

A lot has changed, then, since the Judgement of Paris. The red wines tasted there were Bordeaux-style made from cabernet sauvignon, merlot and other grapes; the white wines were all Burgundy-style made from chardonnay. For much of the twentieth century in Britain, “claret” (an old-fashioned word for red bordeaux) and white burgundy were the standard smart wines for “educated” middle-class drinkers, and even today some Oxbridge college cellars still contain thousands of bottles of these wines. Even when we take into account the size of Bordeaux — it is one of the largest wine regions in the world — and its historical links to Britain, the dominance of claret and white burgundy in the English taste is a little odd, given the huge variety of high quality wines available these days. To put this preference in perspective, the authoritative *Wine Grapes* (2012) by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and José Vouillamouz, lists 1368 varieties of grapes that are made for drinking wine. And even that list is not complete.

Kevin Begos’s *Tasting the Past* opens with a quote from Andy Walker, a professor at University of California Davis, about being “caught in the trap of saying there are only ten good grape varieties in the whole world”. (Readers of Fallis’s book should take note!) Begos’s book investigates the variety of wine grapes, as part of an engaging personal account of the history of wine. The book starts in a hotel room in Amman, Jordan. Begos, a journalist on a non-wine-related assignment, was looking in the minibar for something to drink at the end of a long day, and found an unpromising-looking bottle of red wine made by Cremisan cellars in Bethlehem (labelled ‘THE HOLY LAND’). The wine turned out to be delicious, and Begos tried to find more of it when he returned to the USA, but drew a blank everywhere. The grapes from which Cremisan makes its wine — Balandi, Jandali, Dabouki, and Hamdani — did not even appear in *Wine Grapes*. Begos’s memory of the Cremisan wine drove him to find out more — about that wine itself, its grapes, the fascinating monastery which made it, lying on the border of Israeli and Palestinian territory, and

the history of wine as a whole. The description of the experience he has when he first gets to taste the Cremisan wine again has a poignant quality — he struggles to find the taste, but it wasn't quite there. Wine enthusiasts will recognise this experience — sometimes, you return to a wine, and the experience is never quite the same.