

The dangers of cellar palate

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In some ways it's good that we wine tasters adapt to local conditions. When tasting in Burgundy we need to get used to the gloom of a typical Côte d'Or cellar. In Bordeaux it's useful to be able to navigate the courtly defences around each château. In Australia it's essential to be able to taste in relatively high temperatures and in California you sometimes need to filter out the smell of redwood. (I don't know for certain that it's redwood but there is a certain sort of wood, widely used in West Coast houses and winery buildings, that smells so completely unfamiliar to me that it strikes me as almost rancio in character.)

But I wonder whether in another sense adaptation isn't a problem for those of us whose job it is to communicate about wine. And I'm sure it can be a serious problem for those who make it. By adaptation in this context I mean the way the palate adjusts to the special characteristics of the local wines. In his new book *To Cork or Not to Cork* about the war over wine bottle stoppers, George M Taber points out how rapidly those working in wineries with a serious TCA problem became accustomed to the taint that blighted their wines.

I remember the first time I realised that my palate had adjusted to take account of local conditions was on my first trip to New Zealand in the mid 1980s. I knew that at that stage New Zealand reds had a reputation for being pretty green and herbaceous (Dr Richard Smart, then working at the government vine research station there, had not yet preached his gospel of canopy management at full volume). But after a few days in holiday mood in and around Auckland, being treated admittedly to some of New Zealand's best wines of both colours, I found them perfectly palatable and in some cases even quite impressive.

It was not until about our fifth evening there when we were invited to dinner by one of New Zealand's more cosmopolitan wine writers that I tasted a non Kiwi wine, a Guigal North Rhône Syrah, I think it was. Guigal is not known for making flabby, low- acid wines but this one was a revelation. It tasted so wonderfully mellow, ripe and welcoming compared with what was then the New Zealand norm. But in fact I realised in retrospect that the Guigal wine was not exceptionally ripe. It was the Kiwi reds that had all been slightly unripe, but after the first two or three my palate had obviously adapted to them and no longer noticed their inherent greenness.

And I am far from the only one to have encountered this phenomenon. I was quizzing my fellow British wine commentator Tom Cannavan of www.wine-pages.com the other day about Slovenia because he had just been and I am planning my first ever wine trip there later this month. He told me how significant numbers of the most respected wine producers in western Slovenia are now taking the idiosyncratic producer Gravner of Friuli across the Italian border as their model and deliberately treating their white wines to extended skin contact and long macerations, the result being wines that to most newcomers taste almost oxidised and distinctly weird. "I didn't like them at first," Cannavan admitted, "but I got used to the style after a few days and by the end I rather liked it."

On one level it is terrifying how rapidly the palate adapts to a new environment and set of sensory messages. I'm thinking not just of those of us who travel to a new wine region and try to report accurately on its wines for the benefit of our readers who may encounter one isolated bottle of that particular area's wine style in a completely different context.

But perhaps the single most potentially dangerous example of adaptation on the part of us commentators is the ease with which we can adapt to a vintage's style.

Take the Bordeaux primeurs tastings, for example, when thousands of professional tasters converge on Bordeaux to form an opinion of the latest vintage, opinions which can in the end make a very considerable difference to the amount of money flowing into Bordeaux and indeed into wine merchants' coffers all round the world that year. Their reaction to the first few wines tasted could not be more important, because the more examples they taste, the more their palate will become used to the common characteristics of that vintage, whether it be, for example, the pretty high acid and tannin levels of the 2006s, or the high alcohols and low acids of the 2003s. Once acclimatised to the vintage's character, it is all too tempting for tasters to shorten the focus and concentrate on which are the best wines within the context of that particular vintage rather than assessing the overall character of the vintage as a whole.

For that reason, I seize every chance I can to taste other, more mature vintages when in Bordeaux tasting the primeurs because they can help enormously to highlight the specific character of the youngest vintage on which all attention is currently focused.

These are some of the ways in which the phenomenon of adaptation affects us commentators, but I would argue that its consequences for producers can be even more serious. 'Cellar palate' is the common phrase for what happens when a wine producer becomes too acclimatised to their own wines or those of their neighbours.

It was often said about South African wine producers in the apartheid era that their wines suffered because they were so isolated. Not travelling and not receiving many foreign visitors left them with little tasting experience outside their own country, which made selling their wines against the competition a difficult proposition. In my experience the new generation of South African wine producers are some of the best travelled in the world but there are still some who argue they do not taste non- South African wines often enough. And of course quality is generally evolving and improving all over the world so it is essential for those competing in the global marketplace to continue to see what everyone else is up to – however fiendishly expensive imported wine can seem when paid for in Rand. (**3 Jun 2008** - This seems particularly necessary in view of accusations that some South African reds have an aroma that non South Africans find positively distasteful. See this article in www.grape.co.za)

Australian wine producers could also have been accused of palates too firmly adapted to the Australian status quo in the old days but thanks to the likes of the late Len Evans and his tutorial programme and some extremely energetic importers of wines into Australia, this is not an accusation that could generally be levelled at today's Australian wine industry.

I also wonder sometimes whether California wine producers taste the gentler ferments of their counterparts in Europe often enough. Certainly there does seem to be a fundamental difference in build – I'm thinking of alcoholic strength and general apparent sweetness level here – between California and European wines. But then California wine producers are not nearly as dependent on the need to export as, say, Australians and South Africans. And, happily for them, the average American consumer seems well adapted to potent, rather sweet- tasting wines.

But European wine producers can just as easily be accused of having a cellar palate, of having adapted too uncritically to the norms of their neighbours. I'm thinking here particularly of various enclaves in the Rhône valley where a high proportion of the wines would until recently at least have been rejected from any Australian wine show as being, in the Australians' favourite phrase, 'dirty French wine'.

I promise to try my hardest to fight against the ill- effects of adaptation if wine producers will too.