

## The ethics of wine writing

18 Apr 2009 by Jancis Robinson

**29 Jun 2011:** For a good example of the kind of dilemma wine writers have to face, see [Chutzpah](#) on the forum.

There has recently been much discussion [here](#) on DrVino.com about the extent to which wine writers are and should be in the pockets of wine producers and wine merchants. As a result, I was emailed over the weekend by Arthur Z Przebinda of [www.winesooth.com](#) asking me the questions at the very bottom of this long article. The more involved I got in answering them, the more I thought I owed it to you as a visitor to JancisRobinson.com to spell out my views, and the policies that I have evolved over more than 33 years' experience, on the ethics of wine writing.

I feel there are many related issues here and have tried to address them all below but please feel free to point out any aspect I may have overlooked.

### Wine samples

Rather than seeing these as a perk of my job, I have to confess that I spend more time fending them off than ever soliciting them. I do not feel at all compromised by being sent a free sample of either one bottle or, by the TCA-fearing, two bottles of a wine in commercial circulation in the hope of an enthusiastic review. It's a fact of commercial life, just as publishers think nothing of sending out review copies of new books to as many literary critics as possible, for exactly the same reasons.

I am sometimes sent what is effectively a vertical of a wine I am not familiar with, and frequently write up my tasting notes on this site. I am comfortable with that.

I would, on the other hand, feel compromised by, say, six bottles of a single mature, fine wine that seemed to have been sent as a 'thank you' or a sweetener. I may be wrong, but my sense is that this sort of thing is more common in France than in the UK. Mas de Daumas Gassac used to send me a whole case of their new vintage until I remonstrated – not, I'm sure, because they wanted to buy my favour, but because this is how things are done in France.

AXA Millésimes, for example, have been in the habit of sending out to wine writers a very handsome wooden carry case of examples of six of their wines (which include such landmarks as Pauillac second growth Ch Pichon Longueville). When I suggested to Christian Seely of AXA Millésimes that this might be construed as improper, he replied that this response plunged him into gloom. 'Has the world really become so politically correct?' seemed to be his gist. 'I want you to see how these wines are at a more mature stage (typically four or five years old) than when you taste them en primeur.' I pointed out that I did have quite a few examples of his wines in my cellar already but he sounded so glum and his feelings so hurt that I cancelled my cancellation, so to speak – although I still feel rather guilty about it. There seemed to be no way of solving this dilemma to our mutual satisfaction. But feel free to monitor my scores for any pro-AXA bias.

I would say that of all the samples I receive, less than five per cent of them are solicited – generally because I need to fill a gap for one of my articles here. Despite this, I do try to taste all wines I am sent, except for packages that arrive from very large companies that are clearly sending out exactly the same selection to a list of wine writers. If the wines in these packages are not particularly interesting, I have no qualms about giving them away to a fundraising event without tasting them, as I feel that large companies can easily bear the cost of the mailouts, and they did nothing to tailor what they sent to my needs.

On the other hand, while I try harder to taste what is sent by much smaller outfits, because I realise they need more help (just as I bend over backwards to cite independent retailers rather than the big supermarkets), I draw the line at being sent samples of wines that are not in commercial circulation in any significant market in circumstances when I am effectively being used as an unpaid winemaking consultant. 'We'd love to know what you think of our wines' is flattering to read, except that too often it should have the suffix 'so long as you like them' or 'so long as you explain to us how we can improve them'. Of course, most wine producers are much more competent than I am at winemaking, but you might be surprised by how many small, new producers seek free advice from this wine writer. I would suggest they contact the [Institute of Masters of Wine](#) and enquire about hiring some professional winemaking consultancy. I'm always curious about new producers and new regions but just don't have the time to review wines that are of no material interest to my readers, I'm afraid.

You might be surprised by the proportion of bottles I taste as samples that make it from tasting table to dining table. I'd put it at fewer than one bottle for every 30 tasted.

*A note to wine professionals about our review schedule:* I am often asked by those who supply samples to American commentators what our review schedule is. I'm afraid we don't have a set timetable. The advantage of publishing daily, without the constraint of having advertisers to please, is that we do not have to be slaves to a schedule. Yes, we tend to follow the general pattern below, but there are so many exceptions and exciting additional ingredients in between:

Jan - Burgundy

Feb - Austria

Mar - Champagne

Apr - Bordeaux

May/June - Germany

Dec - Rhône

### **Other tasting opportunities**

I taste far more wines out of my house than *chez nous*. Fortunately, London has an extremely lively professional wine tasting calendar and we do not lack opportunities to taste a vibrant and wide range of wines without their producers' having to sacrifice a whole bottle of each wine for one taster.

Most of these tastings are pretty workmanlike. We are supplied with a tasting sheet, a glass and a spittoon and, if we're lucky, some dry water biscuits to stop us gnawing at the table legs once the tasting leads, as it inevitably does, to pronounced hunger. If there is a buffet at which I can satisfy this hunger before moving on to another tasting, I tend to see this as merciful rather than bountiful. It's true that there is a small and declining band of more mature British wine writers who seem more interested in the food than the wine at tastings, but with my contemporaries the reverse seems to be the case with almost all of them – which may actually be rather unhealthy.

I love tasting in cellars, which generally means abroad. But this takes time and very carefully planned schedules which can take almost as long to organise as the trips themselves (see below for details of Travel). I have reluctantly to limit my foreign forays – not least because we still have one child at home. (I cannot imagine how on earth I would have been able to feed the voracious monster that is JancisRobinson.com when we had three young children at home.) I tend to go to Bordeaux every April, and the Rhône and Burgundy towards the end of the year. Germany in late April and/or late August seems to be becoming the norm. But I have to ration my long-haul journeys, and to choose carefully how to fill gaps in my knowledge closer to home.

When doing comparative tastings such as those of the Bordeaux primeurs, I try to taste blind as much as possible. I don't think there is much point in tasting random wines that are completely new to me completely blind, but I seize on any opportunity to compare like with like under blind conditions.

### **Entertainment**

It is relatively rare that there is anything like a lavish meal attached to a tasting but the wine trade is congenitally hospitable. Wine producers and merchants necessarily want to show off their wares with food. I have no qualms about sharing a meal with someone who makes or sells wine. I tend to learn a great deal from such contact, and if anyone thinks I can be 'bought' with a meal – not least because since 1981 I have been married to a restaurateur who in 1988 turned into a restaurant critic – then I don't think their opinion is worth valuing.

The question of friendship with people in the wine business is a much more difficult area – and virtually impossible for either the relevant parties or others to control and police, I would have thought. The wine world is full of great characters, most of whom are fascinated by my greatest interests: wine, food and words. I'm afraid I am unable to react differently to wine producers and wine merchants from how I would react to them if they were not wine professionals. I like the majority of the people I meet through wine but I hope, and am rather horribly sure, that I manage to keep a firm distinction between what I feel about people and my assessment of what they have to sell. I am quite capable of having an intense and friendly discussion with anyone in the wine business, but when I sit down at my keyboard, I am quite a different person. (One good friend, a refugee from the wine trade James Herrick, likes to remind me that I once told him that when I approach the keyboard, 'the milk of human kindness drains out of me'.)

I cannot think of a single wine writer who has managed the sort of hermit-like existence that would be required of them if

they were to ensure that they had no real human contact with anyone in the wine trade. Such a person would be decidedly strange. The important thing is to adhere firmly to the need for a wine writer to maintain their independence in what they write, no matter how they interact personally with members of the wine trade. In my professional memoir *Tasting Pleasure/Confessions of a Wine Writer*, I cite the example of my relationship with London wine importer the late Ernst Gorge. He was a real charmer. A diminutive Czech with a wicked sense of humour, he was always very kind to me, and towards the end of his life we socialised with our spouses. But I'm afraid I never wrote a word about the wines he represented, simply because I didn't think they were good enough.

On the other hand, if a wine company approaches me with an invitation to something non-wine-related such as Wimbledon, or the ballet, or the opening of an art exhibition, I always refuse – sometimes very reluctantly (I'd really like a Centre Court seat one of these days) – because it is just too obvious a pitch to make me feel beholden to that company.

### **Accommodation**

I seem to spend a small fortune on hotel accommodation, but very occasionally, there is simply nowhere else to stay when visiting a wine region than under the auspices of a wine producer – typically in a guesthouse or even spare bedroom. For example, when I visited the [Yarra Valley](#) earlier this year, the day after the bushfires, it was physically impossible to get through the road blocks to my hotel accommodation so I had to spend the night in the de Bortoli guesthouse in the vines – overlooking those terrifying scorched vineyards. And in the past I have visited producers in other parts of Australia that are just too isolated to offer any commercial accommodation.

But I always do my best to stay independently. Every year during the Bordeaux primeurs season, the Union des Grands Crus offers all accredited visiting wine communicators free transport, meals and accommodation. I tried it one year, but felt uncomfortable about being in the pocket of those whose wines we are there to judge (as I wrote in [The Bordeaux primeurs circus](#)) and so for many, many years we have hired a car and stayed independently in a hotel with good communications.

### **Travel**

I travel a great deal and am lucky enough to live somewhere, London, with no shortage of cheap – actually shockingly cheap, in my view - flights to European destinations. I am also British Airways wine consultant (or rather was until I resigned in August 2010 after a change in BA's wine buying policy), which helps with longer haul flights to a certain extent. I therefore travel under my own steam for most of the time (fortunately, I love making travel arrangements). Although I am frequently invited on what have come to be known as 'press trips', I have evolved a policy of declining invitations from individual producers (or, if I felt the trip was unmissable then I would insist on paying my own way on it). However, if the invitation comes from a generic body, and I feel I would learn from it without being under any obligation, then I might accept it. The cost of my recent (very long) flights to and from New Zealand and Australia, for example, were shared at my suggestion by the organisers of the Central Otago Pinot Celebration and the Mornington Peninsula Pinot Celebration when both organisations invited me for consecutive weekends.

I was rather surprised to see quite how much animosity was inspired on the DrVino thread by the idea of Mark Squires, a reviewer for Robert Parker, accepting an invitation from the government of Israel to learn about Israeli wine. Setting aside, if one can, the terrible social and political conflicts in that part of the world, I see no conflict of interest as a wine writer in being the guest of a generic body – so long as the wines of the country or region represented have clearly established some sort of positive reputation already. Someone who accepts a two week trip to discover the wines of Kyrgyzstan, for instance, might feel pressurised into writing more favourable reviews of what they taste there than had they looked at the wines in the confines of their own home.

Here are the trips I have been invited on in the last few days with their host and my response. You may be surprised by how varied they are.

*Where* Moldovan vineyards

*Who* Looks like a single producer

*Response* Sorry, I don't accept trips from single producers. Who is the host? If the itinerary looks interesting and varied enough, I may come so long as it's not too long and I can pay my own way.

*Where* The Egyptian Sahara

*Who* An interesting-sounding new single producer

*Response* Sorry, no can do. Please send samples.

*Where* Judging a wine competition in Hungary

*Who* A regional wine organisation

*Response* Sorry, I can't make those dates but it sounds interesting (and non compromising). I'll see if Richard Hemming can make it. (He can't but is involved with another national wine judging in Hungary.)

*Where* The Maldives (yes, really)

*Who* A particularly wine-minded hotel

*Response* Sorry, I can't make the dates of your two-day wine festival. (This is the fourth or fifth time they have invited me and I can't bear to give them a complete brush off – not least because they are not mainstream players in the wine business. If I did go, and if I wrote about it, I could be accused of favouring them over other hotels in the Maldives, but I am not a travel writer, so I don't feel that my professional reputation as a wine writer would be under threat. But if you tell me it would be truly shocking to accept a trip to the Maldives then I would certainly reflect soberly on your arguments.)

### **Other commissions**

I am scrupulous about declining any offers of paid work from wine companies – so much so that I am rarely asked, or if I am, the question is prefaced by 'I know this is very unlikely...' I refer to things like hosting events or accepting writing commissions.

Of course I do quite a bit of wine education and hosting of tastings for charity, and do some of the same for the likes of banks, lawyers and other non wine outfits to whom I charge a full professional rate. I will host, voluntarily at no fee, a tasting for an individual wine company if it offers me the chance to see wines that are genuinely difficult to amass myself and in which I think you might be interested. A good current example is the Screaming Eagle tasting and dinner that Fine & Rare Wines are currently planning at the Berkeley Hotel in London on 3 Jun.

I don't advise restaurateurs on their restaurant/hotel wine lists as I fear that could compromise my husband Nick's role as a restaurant critic.

I have no commercial links with any wine companies or any producers. The nearest my work comes to commercial activity (other than selling my written work) was my role as wine consultant to British Airways (so I would never have written a comparative review of different airlines' wine offerings) and as a member of the [Royal Household Wine Committee](#) (so of course I would never write an article comparing different monarchs' cellars). But both these activities have involved me in blind tastings whose results contribute to my general wine education and which I share with visitors to JancisRobinson.com

### **Other writers for JancisRobinson.com**

I know I am very lucky that by now I have worked long and hard enough to make a decent income from wine writing. The only other person on the fulltime editorial staff of JancisRobinson.com is Julia Harding MW and both of us try to adhere to the same standards. She has been selected by Wine Australia to participate in the [Landmark Australia tutorial](#) in June, which the odd person (come in, purple pager John Lahart) views as a PR exercise for Australian wine, but I think she should have a chance in a lifetime to learn during that week. Along with Michel Bettane of France and Brian Croser of Australia, she is going to judge the Trophy Wine Show in South Africa next month – another great opportunity to learn without feeling beholden to any specific wine company. She has judged the Wines of Chile Awards in Santiago for the same reason.

Richard Hemming tastes and writes for us too but is not employed by us and is rather younger than we are, so I feel I am not in a position to impose such strict standards on him – although I think those who have seen him at work have cause to believe in his scrupulous, sometimes almost excessive, objectivity. The same goes for Walter Speller, who writes about Italian wines, and Michael Schmidt, who occasionally contributes on German wines. Victoria Daskal was on her OIV master's degree when she wrote for the site last year and has no commercial ties to any specific company – although coincidentally both she and Richard Hemming are spending this week slaving behind the scenes at the Decanter World Wine Awards.

### **Winesooth.com's interview:**

1. *Is a desire to experience the world of wine in ways that only a few can and in ways that one could not otherwise afford (i.e. the benefits in the form of samples, events, trips, press junkets, etc) acceptable as part of a career in wine writing (so long as one avoids conflicts of interest and maintains journalistic integrity)? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.*

Speaking personally, I think horse and cart are in the wrong order here. I've been lucky enough to benefit from increasing access as my own career has burgeoned.

But if you are talking theoretically, and the gist of your question is 'Is it acceptable for someone to develop a career as a wine commentator wholly or partly because they want to benefit from the perks?', then I want to say No. I think communicators should serve their readership/audience rather than themselves. If someone is primarily interested in what wine can do for them rather than what they can do for wine, there's a danger they will not bother to pass on what they learn and experience.

*2. Is it possible to fulfil one's desire for these experiences through the benefits mentioned above and avoid conflicts of interest and maintain journalistic integrity? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.*

It's not easy. Wine people are naturally hospitable and generous, and it is in the nature of wine that it should be shared. I think some clear rules or guidelines area needed. See below [and above].

*3. Considering all the resources necessary to produce a wine publication (which relies on new content with every cycle), is it acceptable for the writers to accept free samples, trips, etc as (so long as one avoids conflicts of interest and maintains journalistic integrity)? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.*

I think each form of 'perk' requires a different response.

Free samples are just a part of commercial life. I spend my time fending them off rather than soliciting them. A single bottle, or sometimes two sent by those concerned about the possibility of TCA taint, of a wine in commercial circulation in the hope of a review is hardly compromising. Six bottles of a mature gem would be. As are trips paid for by a wine producer. Actually, this makes me realize that I should write a proper statement of ethics for visitors to JancisRobinson.com [see above]

*4. Can a wine publication remain competitively priced and maintain a healthy revenue stream while paying for all samples and 100% of its reporters' trips and expenses? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.*

You'll need a lot of figures and many a supposition to answer this question properly but I was always determined that JancisRobinson.com should never have ads or sponsorship, which is why part of it is available only on subscription. A 12-month membership has been £69/\$99 (including all of the *Oxford Companion to Wine*, all the maps of the *World Atlas of Wine* as well as all the articles and tasting notes) for the last four years, although the site has improved and expanded enormously in that time.

Nowadays travel costs are not that prohibitive – even for those of us paying in puny British pounds. For some of us the problem is more finding the time for, rather than the cost of, visiting wine regions. But I think it would be an unnecessary expense to pay for every single bottle tasted – and in London we are lucky, as New Yorkers are, that there is such a lively calendar of opportunities to taste such a wide variety of wines at all price levels and from so many different origins. These tastings are usually very workmanlike affairs – max chance to taste max wines rather than any lushing up in terms of fancy food or locations.

You may also be interested in my recent article on [Visiting top wine producers](#).