

Dinner with Coppola

15 Jun 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is much longer

Earlier this month I was invited out to dinner for the first time ever by a world-famous Hollywood film director. It was not clever of me to be blasé about checking the time we agreed on. I had thought that by arriving at 7.20 at The Square, central London's smart restaurant for wine lovers and hedge-fund managers, I would be comfortably early. I arrived to find Francis Ford Coppola and his bright young sales person Heather de Savoye sitting side by side in the bar area looking somewhat discomfited.

To make matters worse, Coppola's light blue tie, a gift from his wife of 48 years Eleanor, was balefully scattered with the number 7, 'my lucky number', Coppola, born 7 April 1939, told me, trying to ease my embarrassment. He really is a very normal, easy-going representative of 'the industry'.

Perhaps having set down roots somewhere as agricultural as the Napa Valley 37 years ago when he bought the old Gustav Niebaum wine estate has helped keep him sane, even through the potential insanities associated with filming *Apocalypse Now* and the potentially aggrandising achievement of directing *The Godfather*. 'Is it true there's a fish restaurant in London called The Cod Father?' was one of his opening sallies. Furthermore, of southern Italian stock (who infused his early diet with wine), he is very, very family. He always insisted on taking his wife and children along when his work required him to travel, even though when they set off for the Philippines to film *Apocalypse* they ended up staying five times as long as the anticipated six months.

But this early exposure to the business of filming, when 'the wardrobe department would make dresses for Sofia's dolls', seems to have paid off. Sofia Coppola is now a celebrated film director herself. Her father literally swelled with pride when pointing out that she had won the Leone d'Oro for best film at the Venice Biennale last year 'before her 40th birthday!' He had lost weight since I last saw him in the mid 1990s when filming for a BBC series at Niebaum's old Victorian homestead on the estate then called Niebaum-Coppola. Both beard and paunch were much neater, although he still has a slightly vulpine look when he really laughs and exposes his teeth.

Coppola regaled us with stories (which Heather loyally claimed not to have heard before) of how he learnt about fine wine as a junior screenwriter in Paris (*Is Paris Burning?*), how Château Lafite was the house red on one job, and how he was once paid in burgundies from the matchless Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. But because I am not a film nut, I have to confess that the particular lure of this evening for me was his promise to bring over (in a private plane, I was to discover) an old vintage or two made on his estate when it was in its prime and called Inglenook, a name that he has recently bought back at great expense ('more than I paid for the estate in the first place') from the thoroughly mass-market Wine Group. He invited all five men involved in the deal to celebrate it by spending a night en famille chez Coppola during which the wives apparently let slip, 'they always wanted you to have it'.

With the old name restored, and a new winemaker from Château Margaux in Bordeaux in place complementing his French consultant Stéphane Derenoncourt, who is weaning the vines off the irrigation that has become routine in the Napa Valley, Coppola, perhaps stung by some pretty lacklustre recent reviews from the American wine press, is trying to re-position his historic property as a Frenchified California first growth. His role as board member at François Pinault's Château Latour presumably provides him with a few tips.

He certainly has form as a re-inventor and re-brander. Today he has two very different wine operations: the upmarket Napa Valley estate and the thoroughly mainstream wine blender, bottler and 'wine wonderland' tourist destination on the old Souverain site in Sonoma and home to all the memorabilia from his film career. Its wines are called things like Director's Cut in a shameless attempt to sprinkle Hollywood magic on some pretty basic offerings. 'I don't want to drink great wine every night', he told me defensively, explaining that the Sonoma operation will bankroll the serious investment he expects to make in the Napa Valley, including a brand new winery on top of the barrel hall in the original Inglenook buildings (pictured).

I reminded him that, when we had last met and he had yet to acquire these and the balance of the prime vineyards associated with them, he had asked me to write to the head of what was then IDV, now part of Diageo, who owned them but was doing nothing particularly worthy with them. (I did, and IDV eventually sold to Coppola, though I doubt the two facts are related.) Coppola could be accused of rather neglecting this prime asset in recent years, allowing the post of

head winemaker to sit vacant for a vintage or two, so let us hope that the new team can co-operate to navigate a steady course for this potentially great estate.

Coppola himself admits he is no wine specialist. He loves to cook, and fell silent for a good five minutes while we studied the menus - but prefers to leave major wine decisions to others. I was given the daunting task, for instance, of choosing a white wine with which to begin our dinner. 'We only brought reds', explained Heather helpfully. 'We want to see what you choose', said Coppola, heavy with import. I feel uncomfortable being given carte blanche on someone else's credit card, especially someone who, like Coppola, was muttering 'Montrachet' under his breath. Surely he didn't really want to spend a four figure sum on this bottle?

Serious study of The Square's wine list could have distracted me for a good hour, which would have been impolite. But I remembered a stunning bottle, actually two, of Trimbach's Clos Ste Hune Riesling 1990 that I'd enjoyed at The Square with my German editor once, so I stopped at the Alsace section and went for the same producer's 375th anniversary (get that, Napa Valley) bottling of their Cuvée Frédéric Emile Riesling 2001 that in the event had Heather swooning, and Coppola quite satisfied enough *faute de Montrachet*. But this was not before the sommelier, who suggested decanting this beautiful golden wine, managed to chip one of the tall goblets he brought for each of us to add to the three glasses already at each place. Coppola nerves, perhaps?

After our first course (stuffed courgette flowers for Coppola), we were poured two relatively recent vintages of his prime Napa Valley Cabernet, called Rubicon by Coppola, who for a time also applied the name to the entire estate. (This top bottling will be called Inglenook Rubicon from the 2009 vintage.) The idea was that comparing the 2005 and 2008 would demonstrate the refinements that Derenoncourt is beginning to make. As it was, I took one sniff of the classic old rich, dusty 2005 and sighed 'California' appreciatively. 'Rutherford', he corrected me, pronouncing the 'th' in the name of Inglenook's appellation lightly in the American fashion. The 2008 was indeed a more sophisticated wine: fresher, more mineral. More French.

It was the 1958 Inglenook Cabernet, opened just before serving and carefully decanted through muslin by The Square's sommelier (perhaps the transatlantic flight, however luxurious, had shaken up the sediment a little), that was the real star of the evening for me. At just 12.5% alcohol it was the best 1958 I have ever tasted, a wonderfully complex, ethereal, still-appetising reminder of what encouraged incomers such as Robert Mondavi to plant Cabernet Sauvignon in this blessed valley in northern California in the late 1960s. It came in a beautiful old bordeaux bottle which Coppola plans to emulate for future bottlings of his top Cabernets, as opposed to the unfashionably heavy, embossed bottles that have recently housed Rubicon.

He recounted tales of all that he had learned from the five or six candidates for the winemaker job - mainly French but one high-profile Spaniard - clearly relishing the time he had spent with each of them on the estate, listening to their varied suggestions for how to improve his wine and winery.

By this stage, after an unexpected intermediate course of sweetbreads sent out by chef Philip Howard and devoured by Coppola, we had moved on to our main courses. Looking rather wistfully at what both Heather and I had chosen, he observed, 'Someone told me pata negra pigs were all English. Can that be true?' before announcing that he had a 'a little surprise' for me. And what a surprise it was, a second bottle from the cellar of old Inglenook wines he acquired with the Niebaum property, a 1957 Pinot Noir. Today there is probably hardly a single Pinot Noir vine in the heart of the Napa Valley, so much hotter than Pinot's homeland Burgundy is it. But these vines were apparently planted in one of the cooler corners of the estate (along with the humble Charbono for which Inglenook was once famous) and the 54-year-old Pinot was still a real pleasure to drink. Rather more fragile, it didn't have the purity of the Cabernet but was still sweet and hauntingly perfumed. It reminded me of an obviously chaptalised old-fashioned burgundy from the 1960s.

Coppola waved aside any suggestion of dessert in order to plunder The Square's heavily charged cheese trolley and told us with pride of his love of Stilton (that Pinot was not a bad partner for it) to the extent of ordering whole cheeses to be sent over to California from Paxton & Whitfield in London.

Perhaps he should be in the food business rather than the wine business. Hearing that I was off to the far south of Italy the next morning, this son of the desolate Basilicata region was insistent that once there I should ask for *lampascione*, which turned out to be a particularly bitter variation on pickled onions, actually based on the bulbs of wild hyacinths that grow in that part of the world. He even followed this up with an email telling me exactly how he cooked them: 'first par boiled and then fried with paprika and garlic (crispy) in olive oil'. I took this picture of them, lit by Ryan Opaz of Catavino, at the Michelin-starred Al Fornello da Ricci restaurant in Puglia while tasting wines for the Radici del Sud southern Italian

wine competition. (I will be reporting on Puglia next week.)

Presumably it is this love of food that has encouraged him to diversify into restaurants and a resort in Belize. His son Roman is already moving in on the wine side of the Coppola's wine operations, producing a Syrah to make his own mark on the Napa Valley. I'm sure his father is very proud.

Coppola was off to Berlin, Prague and Paris, where he would meet Eleanor. Heather was off to New York to discuss a 24 Sep sale of ancient bottles from the Inglenook cellar with Christie's.

The world-famous film director seemed bemused by my first name and asked twice, once over dinner and once when we spoke on the telephone about his new winemaker appointment, whether I felt a particular affinity with people called Francis. On reflection, I think I do.