Meeting the wine bloggers

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In the beginning was the word and the word was never questioned. This is how many specialist commentators such as myself viewed our work. We wrote the reviews, the articles, the books, and sold them to a publisher who then packaged and disseminated them to a grateful readership whose only reactions to what we wrote were to follow our advice, perhaps to mutter among themselves about what they viewed as our mistakes or misconceptions, and very occasionally to go to the trouble of writing a polite letter either to us or to our publishers to comment on what we had published.

Until recently we specialists enjoyed near oracular status, a situation encouraged by those who have something to sell in our specialist field. Cinemas are plastered with carefully chosen snippets from film reviewers. Publishers adorn book jackets with quotes from book reviews or, even more insidious, 'blurbs' from accommodating fellow authors actively solicited on the basis of unwieldy proofs circulated even before publication. And we all know the wine equivalent of this, don't we? The scores that so many wine retailers, and wine producers, have milked mercilessly as sales aids. The magic of Parker points has robbed at least one generation of wine retailers of the need to do anything more creative than follow another person's palate preferences. Even much less admired wine commentators have seen their comments and ratings used to sell bottles. It's no wonder that we specialist commentators, many of whom have put in many years of hard slog, have come to believe we are pretty special.

But what's this? I hear the clicking of fingers on a keyboard. I see the explosion of websites, blogs, tweets and online bulletin boards which can provide a global readership to anyone who can type - and the ability to comment on what anyone else writes without risking a thing. They don't have to appear in public; they don't even have to give their real name and location. Suddenly, we specialist commentators have found that our readers can answer back! Indeed, many of them prove to have opinions just as strong as our own, some of them founded on every bit as much knowledge. Welcome to the new democracy of wine in which those of us previously cocooned in a swaddling of publisher's packaging have had radically to reassess our role, and relationship with those for whom we write.

Having set up JancisRobinson.com as long ago as 2000 (see The story of JancisRobinson.com), and having welcomed public comment from readers (initially called Your turn) since 2001 (see Purple page' tenth birthday!), I have had quite a time to get used to the new reality of online publishing, but I have many friends who are authors and newspaper journalists, some of them with enviable reputations. I see them still struggling to come to terms with a world in which literally anyone can publish strongly held opinions on what they view as their personal fiefdom, their own specialist subject. In certain circles therefore, blogger is a term of derision. Indeed the unregulated nature of online comment has tended to encourage more vicious criticism of some of the old-guard oracles than is justifiable.

It was with all this in mind that I accepted an invitation to be a keynote speaker at this year's Wine Bloggers' Conference, pictured above and held in steamy Charlottesville, Virginia, last July, the fourth such event for American wine bloggers, matched by a conference for European wine bloggers organised on rather different lines by Ryan and Gabriella Opaz andd Robert McIntosh in Franciacorta, Italy, in October this year. (The locations of next year's events will be Oregon and Turkey respectively.)

I am the last person to underestimate the importance of those who have taken to the world of wine writing and are busy taking advantage of the fact that they can broadcast their views so easily, with so little investment and zero depletion of the world's forests. I know personally a fair number of European wine bloggers but was curious to meet well over 300 of their American counterparts en masse. (I also happen to have two very good friends in Charlottesville who are no longer able to travel, so the location of this year's WBC, as they call it, suited me perfectly.)

During the months leading up to the conference, I also happened to have judged two international wine-writing competitions, which gave me a useful insight into the activities of such wine bloggers as bother to enter competitions. The Born Digital Awards are focused entirely on online wine writing while the most hotly contested category in this year's Louis Roederer International Wine Writers' Awards was that for bloggers, both of these competitions attracting entries from all over the world.

For the record, I don't consider myself a blogger. I publish, and write far too much of, a website full of news, views and tasting notes on wine. A blogger's work is more intensely personal, often giving the reader almost too much detail about the private life of the writer. But I do know all too well the addictive nature of online writing. The fact that there are no spatial and chronological limits - with a little competence you can publish at any length and at any time of day or night - and the fact that anything published on the web can stimulate immediate responses, often from the other side of the world, means that we online writers have no checks on our logorrhoea and many of us write daily. (Perhaps part of the

charm of Twitter is that although we may tweet compulsively several times a day or even minute, at least we have to do so within 140 characters.)

I was struck at the conference (some of my coverage is here), perhaps naively, by how commercial it was. There was no getting away from the event's sponsors, especially the major one in Charlottesville, Virginia wine. I enjoyed the chance to explore a wine region that had changed enormously since my first visit many years before, and tasted a few stunning wines, but I must say that by the end of the weekend, I was really looking forward to a glass of something that had not been grown in the US - even if I did increase my knowledge of Indiana Traminette infinitely.

The bloggers themselves seemed a generally enthusiastic bunch, but were almost outnumbered by the wine marketers who had come along to try to influence them. The bloggers dutifully tried to taste and write notes on every glass put in front of them, but what was in that glass was determined much more by the deals done by the event organisation that owns the (US) Wine Bloggers' Conference than by any wine-centric, or even wine-writer-centric, considerations. Perhaps predictably, many of the most respected American wine bloggers were absent.

I was glad to see that the old adversarial relationship between conventional writers and bloggers seems to have mellowed a little. The former tended to see themselves as superior to the latter while the bloggers saw themselves as the inheritors of, if not the earth, then cyberspace, which is all that they feel will matter in a little while.

For the record, I list a small selection of some of my favourite wine websites with the blogs I admire most, generally those which express with verve, literacy and frequency a serious amount of original material and a particularly personal point of view. I should add the huge caveat, however, that this list doubtless omits dozens of great wine blogs because I am too busy writing for my own website to have time to read much of what else is published online.

AliceFeiring.com

DrVino.com

Fermentation.typepad.com

Thewinedoctor.com

Vinography.com

Susieandpeter.com

Wineanorak.com

WineDiarist.com

WineWomanSong.co.uk