Rushing to judgment

1 Jun 2012 by Jancis Robinson/Syndicated

A few months ago we had a bit of an argy bargy on our usually particularly courteous Members' forum. The issue, believe it or not, was whether tasters should be allowed to publish reviews of Germany's finest dry wines, the Grosses Gewächs, before they are first officially presented to international wine media in the sedate spa town of Wiesbaden at the end of August the year after the harvest (where Michael Schmidt and I plan to be this year to taste the exciting 2011s).

The only exception allowed to this rule by the VDP, the association of top German growers, is for those writing about them in publications published after that date. The motivation for the ban is a noble one. The VDP and most serious German wine producers believe these are wines that benefit from long, slow fermentations, prolonged ageing and natural stabilisation before bottling. The embargo is designed to discourage producers from feeling any pressure to finish the wines in a hurry, in time for tastings in the spring for example. President of the VDP Steffen Christmann assured us that they continue to discuss this issue within the association but that his own opinion is that it is a good thing not to show the wines too soon after the vintage. He added, with a nod to the controversial Bordeaux primeurs tastings every spring, 'Also, not everything I hear about Bordeaux is so positive...'

Others, including VDP member and gifted producer of Grosses Gewächs Klaus Peter Keller, pointed out that most of the top German wine merchants already taste these wines before they are bottled and comment on them in their literature, so why should wine writers be forbidden to do the same thing, even for unfinished wines, so long as they clearly state when the wine was tasted. Asked to comment on this observation, the VDP preferred to remain mute.

At around the same time there was an online kerfuffle about reviews of the latest Brunello di Montalcino vintages. My colleague James Suckling who used to write for the *Wine Spectator* and lives part of the time in Tuscany excited the ire and scorn of his fellow wine writers by publishing his scores before the start of the official week of Anteprima tastings organised by the growers' consortiums in Tuscany in February, scores based on tastings he had organised himself.

American wine writers have also infuriated their counterparts in France in particular by rushing to publish their reviews of the Bordeaux primeurs, helped enormously by special early tastings in co-operation with certain négociants. Scores from the likes of Suckling and James Molesworth of the *Spectator*, and even now the odd European, can be read before the beginning of the week in early April designated for the official media and trade tastings of the primeurs organised by the Union des Grands Crus, the Bordeaux equivalent of the VDP. On the eve of last year's primeurs week, France's best-known wine writer Michel Bettane threatened to boycott the primeurs tastings in future if the UGC did nothing to stop journalists from publishing their reviews and scores ahead of primeurs week.

This storm in a wine glass rumbled on and resulted in a communication to us wine writers from Pierre-Anton Castéja, head of important négociants Joanne, as early as January this year claiming that he had been forbidden by the UGC to show us wine writers the 2011s at all. This was probably a clever tactic to get us to remonstrate with the UGC, which we did since tastings chez the négociants are genuinely useful even to those of us who adhere to the official schedule because we can fill in the gaps in our tastings there. The UGC therefore had to backtrack and the most precocious tasters have still been able to rush out their assessments of the 2011 vintage ahead of primeurs week - however little interest there has been in the wines this year.

I actually imposed my very own boycott of the 2011 Bordeaux primeurs. My long-suffering husband Nick Lander, who has been plagued by ulcerative colitis for the last 40 years, had to have a major operation on his gut in mid March, involving many weeks of demanding convalescence afterwards - not being allowed to drive a car before the end of May, for instance. When this became clear, I saw no choice but to stay at home in London with him. The brilliant Julia Harding MW went to Bordeaux to taste the 2011 primeurs instead - and did an extremely good job too. See the fruits of her not-inconsiderable labours in Bordeaux 2011 - a guide to our coverage.

While I missed the intellectual and sensory exercise of tasting a new set of wines from a particularly interesting, if not wholly successful, vintage, I was thrilled to spend time with Nick at such an important time in our lives, and was also delighted to be spared my personal part in the Bordeaux sales campaign. I do feel more and more that the Bordelais want us there only for our blessed scores - and then only for the good ones - because we are now part of the sales pitch. I was saddened but not surprised to hear from the odd merchant that some Bordelais thought I was somehow letting them

down, or failing in my commercial duty by giving Bordeaux a miss for the first time in 14 years. (If all else were equal, I would think seriously about making a special, later trip to taste the 2011s once Nick was properly recovered, but there is the small matter of three books coming out in the next year or so.)

But all of these fierce arguments about dates and wine reviews seem a bit silly to me. I think in any case that Bordeaux is shown far too young anyway. Most of these wines, the reds and sweet whites anyway, are designed to be opened at 10+ years old. They will not be bottled for well over a year after they are shown in primeurs week. Many are specially groomed to show well then but these samples may give only very approximate ideas of what the final wines will be like.

But in any event, like it or not, we now live in an era of instant communication. I go to a tasting and find someone has tweeted their views on it before I have even got home. Sometimes before I have even arrived at the tasting. Blogs and websites offer anyone the chance to publish their impressions within hours, unmediated by print deadlines and distribution schedules. Embargos, once obeyed by all upstanding journalists, are today an anachronism, and the world of wine will have to learn to adapt to that fact, however unpalatable.