Is wine ready for its close-up?

5 November 2015 We're re-publishing Alder's September column free as today's Throwback Thursday in anticipation of the release of the new documentary Uncorked, whose first episode will be shown on NBCUniversal’s Esquire Network this Tuesday 10 November. More details below.

16 September 2015 At last night's Louis Roederer International Wine Writers' Awards, Alder was given the special Chairman's Award by chairman of judges Charles Metcalfe, who was particularly impressed by Alder's beautiful self-published book The Essence of Wine: Celebrating the Delights of the Palate. (The Book category was won by Ian D'Agata's excellent Native Grapes of Italy.) For his work here and on Vinography.com Alder was also shortlisted for the Online Communicator category that was won, along with the Columnist of the Year category, by Victoria Moore of the Daily Telegraph. Many congratulations to all.
Was there wine in American movies before Sideways? If so, no one noticed it. But these days, wine seems to be all but oozing out of the big screen and televisions alike, as documentaries, feature films, and reality shows have started casting wine as a character. [One of the 300 new entries in the 4th edition of the Oxford Companion, published tomorrow, is on films about wine - JR.]

Other than as a prop, there was very little wine in American cinema before Sideways. Only the most die-hard oeno-movie-philes will recall Stanley Kramer's 1969 film, The Secret of Santa Vittoria, about an Italian town trying to hide its wine stocks from the invading Germans in World War II; or the Rock Hudson vehicle The Earth Is Mine, in which a young Jean Simmons is pushed into an arranged marriage in exchange for some vineyard land.

Following the smash success of Sideways in 2004, and the much-remarked-on documentary Mondovino in the same year (see Putting wine on the wide screen written in 2004), Hollywood got a little more wine-friendly, releasing A Good Year, with Russell Crowe in 2006 and Bottle Shock with Alan Rickman in 2008, the same year that an alliance of Merlot producers opted to shoot Merlove, a documentary aimed at undoing the serious damage that Sideways did to the grape's reputation in America.

After that, it seemed that Hollywood might have had its fill of all things vinous. But then three years ago, a little documentary film called SOMM burst onto the scene.

'I still get asked, maybe five times a week, if I've seen the movie and whether I'm studying for the exam', says sommelier Yannick Benjamin (pictured above) of the University Club and Le Du's Wines in New York City.

Benjamin's answer to that question has long been affirmative, but as of six months ago, he can now tell people to tune in to see how everything turns out. Benjamin, along with five other New York wine professionals are the stars of Uncorked, a reality TV show based on the SOMM movie (created by the same producers), and with a very similar premise. Premiering in November on the Esquire Network (a cable television channel that is a joint venture between NBCUniversal and the Hearst Corporation), the show follows the six wine professionals as they study and then sit for the Master Sommelier examinations.

November will also mark the premiere (at the Napa Valley Film Festival, no less) of SOMM: Into the Bottle, a film that many people will imagine is a sequel, but may disappoint anyone hoping for an update on the lives of the first film's protagonists.

'The first movie wasn't really about wine', explains Master Sommelier Geoff Kruth (pictured below in stills from an upcoming episode of Uncorked). Kruth also appears in both films and co-produced the second one. 'SOMM was more about four intense, wacky people who are dedicating themselves to a specific niche. A lot of people related to it, whether they loved wine or not. It was dealing with life themes. Wine was almost incidental to the plot. In the new film, wine is really the subject.'
SOMM: Into the Bottle, explains Kruth, is an exploration of wine through the stories behind ten different bottles from around the world. 'If you were a wine geek, the first movie wasn't made for you. This movie has so much of the back-story, the history, and the people involved with wine. If you like travel, history, or wine, you'll love it.'

The SOMM franchise isn't the only game in town, however. In late 2013 legendary wine importer Martine Saunier released her documentary A Year in Burgundy, which was followed up by this year's release of A Year in Champagne. Both films saw much more limited release and exposure than SOMM, but have received enthusiastic accolades within the wine community, as did the Red Obsession documentary in 2013 about China's impact on Bordeaux and the fine-wine market. [I wrote about these in 2013 in Wine on the wide screen - JR]

Hollywood isn't out of the picture either: an adaptation of Benjamin Wallace's The Billionaire's Vinegar, starring Matthew McConaughey, is in production, and screenwriter (and Sonoma County winery owner) Robert Kamen recently began shooting (even as he continues to court investors) a film about the Judgment of Paris.

A press release about the film indicated Kamen's plan to complete production in 2016 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Paris tasting, but did not make it clear whether the film was a documentary or a narrative feature.

Online video content about wine continues to proliferate, as does every other kind of online video content, but one pair of executives – a former president of MTV and a former executive of Treasury Wine Estates – have decided to create what they claim is the first TV network focused entirely on wine. WineVine.Tv began in Australia as an online destination for wine content, but is gradually expanding into broadcast channels, according to the company's Advisory Network Ambassador, Christine Havens.

'We're painting with a broad brush', says Havens. 'We hope to have a very wide audience. We've got coverage of VinExpo for the trade and we've got Wine 101 topics for those just getting into wine.'
Wine is now everywhere, on big screens and small. So is America finally ready for wine to step out of the shadows and play a major role in our media diets?

'SOMM getting made is a reflection of the increased interest in wine in the US, and not just in drinking it, but in learning about it', says wine writer and film buff W Blake Gray. 'Twenty years ago these audiences would have been too small to support the film.'

Kruth agrees. 'There's just a broader interest in wine in our culture. If you go back two generations a wine card was just rosé, Chablis, Bordeaux, and Blue Nun. Now it's a big part of dining out and it's part of an international global culture, and people have an interest in that.'

'There's also just this whole intrigue now with sommeliers', says Benjamin. 'I think people are sort of exhausted with chefs and cooking.'

There may be some truth to that supposition, as the Food Network's ratings have dipped as much as 16% in recent years, yet America seems more food-obsessed than ever.

Perhaps the general public are simply learning more, and as their knowledge grows, so too do their horizons.

The customers who stop in to the University Club and end up talking with Benjamin about wine have changed, he says. 'These guys asking about the movie are mostly the top 5%, the ones with disposable incomes, the lawyers, the doctors, the finance guys. They're really stepping up their games, some of them are even taking wine classes because they saw the movie.'

Havens, who also writes content for what she describes as the 'definitely more average wine consumers' in the wine app ViVino, has been surprised at the level of curiosity expressed by her readers. 'It fascinates me how interested these people are. They want to explore things they haven't heard of, and want to branch out from the tried and true.'

We have a way to go, however, before the level of interest in wine approaches the place that food occupies in our culture. 'Sommeliers aren't like today's chefs', says Kruth, 'we're like chefs were 10 or 15 years ago, just starting to become recognised personalities. I don't know how far we'll go.'

Kruth believes that it's only a matter of time before we see superstar sommeliers who are every bit as popular as some of today's TV chefs. 'Do I expect 20 shows on TV about wine?', he asks. 'Probably not. But there's some real potential, and there are a lot of beverages besides wine that people are interested in. Sommeliers will be the guides to those worlds. But the thing to remember is that most of those Food Network shows are personality-driven. A lot of people think they can be the next Anthony Bourdain. But there's only one Anthony Bourdain.'
I'm certainly ready for a foul-mouthed, fast-talking sommelier to guide me around the seediest parts of the wine world, and these days it seems like the rest of America might just be ready for that too.

*Stills from Uncorked courtesy of Esquire Network.*