



Written by
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The call of the wild



This is a longer version of an article also published in the Financial Times.

On 14 May this year Marks & Spencer, one of Britain's staidest multiple retailers, will be launching a Japanese white wine in its smartest stores and online. Sol Lucet 2012 will be £12.99 a bottle and is made from Japan's indigenous Koshu grape variety. Not since coming across a Tesco Finest Teroldego some years back have I encountered such a blatant reminder of British wine lovers' presumed obsession with novelty. This Japanese offering follows M&S's recent additions from India, Brazil, Georgia and Turkey to their range of wines.

But now this desire for ever more obscure ferments seems to have taken hold across the Atlantic. Experienced restaurant-going friends just back from southern California reported recently that they didn't recognise anything on the wine lists of the smartest establishments

there. Encouraged by the breadth of wines espoused by writers such as Eric Asimov of *The New York Times*, America's increasingly powerful sommeliers really do seem to be going further and further off piste when making their selections. Diners may search for classic bordeaux or full-blooded California Chardonnay in vain (on both sides of the Atlantic). They are more likely to be presented with offerings from the furthest byways of Europe or perhaps one from the latest convert to 'natural wine' operating out of an alpine cowshed. I exaggerate but you get the picture.

The American wine critic Robert M Parker Jr, granddaddy of US wine commentary, has presumably been watching this phenomenon from his base in the woods of Maryland for some time and last month finally lost patience with it, publishing a long and impassioned wail on his website which included the following:

'What we also have from this group of absolutists is a near-complete rejection of some of the finest grapes and the wines they produce. Instead they espouse, with enormous gusto and noise, grapes and wines that are virtually unknown. That's their number one criteria - not how good it is, but how obscure it is. Remember the "ABC" movement ? "Anything But Chardonnay"? That's dead, and rightfully so. Chardonnay produces some of the greatest dry white wines in the world and has done so everywhere from California to the East Coast of the United States to Western Europe. Same thing for Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah (although Pinot Noir, at least from France, seems to be the one exception to these crucifications). Of course, they would have you believe some godforsaken grapes that, in hundreds and hundreds of years of viticulture, wine consumption, etc., have never gotten traction because they are rarely of interest (such as Trousseau, Savagnin, Grand Noir, Negrette, Lignan Blanc, Peloursin, Auban, Calet, Fongoneu and Blaufränkisch) can produce wines (in truth, rarely palatable unless lost in a larger blend) that consumers should be beating a path to buy and drink.'

Personally I would put up a sturdy defence of the thrilling quality and distinction of some wines made from Trousseau and Savagnin of the Jura, Négrette of Fronton, Callet (sic) of Mallorca and, especially, the Blaufränkisch that is responsible for many of the finest reds currently made in what was the Austro-Hungarian empire. But I do know what he means about throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There is a reason why Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay are the world's first, second and fifth most planted grape varieties according to a thorough recent survey by Kym Anderson at the University of Adelaide. (Spain's most planted white and red, Airen and Tempranillo respectively, occupied third and fourth places, chiefly because in arid Spain vines have to be planted so far apart.) At their best, the holy French trinity of Cab, Merlot and Chard produce the world's finest wines.

The fact that 90% of all Chardonnay is deeply dull should not diminish our respect for Domaine de la Romanée-Conti's Montrachet. Nor should Blossom Hill Merlot make us think any the worse of Petrus, and, so as not to be too Francocentric, I would also wave an enormous red, white and green flag in favour of the likes of Sassicaia, Ornellaia and San Leonardo, which tower so definitively over Yellow Tail Cabernet Sauvignon despite being made from the same ubiquitous grape variety.

I certainly wouldn't agree with the dyspeptic tone of Parker's diatribe but there is a kernel of truth in his plea to celebrate the classics of the wine world. I still think some of the best red-wine value to be had now is in the lower reaches of red bordeaux. The most conscientious producers use methods remarkably similar to those of the first growths, yet are able to charge only a small fraction of their prices because of their lack of status. The B-word may be far from the most fashionable with wine consumers currently but value-conscious wine lovers ignore Bordeaux at

their peril.

Similarly, there is just so much Chardonnay in the ground that by the simple law of averages some of it is bound to be delicious. Australians in particular have completely re-engineered their Chardonnays so that a substantial proportion of them nowadays are excitingly tense, unmarked by oak, and can give some really fine white burgundy a run for its money - at generally lower prices despite the strength of the Australian dollar.

I could not be more enthusiastic about indigenous grape varieties and the need to retain maximum biodiversity in the vineyard, but I agree with Parker that viticultural rarity does not necessarily bestow wine quality. Aubun (which I think is probably what he meant by Auban) is a very minor and unexciting ingredient in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The fact that there are a few vines of this variety still extant in one vineyard in California does not necessarily mean that they make great wine. I would be far more excited by some old Zinfandel plantings but then Zin, California's most planted red wine grape after Cabernet and Merlot, does not have the magic attribute of obscurity. Fogoneu (not Fongoneu) is an extremely minor Mallorcan grape. I'd much rather drink a wine made from its probable parent Callet.

The question I am probably most often asked is 'Where/what is new in wine?' Thanks to climate change and improved tropical viticultural techniques, I have no shortage of answers to choose from, but arguably it's the wrong question.

OBSCURE BUT GOOD

Château Mukhrani, Rkatsiteli 2012 Georgia
£9.49 Marks & Spencer

Lyrarakis, Armi Thrapsathiri 2011/12 Crete
£16.95 Berry Bros
\$15.99 Gotham Wine & Liquor, NY

Dveri Pax, Sipon/Furmint 2011 Slovenia
£9.80 Savage Selection of Northleach
£9.95 The Wine Society

André et Mireille Tissot, Singulier Trousseau 2011 Jura
£25 Berry Bros
\$25.14 Sec Wines, OR

Moric, Neckenmarkt Blaufrankisch 2009 Austria
£62 Huntsworth Wine, London W8
\$135 Winemonger, CA

OLD HAT BUT GREAT VALUE

I gave both these wines a massive(!) 17 points out of 20.

Ocean Eight, Verve Chardonnay 2011 Australia
£25 Huntsworth Wine, London W8
No known stockist in Australophobe US

Ch Sérilhan 2009 Bordeaux

£23.50 Cambridge Wine Merchants

\$19.97 PJ Wine, NY

I realise that a wine at £23.50 a bottle is not exactly bargain basement but see the bottom of my list of 2010 bordeaux bargains in [Classic 2010 bordeaux reviewed from last week](#) and also [this recent wine of the week](#).

Photo from Tambako the Jaguar on Flickr