

High on alcohol

I DON'T KNOW about you, but I am having problems drinking as much wine as I used to! I suppose, yes, I am getting on a bit but I rather think that the problem does not stem from my age or my high gamma count, but rather from the fact that wines in general are being vinified, or rather grapes are being picked, at a much higher alcohol potential than they were say 30 years ago.

For example, whilst the average alcohol in a top end Bordeaux during the Eighties would have been around 12.5 per cent since 2000, the average has gone up to 13.5 per cent touching 14 per cent. Whilst you might be thinking that does not seem like a lot, it represents a whopping 12 per cent increase. Even bigger if you go back to the Fifties and Sixties, when it was common for the same wines to be bottled at 11.5 per cent of alcohol.

Of course, global warming has a little bit to do with it, but more importantly, the levels of alcohol have gone up, in some cases dramatically, because of the way the so called modernists are tending vines and vinifying wines. But why, did this happen? In my opinion there are two main factors: the success of new world wines and the phenomenal importance and influence of wine critics, particularly in the USA.

The popularity of wines from California, Australia and more recently Chile and Argentina, with their ripe, soft tannin, spicy and oaky, low acid and alcohol levels of 14 per cent or more, persuaded many traditionally non wine drinkers that this is how wine should be. Full, rich in flavour, sometimes slightly sweet, ready to drink wines that get you drunk quickly. Aided by huge market research and innovative and effective marketing campaigns these 'Prêt à Porter' wines kindled the fashion for wine drinking in bars, parties and social gatherings all over the world, including the important wine markets of the UK and the USA.

European producers, especially in the medium quality range, whose wines, with their high acid, high tannin and medium alcohol, have traditionally been produced to drink after some bottle age and more importantly with food, lost a lot of market share. In response, many wineries adopted a "new world" attitude and within a few years, many European wines turned darker, richer, fuller, more alcoholic and more concentrated.

But the real push for these types of wines came after winemakers realised that Robert Parker, who had established himself as the most influential wine critic in the USA after his approval of Bordeaux's 1982 vintage, love these types of wines. This was also the time when *Wine Spectator* gained a lot of influence and the magazine's European correspondent, James Suckling, became nearly as influential as Parker with American wine buyers. The new modern era of European wines had begun and just like Emile Peynaud, fathered the previous vinicultural revolution. The new one was squarely in the hands of a young consultant winemaker from Bordeaux called Michel Rolland. This was a period of new vineyard and winery techniques. Green harvesting in June, late harvesting, tank bleeding, micro-oxygenation etc.

Taking Rolland's advice inevitably meant concentrated, high alcohol wines, which in turn, more or less guaranteed high scores from the critics, meaning financial success. The formula was set and within a few years, Rolland became the key to fame. Demand for his services grew and today he consults more than 180 wineries all over the world, most of which are highly rated by Parker, Suckling and a host of other wine critics who followed their footsteps and tastes.

Wineries all over the world, including Italy and Spain, changed tactics and adopted the concentrated

WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone

wine policy. Approval from the critics not only meant good demand, especially in the USA, but also higher price per bottle. Parker became a phenomena and no wine conversation since has been complete without mention of the great man! A recent book even crowns him: *The Emperor of Wine*.

Having so much influence on the wine sales brings a large amount of responsibility and at the same time pressure to taste as many wines as possible. The workload is huge, sometimes packing in 80 or more tastings a day. This must be mentally and physically exhausting, but more to the point, quite biased and unfair on wines which are meant to be drunk/tasted with food. Another worrying and in my opinion damaging factor is that the process of tasting so many wines in one go, naturally leads to favouring wines with a high concentration, simply because they are the ones with the most identifiable, strongest flavours. They are the wines that are shouting the most.

It's a bit like walking in a room full of people. Your ears and eyes will automatically focus on the person making the loudest noises. Why? Because that noise is standing out amongst the mumble, which could well be made up of loads of interesting conversation. But, at a glance, your attention would go to the loud *hamallu* in the room, not noticing the fact that you might be risking a serious headache should you absorb too much noise. You know... Nice in small doses. The French have come up with two terms to describe all this. *Vin de Boire* (wine to drink) and *Vin de Goûter* (wine to taste). They have also coined the phrase *vin de plaisir* (wine of pleasure) which I suppose can be interpreted according to whether you like to taste or to drink wine. I know which interpretation I choose!

I can recount a number of occasions where I was invited to dinner and simply could not finish my food or my wine, which is very abnormal. Not long ago at an Alsace dinner accompanied by Zind Humbrecht wines there were Gewurstraminers at 15 per cent and more of alcohol. I simply was knocked off my knees and to be perfectly honest, as time went on I disliked the wines immensely. More recently at a dinner accompanied by Argentinean wines all at 14.5 per cent the same thing happened. You take the first sip and think, "Yep, a tasty wine" but rather tiring and therefore undrinkable.

Let me be frank. It is not concentration that I am critical of but rather over concentration and over extraction. Concentration in itself, as long as the wines remain in balance and retain their individuality and typicity is a good thing. It gives structure and longevity to wines. Indeed, all the great years, like 1945, 47, 61, 82 etc were vintages with a good deal of concentration but to achieve this concentration and keep the alcohol and balance in check is not an easy task. Hubert de Bouard, whose Chateau Angelus typifies the modern, concentrated Bordeaux, believes that there is nothing wrong with concentration as long as the wine is in balance, but to retain that balance one must have exceptional *terroir* and exceptional winemaking skills. A view, which is held by many young winemakers.

I suppose that in reality these

modern winemakers are only adapting to the global trend for sweeter, stronger, spicier flavours. This is why Syrah/Shiraz based wines with their spicy, rich flavours are booming. This is why the western style of Oriental food is so popular. No doubt as long as children are brought up drinking Coke with their meals and daddy's barbecued meat is saturated in marinade that removes every trace of natural meat flavour, the trend will continue. Winemakers will have to oblige and continue to adapt to new realities. The shame is that in the process we might lose individuality, and typicity. God forbid, globalisation of wine!

Look at it this way. Although I do not like high alcohol wines I do not criticise Amarone producers for their 15 per cent alcohol, or Sicilian Nero D'Avolas at 14.5 per cent. Neither do I knock Spanish producers who vinify their Tempranillos at high alcohol because this is what gives them their typicity, part of their culture. The same goes for one of my favourite aperitifs, dry Sherry. But, if James Suckling decides one fine day that Amarone should be at 12.5 per cent alcohol, I am sure most Amarone lovers and producers would say, "Please Mr Suckling lay off our Amarone!"



Here, I suppose lies the crunch of the argument. I for one don't begrudge the huge success of the wine critics. After all they are successful because wine buyers (sometimes consumers) have made them successful. But I am critical of the fact that too many people allow themselves to be lead by scores and stars. Like sheep following the Shepard, which is a real shame as I believe that individuality and the fact that different people have different opinions, provide a richer wine world, far more exciting and fulfilling, physically and intellectually.

Thankfully, there are still wine makers and drinkers who follow their nose, mouths and hearts rather than someone else's. In fact I am encouraged by the amount of free thinking wine makers and consumers that I meet, practically daily, in Malta and abroad. I am encouraged

when I read that influential Italian wine makers are reversing the trend for dark, concentrated wines and reverting back to red wines.

I am happy to meet people like Francois de Ligneris from Bordeaux, Mr Guibert from Languedoc and so many other French wine growers who are fighting back with real, character full wines, jam-packed with identity. People like Madame Dany Bertin Denis who from her small restaurant in Rue de Beauce in Paris, showcases wines and food with real regional-ity. Unfortunately we don't get to hear much about these because fortunately (being very selfish) they are not in the limelight, but rest assured they are here and they are here to stay. Maybe one day you will hear more about them.

Finally I would like to finish my contribution by recounting an interesting communication I recently received from Chateau Figeac's Thierry Manoncourt, where he recounts one of many incidents between him and Robert Parker. Mr Manoncourt told Parker, and I quote: "No dear Bob, I don't make wine for you. I am not an ink producer. You like wines of 13.5 per cent or more but I have tasted many excellent Lafittes at 11 or 11.5 per cent alcohol after which I was able to go back to work! You say you like to taste the tannin of new oak barrels, but Figeac has been made in 100 per cent new barrels since 1970, only I try to find ways of how these tannins don't show in my wines. Yes, dear Bob. My wines are for drinking, not for tasting."

And with a glass of Figeac 96 in my hand I wish you happy drinking.

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Al Fresco goes local

DEMAND from InterContinental Malta residents has led to the introduction of a selection of typical Maltese dishes at its Al Fresco restaurant for the summer season.

Members of the media were invited by general manager Christophe Laure to sample the menu on July 20 and to meet the chefs who put it together, led by head chef Max Grenard.

For starters there was a Maltese antipasto and *Terina tat-Tonn*, including octopus in garlic, Maltese sausage, *bigilla*, butter beans, sun-dried tomatoes, pickled onions, stuffed onions and tuna, and bell peppers terrine with a garlic cream sauce.

You just want to have lots of Maltese bread with this dish and take bits and pieces from all over the plate – almost a meal in itself.

Then came a mixed plate with *Soppa ta' l-Armla* and spaghetti with *rizzi* (sea urchins).

Soup is not the sort of thing you feel like in summer, but it went down well with all the summer vegetables available and the goats' cheese.

The spaghetti sauce also includes garlic and olive oil, and is cooked with fresh chillies.

Two different dishes were served as a main course: *Paġell u spnott moqli* and *Stuffat tal-fenek*. The fish – pan fried red snapper and sea bass was served on crushed potatoes, infused with basil and mint, accompanied with an anisette velouté – was what I was served. It tasted fresh and moist – quite the sort of thing I would look out for in summer. The *fenek* – braised leg and stuffed saddle of rabbit – I was told was also delicious, served with pea purée, ratatouille, sun-dried tomatoes and red wine sauce.

For dessert there was *qubbajt* – nougat parfait with blood orange sauce – or *Torta tac-cikkulata u*



tin – chocolate mousse with fig tart, accompanied with Turkish delight ice-cream. I tried a bit of both (and had to forget about the calories).

So, apart from the standard *à la carte* menu of seafood and Mediterranean cuisine, InterContinental Malta have added that local culinary touch, which should be appealing not just to hotel residents but the 'non-residents' too.

Al Fresco is open from Tuesdays to Saturdays from 9 p.m. Reservations are recommended on 2137-7600.

M.J. Naudi

