

# Questions of taste

**QUESTIONS of Taste** – *The Philosophy of Wine* is the title of a very interesting new book edited by the philosopher Barry C. Smith. The work is a collection of essays by some eminent and contemporary philosophers as well as Paul Draper and Steve Chatters, who delve in and around the topic “Is wine truly subjective or objective?”

Of course the book does not conclude on the matter but rather opens a number of hugely interesting debates such as: Is the art of appreciating fine wine elitist? or Can an industrial wine ever be a fine wine? It even discusses how can experienced, highly reputable, independent wine critics differ on evaluating the quality of a wine, when tasting the same wines.

The connection between philosophy and wine is nothing new. The Greeks used wine to encourage debate in their symposium, and I am sure that reading this book will enliven and add substance to many local wine discussions.

Jancis Robinson, who wrote the foreword, suggests that “the book could represent the most fun one can have with wine without drinking a single drop!” Without wanting to popularise the idea, I agree with her and encourage you to read it.

## A matter of taste

I recently listened to Professor Joe Friggeri in essence saying that in its basic form, art should be able to stand on its own and that appreciating art is not the prerogative of the art experts, although the more knowledge one has, the more developed and intense the appreciation would be.

Wine is just the same. Wine should stand on its own and give pleasure to receptive people irrespective of whether they know what malolactic fermentation is or what wine reduction means. You don't have to be a famous conductor to appreciate classical music or indeed any kind of music! Yes, as in most things in life a certain amount of knowledge will help you understand and appreciate wine more and the more aware you are the more discerning you will become, which is great from a hedonistic point of view as you will be able to detect small, minute, even hidden components that will enhance your pleasure. But more importantly, and in a way more fundamental, you will be able to distinguish between flavours and compositions, textures and tastes that will form the basis for opinion. That is to say your tastes, your preferences.

Providing that the technicalities of good wine are met, everyone has the right to an opinion, which by its very own nature is a subjective matter but, does that right extend to the judgment of whether a wine is good or bad? Surely that is the prerogative of the expert. The experienced. But even here there is no clear-cut objectivity about the subject as the variables are huge and personal preferences still play a role. What food, mood, glass, temperature, conversation, place, cultural background, are just some of the aspects that could alter an expert's opinion.

The book highlights this theory by describing the now famous incident regarding Chateau Pavie 2003. When two of the most influential and experienced wine critics in the world tasted the same flavours and had the same experiences but gave very different quality values to the wine, one saying it is a fantastic wine while the other said it is a ridiculous wine.

Here is the same idea, on different subjects. The façade of my neighbour's house is flaking away. They are fed up sweeping the dust from in front of their house. They buy some bathroom tiles and cover their façade with them. The neighbours are happy because their façade does not flake anymore. Some other neighbours follow suit and all are happy. Their walls are not flaking. But do they think their façades, which now look like bath-

room walls, look nice? I have no doubt that they do. But do they really look nice? Of course not, but to them cleanliness had priority over aesthetics.

So, should someone decide what looks nice and what does not? Who should decide what is good and what is bad? How about the experts? While this is the only logical answer, we must also keep in mind that experts also have personal opinions which differ from other experts' views. In the 1850s a certain French art critic and expert called Mr Leroy dismissed *Impressionist Sunrise* and proclaimed that artists like Monet will never amount to much. “Whom are they trying to impress?” he said! For many years Impressionist paintings were refused entry into the mainstream art exhibitions.

The Impressionist movement eventually went on to become France's main contribution to world art.

Which brings us back to basics. It's all a matter of taste.

## Wine – live in concert

Have you ever wondered why the same wine can taste different in different scenarios? From the early days of my work with wine this topic has always intrigued me. Like many of you I used to buy wines that I loved on holiday only to find that they are, let's say, quite average when I drank them at home. And why do wines that we love drinking at home appear to taste even better when we visit the vineyard where the wine comes from?

Allowing for the fact that the wines here have travelled, which may have altered the taste slightly, to me this explains and confirms some of the many magical aspects of wine. Good wine is a reflection of the land and people that grew it. Combine this with good food and company. Joyful memories and happy conversation and you have a celebration of life. That is the poetry of wine. That is the passion. That is wine at its very best – life in concert.

I suppose I am very fortunate to be able to experience occasions like this quite often. One that comes to mind was a visit to Tuscany in the Chianti region and a wine by Fonterutoli drunk with a group of great friends, a lunch of pasta with porcini followed by steak *alla fiorentina* cooked on olive wood in Fonterutoli's trattoria just before visiting the vineyards. This was a great, happy occasion. The wine had achieved its purpose – to make people happy.

We arrived home that evening very content and high, playing Zuccherò on the rented car's CD player which we continued playing and dancing to, well into the early hours.

This reminds me... Why do we go to live concerts? Surely music is there to be listened to. Surely Joseph Calleja sounds better on CD. Surely Zuccherò's guitar riffs are clearer on CD. Yes maybe, but those who watched Zuccherò live a few weeks ago know that at the Valletta Waterfront, magic was in the making. This was not listening. This was Zuccherò and all the audience participating in a celebration of life. This was experiencing. This was belonging. This was fulfilment.

So can this level of joy be achieved with all wines, all artists. No. A bad wine is a bad wine. Bad music is bad music and no magic, company or celebration will make it taste or sound good. It takes great wine and great music to do that. Can you imagine if you combine the two?! It has been done you know. Not long ago and not so far either.

## Tasting notes

If there is one aspect of wine which should fall under the objective, surely it must be the art of writing a tasting note. That is to say, unless the ability of the writer is weak, tasters should agree on the content of the various components which make up a particu-



lar wine: colour intensity, fruit character, levels of tannin, depth, length, etc.

But how useful are these notes when one thinks that they are written for the benefit of the wine consumers or readers who may not have the same taste vocabulary as the writer? Let me give an example. Look up the tasting note of a Sancerre at the next opportunity and no doubt you will find descriptions such as “gooseberries”, “cut grass”, “herbaceous”, “citrusy”, etc.

So I ask: how many people have actually tasted a gooseberry? Or how many, at least in Malta, know the smell of cut grass? And even so, if I take some gooseberries, squeeze some lemon juice, add some herbs and go and smell them on the Gzira roundabout after the grass has just been mowed, will the smell remind me of a Sancerre? I doubt it.

My friend Johnny Hugel is very critical of the overly fruity, enthusiastic tasting note. In his larger than life fashion he recounts that he has never smelled a Nuits St Georges in his wife's fruit salad even though the fruit composition was generally made up with the same fruit that some writer detected in Faiveley's 2003.

Do we really like a certain wine because of its similarity to a fruit of sorts or a particular flavour? I doubt that in reality people like certain young Merlot-based wines because they are faintly reminiscent of plums. I don't think I would be exaggerating if I said that indeed, for any liquid to

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by Michael Tabone

taste of plums it would have to be plum juice. And knowing that wine is a beverage in an ever changing state, how can for example a physical tasting note on the back label of an average quality wine from the 2000 vintage still apply in 2007?

So how best can we communicate the language of wine? Experienced tasters often use the simplest forms of human expression to express their opinions, especially regarding great wine – a sigh or a twitch of the face, a hand movement, a look that says it all. But of course wine writers have to communicate through the media.

That is their job. So words or images have to be found to express their experiences as faithfully as possible. Different wine writers use different techniques which attract different types of wine lovers. Some even delve into the rather mind-numbing system of numbered scores or stars which absolutely mean nothing unless put in some sort of context but to which many speculative wine consumers pay unquestionable allegiance to.

However, I rather think that the kind of tasting note or general writing a wine writer publishes reflects his or her own personality which is equally reflected by the wine lover. It is their connection with wine in general, with a specific wine and possibly more important, the correlation between the writer and the reader that will facilitate successful communication.

Let me illustrate two very different texts both describing the same wine I tasted recently: “Tawny fading at the rim, with an intense core. The nose is earthy with tobacco and mineral hints. Subtle at the beginning but intensifying with time in the glass. Nose keeps changing and evolving introducing preserved red fruits which live up as the oxygen makes the wine more volatile.

On the mouth the wine begins dry and austere but opens up with a

smooth texture. Same flavours as on the nose but with gamey and smoky undertones. Tannins are ripe and non-obtrusive which are in harmony with the alcohol and acidity. Mouth-filling, with a very long and persistent finish.”

Although that is a well-defined and well-constructed, objective tasting note, it describes the physical aspects of the wine and does not say much about its identity and does nothing to interpret or express my own sub-conscious connection with it. My judgment! OK. Maybe an experienced taster/drinker would realise that I am talking about a rather old wine because of the colour and the earthy flavours. Maybe one can conclude that it is a complex wine because of all the different components, but without interpretation the reader cannot know if I like, love or am crazy about this wine.

So, here is a shorter, but in my opinion equally informative tasting note about the same wine. “Chateau Ausone 1982 – Saint-Emilion 1er Grand Cru Classe A. Holding its 25 years beautifully this is an intellectual wine, a wine to meditate on, a wine with a huge identity card. Very complex. Fine. Deep-reaching and soul-comforting. Magical.”

One final thought. If you were a travel writer or an architect, how would you express in words the beauty of the Taj Mahal or the Grand Harbour? What words could possibly do justice to the sheer grandeur of these two sites? Maybe some wines are simply so great that words cannot describe them!

If you are a wine lover and find all of this very confusing just ignore the whole thing and continue to enjoy wine in any way you deem best. That is what wine is all about. But if you are intrigued by these arguments, *Questions of Taste – The Philosophy of Wine* explores these ideas into much more detail.

Happy drinking.  
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