

Food and Drink

Beware the wine 'experts'



Michael Tabone

is a reflection of society in general as to who is perceived as an expert or not. It is a bit like people getting the government they deserve.

In 21st century Malta with all our TV stations, magazines and general obsession with marketing, we are artificially creating an army of perceived experts based on the fact that they, or their employers, buy advertising space from the media.

I am often perturbed as indeed are many wine/food enthusiasts when we see 'experts' swirling

ments border on the offensive. One of these sends me a personal, unsolicited, very long and self indulgent e-mail basically telling me that I do not know how to eat and live. Even more astounding is the claim that his Cassatella is better than anything the Sicilians have ever come up with.

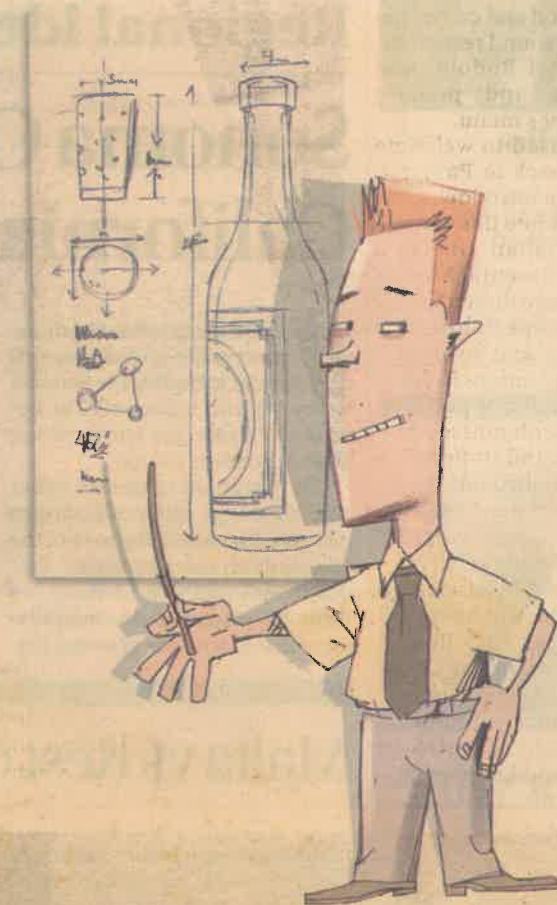
Of course, it is a free country and within the moral and legal boundaries for anyone to say what he wants. We consumers are also free to decide who influences us or not but media bosses, professionals and people in authority cannot afford such luxuries.

They carry a huge responsibility to balance the need for advertising with a real quest for quality and especially authenticity. Decision-makers must also understand the full cultural, socio/political and economic consequences of their decisions.

Who can excuse the wasted years of the late 1980s and early 1990s when wine consumers were led to believe that they were drinking quality Maltese wines, but in reality they had a debatable standard of quality and were definitely not Maltese?

It was a time we should have spent researching and investing in our own vineyards. I wonder who we will blame when the character of our much loved Maltese bread disappears completely? What about chicken and flat tomatoes? Do you remember what those tasted like? I think to myself which expert was behind the death of the Valletta food market?

On the international front, French and Italian wine growers with hundreds of years experience behind them, encouraged by successive national governments and misled by the agro/chemical industry, sprayed enormous amounts of chemical



No one knows who was the first person to acquire the title of 'wine expert'. It was probably the first person who realised wine makes you happy, followed by another who proclaimed that if you make yourself too happy you will get a headache.

Although by no means based solely on wine criteria, history shows that a number of people made a name for themselves for their knowledge and understanding of wine and food.

Some have even contributed, locally or internationally, to the ever-evolving world of gastronomy. Plato, Aristotle, Petrus, Dom Perignon, Thomas Jefferson, Brillat Savarin, Hugh Johnson, Robert Parker Jr. are just a few. Different generations termed them wine and food experts - people to be respected and listened to; people who hold the key to one of life's biggest pleasures.

The exact definition of a wine or food expert is not easy to formulate. There are no exams or interviews to determine whether you are an expert or not. Even more, over the years I have never met a real expert who presents himself as such. Quite possibly because the real expert knows that he is no expert - simply because he knows that he doesn't know enough.

It is society itself that awards and recognises individuals as experts. It

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glasses who have tasted blueberries and toasted pecan nuts in Petrus 1991 - when no such wine exists! Likewise, it's upsetting to hear wine educators quoting Max Schubert from 2004 - a full 10 years after his death.

Even more, I am astonished by the audacity of a few, recently self-proclaimed champions of good food and wine whose state-

fertilisers, herbicides and insecticides on their vineyards in the late 1960s and 1970s, only to realise in the 1980s that their actions practically destroyed their vineyards' soils.

So, what's the message? Wine and food enthusiasts should be aware of the marketers among the small number of people with a genuine interest at heart who present themselves as educators, journalists, lecturers, and so on. It is you who should decide whether they are experts or not. Decision-makers carry the biggest burden as their actions will have longer lasting consequences.

Plato once said that non experts are not tolerated by the Athenian people if they try to advise on any subject permitting expertise.

On the other hand, experts on wine were required to advise the nation on all policy relating to wine. Their advice would have taken full account of the goals of society at large, but any teetotaler who stood up before the assembly of ancient Athens seeking to advise the people on matters concerning wine would expect to be hissed and booed until he stood down.

Now there is a thought!

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