

*A
Hedonist
in the Cellar*

ADVENTURES IN WINE

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INTRODUCTION

My careers as a novelist and as a wine writer could both plausibly be said to have their humble beginnings in the Westcott Cordial Shop in Syracuse, New York. While studying with Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff in the Graduate Writing Program at Syracuse University, I was working behind the counter of this boozeteria, located in a marginal neighborhood a mile or two from the university campus, when I heard that my first novel had been accepted for publication by Random House. And it was there, in between working on the revisions of the novel and riding out the occasional stickup at gunpoint, that I read through the proprietor's dusty collection of wine books. A significant portion of our business was in the sale of that spirit-fortified grape juice which sustained hardcore, low-budget alcoholics: Night Train, Wild Irish Rose, MD 20/20. But we also sold some real wine—that is, grape juice that had actually undergone fermentation—and it was a tradition among the clerks to take home a bottle each night. I started with, as I recall, a two-dollar bottle of Yugoslavian Cab and worked all the way up to Freixenet, a Spanish sparkler that sold for \$5.95 at the time. The owner also kept a small stock of Bordeaux and Burgundy on a shelf near the cash register, dusty bottles that had never moved during my tenure in the store. The day I heard my novel was to be published I bought one of them, a 1978 Smith-Haut-Lafitte, and while, objectively speaking, it was far from the best Bordeaux I've ever had, I don't for a minute believe that wine appreciation is a strictly objective enterprise: I've gotten far less pleasure out of more expensive and highly regarded bottles of Bordeaux in the years since.

Bad as some of the wine I was lifting from the store shelves was, it was probably an improvement, in an aesthetic and toxicological sense, from the harder stuff to which I subscribed in my early years in Manhattan. Oenophilia was a way of channeling the hedonistic impulse, of refining and intellectualizing it to some extent. Wine is an intoxicant, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise, although you might never know it on the basis of most of what's written in the wine

journals. And let's face it: if it weren't, we wouldn't be drawn to it. But it can provide intellectual as well as sensual pleasure; it's an inexhaustible subject, a nexus of subjects, which leads us, if we choose to follow, into the realms of geology, botany, meteorology, history, aesthetics, and literature. Ideally, the appreciation of wine is balanced between consumption and pleasure on the one hand and contemplation and analysis on the other.

My interest in the grape has led me to some of the more beautiful parts of the world—Alsace, Tuscany, Provence, the Cape of Good Hope, the Willamette Valley, to name a few— and brought me into contact with some of the most stimulating and congenial eccentrics of our time. Wine people are as a rule gregarious, generous, and passionate. The cult of Bacchus doesn't include many anal-retentive personalities. I learned a lot about viticulture from Angelo Gaja over dinner at a trattoria in Barbaresco, but what I remember most vividly was the story of how he smashed his television set with a sledgehammer after he decided his kids were watching it too much. And I'll never forget Joan Dillon at Château Haut-Brion talking about hijinks on President Kennedy's yacht, or Allen Ginsberg disrobing in the offices of the Paris Review. Our love of wine is the fraternal bond that brings us together, and it is the lubricant that stimulates our conversation, but it's a polygamous relationship that encourages and enhances our other passions. It leads us to other subjects and leads us back to the world. It lifts us up and delivers us from the mundane circumstances of daily life, inspires contemplation, and, ultimately, returns us to that very world, refreshed, with enriched understanding and appreciation.

Fermented grape juice is a far more potent catalyst for contemplation and meditation than a highball, or an eight ball. It is a sacramental beverage, a sacred and symbolic liquid. "Do this in memory of me," Jesus said as he lifted a chalice of wine, and indeed wine can serve as a mnemonic device, a catalyst of memory. But that shouldn't prevent us from enjoying it unself-consciously. Wine is as serious or as frivolous as we wish to make it. Like sex, it has far too often been shrouded in mystery, hemmed in by taboo, obfuscated by technical blather, and assailed by puritans. though its enjoyment is, or should be, simple.

accessible, and entertaining. Michel Chapoutier, one of the world's most serious and successful winemakers, once ordered me to stop thinking so hard about a glass of wine I was nosing. "If you think too much you kill it," he said. We were sitting on the terrace of his sprawling house at the crest of a ridge high above the Rhône River, just south of the town of Tain l'Hermitage, digesting a spectacular lunch with the aid of his '99 Hermitage vin de paille. "The brain is a pleasure killer," he said, before concluding with the sort of politically incorrect analogy French winemakers seem to adore: "You don't need to be a gynecologist to make love." In Europe, where wine has been a part of daily life for thousands of years, American oenophiles are sometimes viewed as monomaniacs—zealous and somewhat narrow-minded converts to a generous and pantheistic faith. American wine lovers need to broaden their vision and relax: to see wine as just another aspect of the well-lived life.

Some ten years after my stint at the Westcott Cordial Shop— ten years ago, in fact—my friend Dominique Browning, who had just been named editor in chief of *House & Garden*, asked me if I would consider writing a wine column for the magazine. I demurred, believing that I wasn't nearly knowledgeable enough to set myself up as an authority on wine. It was true that I spent far too much time reading wine books, wine catalogs, and weather reports from Bordeaux; I sometimes bored my dinner guests with rapturous encomiums to whatever I was serving them; and on the average night I drank more wine than my doctor would have recommended. I'd been known to jump on a plane to London if my friend Julian Barnes, who has a world-class cellar and isn't afraid to uncork his treasures, invited me to dinner. But I'd never taken a class, or attended a wine tasting, or spit into a bucket, and for the life of me I had no idea what was meant by the phrases "malolactic fermentation" or "volatile acidity." And I had very little knowledge of flowers or floral scents, which seemed a prerequisite for a certain kind of wine writing. Besides, I already had a job.

Around the time Dominique brought up the wine-column idea I was asked to write a profile of Julia Roberts, a request I initially turned down out of ... well, I don't know what the hell it was—a sense of

highbrow self-importance, I guess. "I don't do celebrity profiles," I sniffed to the editor. "Are you insane?" my agent said to me later, when I told her the story. "Somebody wants to pay you good money to hang out with Julia Roberts and you said no?" In that light, I suddenly decided that my scruples were foolish. And on second thought, the wine column seemed like a similar opportunity. A good friend was offering to pay me to indulge one of my obsessions, and to travel to stunning places to taste wine and meet kindred spirits. It seemed like a no-brainer. Still, I was a little nervous about my scanty qualifications. So I decided to write as a passionate amateur and to employ a metaphoric language; I was more comfortable comparing wines to actresses, rock bands, pop songs, painters, or automobiles than I was with literal parsing of scents and tastes à la "bouquet of American Beauty roses." If I'd had a role model here it would have been Auberon Waugh, the son of novelist Evelyn Waugh, whom I first met at a lunch for the satirical magazine *Private Eye*. As I recall, Waugh had just published a pretty fierce parody of my latest book, but I couldn't help being charmed by him and grateful that in person he was as benign and charming as he was savage in print.

As it happens, he was friends with my oenophiliac mentor Julian Barnes, and I subsequently shared a number of bottles with him over dinners at Julian's house. As a guest he was always vague and complimentary about the wine. Not so in print. Again, I couldn't help liking him, if only because he wrote some of the sharpest and funniest wine criticism of all time, collected in a slim volume called *Waugh on Wine*.

In his essay "Perils of Being a Wine Writer," he declares, "Wine writing should be camped-up. The writer should never like a wine, he should be in love with it; never find a wine disappointing but identify it as a mortal enemy, an attempt to poison him; sulphuric acid should be discovered where there is the faintest hint of sharpness. Bizarre and improbable side-tastes should be proclaimed: mushrooms, rotting wood, black treacle, burned pencils, condensed milk, sewage, the smell of French railway stations or ladies underwear." As a wine writer I consider Waugh a forebear of sorts. although I have to admit that I am

more of a lover than a killer. While I have encountered many despicable wines in the course of pursuing my duties as a wine columnist, I've written more often about those that make me drool, that make me weak in the knees, that make the hair on the back of my arms stand at attention. That make me want to howl at the moon and kiss my girlfriend repeatedly.

The title under which I hoped to write my column, "An Idiot in the Cellar," reflected my ambition to be honest about my own ignorance relative to the acumen of professional critics like Robert Parker and Jancis Robinson. Dominique quashed the title, and I suppose that now, ten years later, it would be disingenuous to pretend I haven't learned what malolactic fermentation is, or that I can't usually distinguish a Burgundy from a Bordeaux.

Anyone who drinks and tastes as often as I do is bound to have the equivalent of a fish story, a tale of a blind-tasting triumph, and mine dates back to a moment some four years ago. Watching me that night at New York's La Grenouille restaurant, a stuffy temple of the old-style haute cuisine, you might have believed I was truly an expert. I had arrived late for a dinner party thrown by a deep-pocketed friend. The other guests were already seated and had red wine in their glasses. A carafe sat on the table. "Here's Jay," my friend announced. "He knows wine. He'll guess what we're drinking." Somehow this announcement coincided with a lull in the conversational din throughout the room; it seemed to me that all eyes from the surrounding tables, in addition to those of my dinner companions, were turned on me. The sommelier, who happened to be standing nearby, handed me a glass and poured from the carafe, then stood back and smirked, while the entire restaurant, or so it seemed to me at the time, looked up at me expectantly. Unable to think of any graceful escape, I stuck my nose in the glass. "Haut-Brion," I declared, eliciting a chorus of gasps. I examined the color and took a sip. "Nineteen eighty-two," I added. From the expressions of surprise and wonder I could see that I'd scored. I sat down to bask in the general admiration, and felt that perhaps all my years of drinking and tasting and spitting and reading had not been

entirely wasted. Of course, there was a story behind this story, a bit of a trick involved, as there often is, and you'll find it in the following pages in my essay on Haut-Brion.

A far more typical story, which demonstrates the precariousness of my claim to expertise, was a recent dinner that involved Haut-Brion's sister property, La Mission-Haut-Brion. I was visiting my friend Julian once again at his home in North London. My dinner partner, Jancis Robinson, the excessively modest and exceedingly attractive wine authority, had just correctly guessed that the wine we were drinking was a Bordeaux from the Graves district. "Well, it can't be La Mission," I said confidently—La Mission-Haut-Brion being among my favorite wines. "Well, it is," Julian happily informed me. So much for impressing my new girlfriend, who had never seen me in full wine wonk mode before.

As much sadomasochistic fun as I find it to be, comparing and contrasting old Bordeaux vintages is less and less a part of the job description for the postmodern wine writer, and I think my own interests and tastes reflect certain trends. I still have a lot of Bordeaux in my cellar, right up to vintage 2003, and come August I start to follow weather reports from that part of the world. Bordeaux was my first love, and it remains a kind of touchstone. But increasingly I am drawn to its rival Burgundy, the Turgenev to Bordeaux's Tolstoy, and when I'm looking for sheer power and exuberance and less finesse, to the Dostoyevskian southern Rhône. If my first collection of columns devoted inordinate space to the cult Cabernets of the Napa Valley (think Hemingway), whose emergence more or less coincided with my own career as a wine writer, it seems to me that Sonoma and Santa Barbara County Pinots (Fitzgerald) are the new cultish reds. These wines are inspired in part by the great red wines of France's Burgundy region, and the renaissance there, driven in part by a younger generation inheriting the old domains, is another heartening development. Pinot has become a household word since its starring role in Alexander Payne's *Sideways*. Syrah, meanwhile, keeps threatening to become a Californian star, but so far its career has been a little like that of the actor Orlando Bloom, more promising than happening. Or even—Svrah being a high-

testosterone grape—more like that of Colin Farrell, a putative star who has yet to produce a major hit.

France and the Napa Valley are increasingly sharing the wine lists of major restaurants and the hearts of wine lovers with other regions. Stellenbosch, Solvang, Mendoza, Priorat, and Alba are among my recent destinations. When I started the column Argentina was a joke and Spain was still emerging from the shadows of the Franco era; now Argentinian Malbec, grown in the high foothills of the Andes, is a hot commodity and Spain has probably overtaken Italy as a fashionable food-and-wine destination among grape nuts and foodies. Fruit-bombastic Barossa Valley Shiraz and grapefruity New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough have become two of the world's great wine types, even as other regions in both countries produce increasingly noteworthy juice. And South Africa, a country that has been under vine since the seventeenth century, seems to be well on its way to becoming the new Australia. My friend Anthony Hamilton Russell is making incredible Burgundian Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays at the southernmost tip of Africa, in vineyards from which he regularly excavates half-million-year-old hand axes and other artifacts of our earliest ancestors.

In all of these places, advances in viticulture have inevitably been accompanied by the evolution of gastronomy. And in fact my own wine education has brought me gradually into a greater appreciation of food, as has my association with Lora Zarubin, the food editor of *House & Garden*, who almost inevitably accompanies me on these trips. Lora was, for all too brief a period, the owner and chef of Lora's, one of my favorite New York restaurants of the eighties. At the time downtown restaurants were divided into those places where you went to see and be seen and those you went to for the food. Lora's had a surfeit of celebrity patrons, but the food was the real draw; it was a homey place with a refreshingly simple menu at a time when chefs were competing to see how many diverse and incompatible ingredients they could cram into one dish, when every meal seemed to be topped with something along the lines of raspberry chili cilantro vinaigrette with green-tea anchovy sorbet. Ah. yes. the eighties. Who can remember them?

Strangely enough, I do remember a sublime grilled chicken I had upstairs at Lora's. When I first saw the menu I didn't know what to make of it—so devoid of frills and flourishes. Where the hell was the chipotle mango pesto? When I later learned she was from San Francisco and a friend of Alice (Chez Panisse) Waters's, her endeavor started to make a lot more sense.

Lora was later recruited by Dominique Browning for House & Garden, and it was she who suggested that the magazine should have a wine column, although she was initially highly skeptical when Dominique proposed my name. Ten years later we've spent hundreds of pleasurable hours together—and a few unpleasant ones when we were lost and exhausted and sick of each other on some back road in Provence or Piedmont. (We once spent the better part of a night in a French police station, but that's another story.) Lora's passionate belief that food and wine are inseparable companions has resulted in our working and traveling together. (I suspect she has also convinced upper management at House & Garden that I am far too scatterbrained to travel by myself, which is at least half true.) She's organized where I'm improvisational; she is the superego to my id. She drives because my driving makes her nervous. Much of what follows is the result of our travels, racing from winery to trattoria, pilgrims of the palate, devout hedonists in search of the next ecstatic revelation.

It's my ambition to share some of those epiphanies in this book and to encourage readers to seek out their own.

Let's be honest: there's only one activity more satisfying than drinking good wine with good food; and if you're drinking wine in the right company, the one pleasure, more often than not, will lead to the other.