

Wine prose that animates lifeless liquids

Forced by circumstance to isolate from the virused world, we celebrate today as best we can, which in wine terms means breaking out a sipper and cherishing it with some wisdom of wine lore that reminds us how venerated is this elixir we revere.



DAN BERGER

Fine writing on wine goes back centuries, the majority emanating from Great Britain, which has a long, steadfast (and financial) connection to the great wines of France, Germany, and Portugal. Wine writers like H. Warner Allen, Prof. George Saintsbury,

and Charles Walter Berry may be long forgotten by most of today's wine lovers, but the scant remaining copies of their works command exorbitant prices. (One reason: You can consume a book and still have it around afterward.)

These writers' paeans to wine inject vivacious illusions that animate and illuminate lifeless liquids.

One delightful vin-essayist whose works aren't hard to find was Harry Waugh, wine merchant and former director of Chateau Latour, and a man who spent lots of time touring the Napa Valley with local friends, often detailing his travels in Bae-deker-like volumes.

In his 1973 work "Winetaster's

Choice," Waugh (who died 19 years ago at age 97) wrote this tale of a Christmas-time outing he attended, likely to bag some game birds.

"Most of us have at least one extravagance – mine is shooting," he wrote, "but at least this is a comfort to my wife, because it gets me out of the house on Saturdays during the three months of the season and this gives her some time to get on with things."

"There are eight of us guns in the syndicate and we shoot over a large estate some sixty miles north of London. And although this used to be a famous partridge shoot in the days when this table delicacy abounded, 90% of the bag nowadays is

driven pheasants, most of which have been hand-reared.

"From fifteen to twenty beaters come out every Saturday..." (Beaters are hardy souls willing to trek through rugged scrub lands scaring the birds so they'll take flight and are easier targets.)

One of the more delightful adjuncts of a day's shooting is the break for lunch, and after a really cold morning exposed to the east wind or whatever it may be, what could be more welcome than a warming drink (even if it is a cold one!) and something hot to eat. In some places, as for example in France, the shooting lunch can be a rather grand gastronomic affair, but ours is pretty simple...

"One of the more amus-

ing days of the season is the Christmas Shoot, only half a day in fact, but more memorable because on this occasion we concentrate more on the 'goodies' for lunch. Our most affluent member usually brings a magnum of Champagne, either Dom Perignon or Taittinger Comtes de Champagne, as well as a Christmas pudding from Fortnum's, accompanied by the essential brandy butter."

(Fortnum & Mason, <https://www.fortnumandmason.com>, is a highly regarded culinary-oriented London institution.)

"[On one special occasion] I could think of no more agreeable, nor more appreciative with

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WINE TO SAKE

Looking back at the best of 2020

As the year comes to an end, it is important to reflect on some of the positive results of one of the most difficult rides of our lives. Without a doubt 2020 brought challenges that continue to have repercussions and will for months to come but it sure has made us reflect on what really matters.



EDUARDO DINGLER

In this last piece of a long year, I wanted to share some of my most relevant and memorable experiences as I've done in prior years.

Some of these instances involve our strong community, some safe travel, before and during the pandemic, and valuable pieces worth sharing.

The year started with planned outings to some of my favorite destinations that feel like a second home to me, as well as epic wine tastings and local restaurants, back when we could share a table with friends.

Speaking of wine, the first grand tasting of the year was led by the great Alfred Tesseron, proprietor of the celebrated Château Pontet-Canet in Pauillac in Bordeaux.

The tasting organized by Wine Access took us through a journey of vintages from 2000 to 2015, showcasing the impact of each vintage along with the longevity of these wines. My top wine of the evening had to be the 2000, which resonated with rich mineral complexity and stamina that, to this day, is still seared in my mind.

Our first memorable dining experience of the year took place at Singlethread Farm Restaurant in Healdsburg. Joined by a small group of long-time friends, Chef Kyle and team delivered a one-of-a-kind experience, bite after bite. The presentation and pairings were spectacular with arrangements laid across the table displaying the best ingredients Northern California has to offer

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CODY GEHRET

Night harvest of pinot noir at Hyde Vineyards in Carneros, which had something close to a normal harvest, albeit one still fraught with smoke and a pandemic.

GOOD NEWS STORIES OF 2020

Winemakers and grapegrowers see hope amidst the challenges

TONY POER

Tucked under the heading of the 2020 growing season summary they released earlier this month, Napa Valley Grape-growers included an appropriate quote by Brian Brett: "Farming is a profession of hope."

The Canadian author and poet wrote this in the introduction to his 2009 memoir, "Trauma Farm: A Rebel History of Rural Life." If Brett's observation rings true for farmers in years of normal expectations, the one currently drawing to a close may have gotten winegrowers up and down the valley to go searching for new wells of optimism.

With the effects of August's LNU Complex fire and, par-

ticularly, the devastating Glass Fire in late September yet being felt by growers and winemakers, the jury is still out on the '20 Napa Valley harvest in terms of potential smoke damage to wine grapes. Unpicked clusters of dark, shriveled fruit dot vineyards from Calistoga to Oak Knoll, all the more visible as leaf canopies fall away with the change of season.

And yet, even though NVG acknowledges in its summary that the fires "exposed varieties to smoke and ash, influencing harvest operations in both the vineyard and cellar," it's encouraging to remember that not all Cabernet Sauvignon was abandoned and, furthermore, that plenty

of other wines – from sparkling and Sauvignon Blanc to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir – will be produced from Napa Valley in 2020, since those grapes were mostly picked before the Glass Fire blasted across the valley.

Comparing this past growing season and harvest to another fire-threatened vintage, Schramsberg and Davies Vineyards President Hugh Davies was upbeat.

"I'm actually pleased that not only are we seemingly selling the 2017 Cabernets, our '17 Pinot is already gone, and we're selling the sparkling wines from that year," the veteran vintner said recently. "We now have enough of a sample size, relative to the

marketability of 2017 wines, that it seems to have worked just fine. And I'm thankful for it."

At that time four harvests ago, the traumatic Atlas Fire cast a shadow of doubt across wine productions from both Napa and Sonoma Counties. But up to now, the earlier concerns voiced by many in the wine and mainstream media have yet to bear fruit.

As the respected wine critic James Suckling wrote on his website in February, he'd tasted more than 1,000 wines from Northern California going back to the fall of last year. "I continue to like the 2017s, especially from

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THE WINE EXCHANGE

Is it about taste or place?

A few years ago I participated in a blind tasting with one of my favorite groups where at each meeting, one member selects the category of wine and all members bring a bottle (in a brown bag) representing that category. That evening's call was Sangiovese from anywhere (not just Tuscany where it is the key player).

As we went through the wines with three poured for each flight, I came upon one that tasted



ALLEN BALIK

this wine as it certainly does not taste like Sangiovese?"

My comment was met with some surprise as everyone was

pleasant but did not convey any of the expected signature characteristics of Sangiovese. While the wine was not faulty in any other way, I raised the question, "What is

bringing a Sangiovese and one member raised another question, "Does it have to taste like Sangiovese just because that's the grape, or should the winemaker be free to deliver a tasty wine in his own style?"

A spirited discussion ensued and most agreed with me that a wine should be true to its origin. But a few others expressed their opinion that a wine need only



BARBARA BALIK, NEW WAYS TO SEE.

Alessandro, the manager of guest relations at Poderi Boscarelli in their vineyards just after harvest.

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Good news

From C1

Napa Valley. Many have a firmness and drinkability that is so attractive and intriguing.” Such characteristics have emerged, he observed, “despite the troublesome hot weather during the growing season and the devastating fires in October.”

Whether or not Suckling or other critics will offer such a positive assessment of the 2020 vintage remains to be seen. Every growing season and harvest is different. What’s clear is that, because of the Glass Fire — not to mention all of the COVID-19 safety protocols that have been in place for months — the ’20 harvest was, unsurprisingly, both an aberration and a wild ride.

The valley’s grape crop came in at a fraction of what was shaping up during the growing season to be a normal yield of exceptional quality, a fact lamented by NVG Executive Director Jennifer Putnam. “[T]he prospect of a severely reduced harvest or one where no grapes were harvested was sadly realized” by some of its grower members, she summarized.

But for 2020, Davies said he doesn’t predict an issue with the marketability of the Cabernet Sauvignons and Pinot Noirs that fall under his eponymous label. “Where I do think there’s a challenge is that there’s not going to be much of those wines made.”

On the red wines side of his business, he and his director of winemaking, Sean Thompson, saw a significant drop in production in ’20. For the Schramsberg sparkling wines, which are made from early-picked Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the hit was less severe.

“Sparkling production is down a bit, but that’s because yields were light this year,” Davies wrote in an email. “The sparkling base wine quality is quite good. We’re actually really pleased.

“We’re lucky that Cabernet represents a smaller portion of our overall program,” he added.

When it comes to wildfires and which direction the wind is blowing, both good and bad luck played important roles in the fire events of 2017 and this past September. Vineyard locations and picking dates, meanwhile, are more dependable factors in the pursuit of a successful harvest, even in a year like 2020. A pair of established growers in two of the valley’s coolest areas, Carneros and Oak Knoll, can attest to this.

Bill Hanna and his family have hung their hats on Oak Knoll Chardonnay for half a century. They also claim a fascinating lineage. Hanna’s father, John, was the grandson of the naturalist and conservationist John Muir. In 1970, he planted Chardonnay in what would come to be known as the John Muir Hanna Vineyard, at the corner of Dry Creek Road and Orchard Avenue.

The property figures into contemporary California wine history, as it supplied some of the grapes that went into Chateau Montelena’s 1973 Chardonnay, the top-rated white wine in Steven Spurrier’s Judgment of Paris blind tasting in 1976.

Hanna, his son, Michael, and their vineyard manager, Steve Kline, continue to grow Chardonnay for a number of clients, including Montelena, along with



Shriveled grapes in Calistoga after fall’s wildfires.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SPOTTSWOODE

Spottswoode’s winemaker and vineyard manager, Aron Weinkauf says, “Our yields are down kind of consistently 20 to 30 percent, but that has nothing to do with the fires. It only has to do with drought and the climate conditions of the growing season.”

Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot.

“We’re quite proud of the fact that Dad’s vineyard has been in every vintage of Chateau Montelena’s Chardonnay,” the elder Hanna wrote in an email last month.

Over the phone more recently, he said with a note of relief in his voice that the 2020 crops of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were picked successfully. Like Schramsberg, Hanna’s clients at Mumm Napa incorporate Pinot Noir into their méthode champenoise wines, and all of that fruit goes to the sparkling wine operation on Silverado Trail.

These successes notwithstanding, he spoke frankly about the challenges of harvesting in the midst of a terrible fire season. When the Glass Fire burned in Napa Valley, “the smoke arrived here sooner, and so anything that was left out hanging, which for us included Cabernet, Cab Franc, and Merlot, was exposed and did show signs of smoke. So, we’re dealing with that,” he confessed.

Then Hanna returned to a happier subject. “All of our Chardonnays were picked. It was after the LNU complex. By all accounts — and we sell to quite a few different buyers — everything is looking rosy in terms of the fruit quality from the Chardonnay.”

As a grower who works land down in Carneros planted by his father, Chris Hyde is a younger version of Bill Hanna. He has been Hyde Vineyards’ General Manager since 2012. Larry Hyde is one of the valley’s most respected growers and in July was named NVG’s

Grower of the Year for 2020. He established the now-200-acre property in the early ’70s, when it was only a third that size. Like the Hannas, Hyde father and son grow grapes for dozens of winery clients.

Their property sits south of Highway 121 opposite the Carneros Resort in the windswept AVA that is Napa Valley’s coolest growing region. Thanks in part to Larry Hyde’s early efforts with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, these vines are synonymous with Carneros. They make up the majority of Hyde Vineyards’ ten planted varieties.

Echoing Hugh Davies, Chris Hyde commented over the phone that the ’20 vintage was smaller for their signature wine grapes, but the quality of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir appears to be very high. He and his vineyard team had to work extra hard through both the fires and the coronavirus restrictions to make it happen.

“We’re fortunate that, as an agricultural business, we could continue to operate an essential business. We were able to keep everybody employed,” said Hyde. “We got through this harvest working successfully with our winery partners to get the fruit picked. And, you know, I felt like as a community, everyone really came together.”

With Hyde Vineyards situated in an even cooler location than Oak Knoll, and that much further south and away from the Glass Fire, it allowed for something close to a normal harvest, albeit one still fraught with smoke and a pandemic. 2020 seems to have

given Hyde some valuable perspective.

“We got all of our fruit picked and off the vines, and we were able to deliver it. And from everything I’ve tasted so far, we’ve got a great vintage,” he shared. “That being said, we’re looking forward to another year ahead of us. It’s all about planning and looking to the future. That’s really what agricultural farming and what the wine business are all about.”

Only a small fraction of Hyde Vineyards is planted with another vine closely associated with Napa Valley, but Sauvignon Blanc represents a strong bond between the Carneros growers and Spottswoode’s Winemaker and Vineyard Manager, Aron Weinkauf. Even before Weinkauf came on board the esteemed St. Helena estate in 2006, the Novak family were grape clients of the Hydys.

Spottswoode Winery produces one of Napa Valley’s most sought after versions of Sauvignon Blanc. It’s a variety typically harvested in August and September, so vintners like Weinkauf were able to bring in their lots of fruit before the Glass Fire began on Sept. 27.

“Our verdict is in,” he said on a phone call, the bearer of more good news about the ’20 harvest. “Our yields are down kind of consistently 20 to 30 percent, but that has nothing to do with the fires. It only has to do with drought and the climate conditions of the growing season. We were lucky enough that we had picked almost 100 percent of our grapes” before that late September date.

These included not just Hyde Vineyards’ and other growers’



CHRIS HYDE

I felt like as a community, everyone really came together,” Chris Hyde says of 2020, “We were able to keep everybody employed. We got through this harvest working successfully with our winery partners to get the fruit picked.”

Sauvignon Blanc, but nearly all of the Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux varieties that go into the Spottswoode red wines. Except for a small amount of Lake County fruit, Weinkauf noted, “We were able to bring in everything else before the Glass Fire, which obviously had very close, very serious and direct impacts on us right here.”

He was careful to point out that owing to their growers’ vineyards’ and their own property’s proximity to the Glass Fire, they had finished samples of all of their wines lab-tested for smoke damage. The results brought the winemaker joy and relief. “I literally wrote all of our growers as of like a week and a half ago telling them the good news that we got the numbers back, and we’re clean. We’re making the wines.”

With several weeks of hindsight, Weinkauf has had a chance to consider his colleagues’ varying responses to the Glass Fire. They consisted, in part, of growers and winemakers deciding to leave fruit hanging on the vines for justifiable fear of smoke damage. “People were really just going about this every possible way they could think of, and there were a lot of people who came out and said that they are not making wine.”

He continued, “You know, I don’t want to pretend to know the circumstances of every other winery, but I absolutely know there were a lot of people in a position like us and just said, ‘Yeah, we’re bringing the grapes in. We’re going to treat things normally, but we’re going to be working with all of our growers in every situation. And then we’re going to test everything as thoroughly as we can afterward and hopefully make a decision based on real results instead of predictions.’”

“The fact that 2017 happened, and now ’20 has happened to us, it gives pause,” Hugh Davies observed of the last four harvests’ outcomes. “On the flip side of that, ’18 and ’19 were pretty successful. So, I think we have to take the hits in stride. And this whole COVID thing, no one asked for it.

“There are going to be good years and bad years. There are going to be tough moments. I think that we just have to try to be strong and work our way through these more challenging moments. There are definitely better days ahead.”

Meanwhile, if the Canadian author Brian Brett is a wine enthusiast, his hope for 2021 and the future of Napa Valley viticulture might just spring eternal.

Berger

From C1

which to share my very last bottle of Taylor 1927 [Port].”

(This was a monumental offering. In 2016, Decanter Magazine’s Stephen Brook wrote, “Other than the rare Nacional bottling from Quinta do Noval, Taylor’s vintage is the most sought-after and expensive of all vintage Ports, and this wine, from an acclaimed vintage, is the epitome of the style.”)

Waugh decanted the classic old 1927 wine early in the day, and sealed the decanter, taking it with him as he was driven by “the most affluent member” to the shoot.

The group started the post-prandial period with a “warm-up” Port, 1960 Warre. “But as good as this was, what we had all really been looking forward to was the pièce de résistance, the 1927 Taylor.

“Naturally confident that our ‘affluent’ member had brought the bottle... [along with] the food, I then asked him to set 1927 on the table. There was a deadly hush — he turned quite white and exclaimed, ‘Gosh, I gave that bottle to the beaters for their lunch as I thought it was a Christmas present for them.’

“Since the assembled company were all enthusiastic Port lovers, it was hard to convince them that

this had really occurred and one even rushed out to endeavor to retrieve the bottle, but alas, it was far too late and had all been consumed. All we could do was to laugh and my great consolation came later on when our head keeper Frank Dickens, a teetotaler himself, had told us that one of the beaters had tasted it and exclaimed, “Cor, that’s a drop of good stuff!”

Waugh’s most oft-quoted line was his answer to a question: Someone asked if he had ever mistaken a Burgundy for a Bordeaux?

His reply: “Not since lunch.” Great old Burgundies often elicit paroxysms of delight, and it is also alleged that Waugh coined the phrase: “The first duty of wine is to be red — the second is to be a Burgundy.”

As to Burgundy, one of the most prolific of the Brit wine-prose creators was André Simon, an author and wine lover who lived nearly a century.

In one of his books he wrote, “Burgundies, on the whole, do not keep nearly so long as Clarets. They have more to give, more bouquet and greater vinosity, at first, but they exhaust themselves and fade away sooner than the less aromatic, more reserved Clarets.

“It is somewhat like carnations, which possess a far more pungent and assertive perfume when first picked than any rose;

yet the more discreet, the gentler and sweeter perfume of the rose will abide with the bloom as long as the bloom will last.”

French-born André Simon was a wine merchant and prolific writer. The International Wine & Food Society, of which he was a founder in 1933, wrote of him, “He believed that ‘a man dies too young if he leaves any wine in his cellar: There were only two magnums of claret left in his personal cellar at his death,” at age 93.

The late winemaker André Tchelistcheff also alluded to the greatness of Burgundy when he suggested that to discover its true aroma, smell a dying rose.

The aforementioned H. Warner Allen, an author of detective novels, also penned this in his book, “Through the Wine-Glass,” 1954:

“The Wine-Glass tempers the ruthlessness of the Hour-Glass; wine smooths the asperities of Time. Seen through the Wine-Glass, the past is purified from many of its regrets and unhappy memories, in the specious present ‘present mirth has present laughter,’ and the future which the Hour-Glass reveals with dark and menacing obscurity is gilded with the light of hope... The Wine-Glass can lend enchantment to, or at least veil the horror of, the grimmest moment in this century.”

Particularly apt considering what so many have lived

through.

One of the most famous quotes about Champagne was reputedly said by Lilly Bollinger of the Champagne house of that name:

“I drink Champagne when I’m happy and when I’m sad. Sometimes I drink it when I’m alone. When I have company, I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I’m not hungry and drink it when I am. Otherwise, I never touch it — unless I’m thirsty.”

Much wine writing is devoted to allusion and one of the most enjoyable phrases appeared in the third edition (1961) of writer Julian Street’s book titled simply “Wines.”

Hidden in the text is this lovely passage:

“Rhônes are important wines, particularly friendly and accommodating. The Rhône Valley being in the south has fewer bad years than Bordeaux or Burgundy and because of this its wines are less expensive and one feels justified in using them more freely. A good [red] Rhône will stand up handsomely to venison, a game bird, a rabbit, or any other dish with which Burgundy or a very ‘big’ Claret [red Bordeaux] is usually associated.

“But whereas Burgundy is King and Claret is Queen and Champagne is a gay old multimillionaire, the maid of honor from the Rhône Valley is not above sitting with you on a

grassy bank and adding magic to a lunch of bread and cheese.”

Traci Dutton of the Culinary Institute of America’s education department is a frequent judge at wine competitions who often describes wines transmogrifyingly by using cultural references. Recently (and fittingly) she described one excellent but subtle wine as Debussy and said another wine was Elton John.

I’ll add one mundane reflection.

Occasionally you find Chardonnays or white Burgundies that really are red wines without color — and Pinot Noirs or red Burgundies that really are white wines with color.

Wine of the Week

2018 Langhart & Hill Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$34) — A striking raspberry/cherry aroma is enhanced by notes of tea and oak, but not enough to make the wine unbalanced. Indeed, the balance between fruit, acid, and barrel aging is ideal and the medium-weight wine opens handsomely after it’s decanted for an hour. Good value.

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