

YES, BUT BE DELICIOUS – ANDY PEAY

At a recent wine seminar, a writer/critic proclaimed that “wine must be more than delicious.” The call to arms filled my chest and I felt the power of his gestalt. Then I paused. Sure, a wine can be intellectually intriguing and the experience more profound based on outside information like where it was made or how it was made. But, in the end, if the wine is not delicious, then it will be merely a tasting data point and the experience will not enter the various parts of my brain associated with memory as pleasurable. It will be a sated intellectual curiosity I do not need to repeat. I certainly will not buy a case for my cellar or add it to my wine lists for customers to drink with my restaurant’s food. You would think that would be true for most people, right?

Nope. In many centers of wine hipness these days, what matters is not how a wine tastes and how the associated sensory memories make you feel, but instead the social source of pleasure derived from tasting – and professing to like - a much ballyhooed wine that is made in a style that is currently in vogue. What matters is how tasting and telling others what you taste makes you feel, not how it brings pleasure to you when consumed.

I took my family to Copenhagen this summer. We went to a handful of the “important” neo-Nordic cuisine restaurants, mostly off-shoots from the much-lauded NOMA, the world’s #1 restaurant according to many restaurant guides. It appears Copenhagen wine directors, as in Paris, are caught in a collective Natural wine craze. I like the idea behind Natural wine and at one time was interested in tasting them to see what the buzz was all about. In Copenhagen I had no other option as there was nary a non-Natural wine to be found on any of the wine lists. No “classic” wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, Piedmont, or the Sonoma Coast. In a city with the “greatest cuisine on the planet,” all I could drink was wine esoterica. When I uncovered a handful of classic bottles at a bottle shop, they stuck out for their incongruity against a backdrop of Trousseau, Jura whites, Bio-dynamic wines, and other wine styles/regions currently in vogue. This would not be catastrophic if almost every one of the wines I drank in Copenhagen were not flawed and, mostly, downright unpalatable. The memories they conjured up included turning my dad’s odorous compost pile as a teenager, wincing as I sipped an apple cider vinegar for use in a mignonette with oysters, and spitting out a spritzy sparkling Shiraz as a neophyte wine buyer. Not quite the walk down the sensory Hall of Fame. No matter how much money I spent or the extent to which I quizzed the sommelier, almost every bottle I ordered had some very unpleasant flavor that did not light up my brain’s Pleasure Center or pair with the food. At all. I forlornly left full bottles on the table or grimaced through a few glasses to get one of the other desired effects from the bottle to dull my disappointment. Why did the sommeliers buy only Natural wines for their lists? Did they know about the great, classic wines and wine regions of the world? Were they deemed inappropriate to pair with neo-Nordic cuisine? Or, was something else going on?

Instead of highlighting the classic wines of the world, many tastemakers - including sommeliers, writers, and wine organizations - are focusing on what is novel in wine; whether it is a region or a winemaking style. In some instances, this makes sense. Wine writers need something new to write about. That is the currency of their trade. The known wine varieties and wine regions have been written about a million times. Further, prices for known wines from known regions often have been pushed out of reach of most consumers. So, sommeliers focus on wines of process (oxidative winemaking, stem use, egg fermenters) where flavors are created and fruit to make these wines is cheap – and somewhat beside the point – versus wines of place (terroir-driven wines) which by definition are unique and often the wines are expensive. As one wine fad flames out (remember the

Beanie Baby doll of wine, orange wines?), it is replaced immediately with another. In the U.S. in the past 5 years, wine fads have sparked and fizzled in a line from Bio-dynamic wines to Natural wines to wines made in egg fermenters to Corsican wines to Sherry to Jura wines to wines of “Balance” to “Pet Nat” wines, and on and on. Each of them is worth trying and is appropriate for certain situations (Sherry with cheese, chicken and fish!) My Facebook, Delectable and Vivino accounts, however, are blowing up with high scores and high fives for almost exclusively these bottles. Why not the exemplary classic wines of the world that speak of terroir and not technique?

Wine has been a status symbol among the upper classes in the U.S. since the American Revolution. The upper classes were mostly of British stock and the Brits did not have an indigenous wine growing and wine making culture (not true anymore, I drank a sparkling from the U.K. last weekend.) In America, wine was imported, expensive, and inaccessible to many. As waves of immigrants from southern Europe came to this country in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they brought their cultural traditions including the presence of wine on the table. Among immigrants, homemade wine was consumed without much fuss but outside the upper class the majority of Americans stuck to beer and spirits. And then came the great wealth generation of the 1980s and 1990s. Money accumulated outside the historic social classes at a great pace. Conspicuous consumption was a widespread phenomenon and, in some circles, drinking rare wine the U.S. “aristocracy” consumed (Bordeaux, mostly) became a sign that a person had reached a certain level of social sophistication. Unlike a piece of jewelry where the size of a diamond is visible to the eye, with wine the sensory value of a wine lies hidden inside the bottle. A consumer does not know if he will like the taste of a wine until after it has been purchased and consumed. Certain features may indicate how a wine may taste if the consumer has some wine knowledge – like region, alcohol levels, vintage – but even then, wine is expensive and the majority of people need someone to tell us what will taste good and what we should put in our cellar. Into that vacuum walked the wine critic. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, we relied on a handful of powerful critics to tell us what we should drink. Their power and preferences in wine were paramount and unchallenged. The forces of supply and demand elevated their favored wines to status symbols and price became the visible symbol of quality. At the same time, Americans started to spend more of their new wealth on eating and drinking. Cuisine from all over the world came to our shores and fine dining restaurants multiplied like bunnies. As we dined out for business and pleasure, we relied on sommeliers (and our wrinkled, handy, wine score pocket guides) to lead us in our wine-buying decisions. The interest in wine and the dominance of a few critics dove-tailed with an explosion in communications technology. Web-enabled handheld devices brought wine knowledge to us – and could be shared by us – from wherever we sat. As a result, over the past ten years, power has de-centralized from just one or two critics to a multitude of bloggers and avid posters of tasting notes and Facebook posts. They have gained a platform and audience to share what they think is good to drink. I like this evolution. It feels democratic and self-confident, good American ideals. It can lead to open minds and cut down fossilized social structures of taste. But there is an inherent danger.

When I first started learning about wine in the early 90s, the wine authorities had the benefit of decades of tasting to back up their pronouncements. Of course, I did not always agree with their palates – which I did not recognize initially so I followed them – but their opinions were at least based on a breadth of wine knowledge that far surpassed my own. Further, to be in print you needed a sufficient number of subscribers to support you or have the approval of a publisher. Now, everyone has equal voice and access to the public, and perspective and wine knowledge are not a prerequisite for sharing an opinion. Since wine is a consumer good with somewhat invisible product

features, we open ourselves up to crazes and fads if the hype is in overdrive. Something ultimately tasty to a small sub-sector of adventurous wine drinkers, will be buoyed and amplified online by multitudes with little knowledge on the subject sharing their enthusiasm for something new and hip. What is perhaps a passing curiosity becomes a phenomenon overnight. As a result, new tastemakers may focus on the buzz of the moment at the expense of offering a range of wines that pair with their cuisine. In the end, I prefer this to the tyranny of thought and opinion we experienced over the past 30 years. But, it is how I ended up drinking nasty wine for 4 days in Copenhagen.

At Peay we strive to make classic wines that transcend fashion and fads. We hope to make delicious wines that you buy because they taste good and represent a truth about how that variety tastes in a cold location, specifically, our vineyard, and not because they are trendy and hip. So, next time when I am in the land of wine hipness, I will pocket my Beanie Baby mad cash and stick to beer and spirits. Have you tried a Saison?