

*Wine is, indeed, a living thing,
brash in its youth, full-
blossoming in its maturity, but
subject, if not used in time, to
senility, decay, and death.*
ANDRÉ L. SIMON

II.

Reflections in a Wine Glass

It's said that "work is the curse of the drinking class." My father drank and labored. Lord knows I drink my share, so I'll most likely toil the rest of my life. But if you have to bear that heavy yoke (work), being a winegrower is a nice way to go. There's an added dimension compared to most businesses.

That's not always good. How many other businessmen's friends request a visit to the jobsite on weekends? You see, wine's a hobby to these folks—something they do in their spare time. They want to talk about it, learn more, sample more. Generally, I share their enthusiasm. There are occasions when I must say "no," because it's time to be with the family. Our winery is closed on Sundays by design. And our hospitality staff knows better than to call me at home on Saturdays.

But when people are genuinely interested in wine and don't impose themselves on my private time, I love to visit and sample. I don't feel like a public figure and will never get used to autographing things. Yet I always oblige when asked. I do feel honored to see my product in fine wine shops and restaurants as I travel the country. To walk into a restaurant for the first time, incognito, and upon ordering your own wine, have the waiter tell you that it's the best on the lists, always evokes a big tip, and an extra bottle for the staff to share after work.

There are times when you get preferential treatment because you are known—like a reservation when the restaurant would be "full" to someone else. That's nice. There are other times when the waiter or someone else wants to talk wine when you just want to eat dinner or visit with your wife.

Vintners don't get rich. They opt for a pleasant lifestyle and, if successful, lead a financially comfortable life. In short, they are glorified farmers. They just happen to process a farm product to which a certain amount of mystique is attached. Yet, for their income level, vintners probably travel more of the country, stay at nicer hotels and eat in more good restaurants than most people. Yet this is to promote the product. I would rather stay home and tend the barrels. But when I do travel, it is not uncommon to run across a neighboring vintner in an airport or far off city. Statistics indicate that we are not doing a very good job of increasing the number of aficionados of wine so we compete for the attention and patronage of the same limited audience. Thus, at any given time, there may be as many vintners on the promotion trail as at the winery.

And if successful, he'll probably be land rich and cash poor, building a nice estate for his children and the IRS. If not successful in this very capital-intensive business, he may even go belly up. As one old joke says it, "the way to make a small fortune in the wine business is to start with a large fortune."

So why would anyone want to be a vintner? Why do I enjoy it so much? First of all, I like to think there is a certain artistic ability to being a winegrower. I take pride in what I do and I derive great satisfaction when other people enjoy it. I have always had the vision that wine is food and have always expected my food to taste good, to be enjoyable, so I have produced wines designed to evoke the same response.

I remember when I started my own winery in the early 70s with the concept of wine as food. I always tried to produce an elegant wine, typified by finesse rather than power. When I started the winery, I decided to make only Cabernet Sauvignon which would not be released until the fifth year. So, there I was with years of inventory of the elegant, finesse-styled wines building up, while at the same time many wine producers and most wine writers were into "big, monster, tannic, red wines," the kind that will take the enamel off your teeth. It was very stylish to equate tannin and unapproachability with future quality. You'd think from their comments that good-tasting wines had no potential whatsoever. It was a little unnerving because if that tendency was more than a fad, I was in big trouble.

It has been somewhat reassuring to me to see that most of those "monster" types are no longer with us. I think I can safely say that most producers today are swinging back toward more elegant, "food styled" wines. Unfortunately, the term "food wine" is taking a rap because some producers have decided to make lighter styles and call them "food wines," not having taken the time or made the investment to produce a wine with much character, then age it enough to produce an elegant, fine style. Today, even in Burgundy and Bordeaux, France, we see the same kind of argument raging. Some European producers claim they must get back to the bigger versions which established their reputation. Granted these wines take many years to reach their peak.

The entire controversy over whether to produce a lighter wine which can be drunk sooner or to produce a more full-bodied, heavier edition is dictated by consumers—what they will buy and how long they are willing to age it. People like to talk about older wines but few have the cellar, the patience or the capital to age reds to any reasonable degree; therefore, our industry has taken the approach that if this is what the consumer wants and is willing to pay for, this is what we will offer them.

Some of us who are willing to take the financial risk hold our wines longer. We do this because we see wine making as an art form and because we realize that a good red wine takes time to come around. All this must be calculated into your business plan and that's why this industry is so capital intensive. It takes three years to harvest any fruit from a newly planted vineyard. Then, in the sixth through eighth years, the vineyard may reach full production. It then produces a full crop for the next 30 to 40 years before it begins to decline. During those first six to eight years of the vineyard's life, while it is producing less than a full crop, you can expect cash deficits to pile up. Then, at least if you're only growing the grapes to sell, you begin to enjoy some income. But if you choose to be a winegrower, you're not only faced with no grape sales and the additional capital investment of a winery, but one to three more years aging for a premium white and three to five years minimum for a premium red, which could add up to ten years of deficits. You have to really love the wine business and be a little crazy to stay in it.

Let's address some common recurring questions in this business such as, "When will this wine be at its peak?" My answer is, "When you think it's wonderful." I'd venture to say that only about

5 percent of wine drinkers have a wine cellar of any reasonable size where they can hope to buy and hold reds until they reach maturity. I believe that statistics indicate that approximately 30 percent of Americans drink wine on a regular basis. If 5 percent of that number store wine, we're saying about only 1 to 2 percent of the population has a reasonably sized cellar. All of this being said, most American consumers drink it, if not the same night they bought a bottle, then within 6 months to a year of that time. Any intelligent wine producer should take this into consideration in his marketing plan and in determining the style of his product.

There may be subtle but important differences between light, soft and elegant products. These differences might be determined by the supply of grapes, fermentation techniques, blending varieties, or the amount of time given to age the product before it goes to market. Frequently I'm asked what other grape varieties do I blend with Cabernet Sauvignon, the insinuation being that if the wine is 100 percent Cabernet, it might be less complex. I like to counter the suggestion by saying that since I give my wines considerably longer aging in both barrel and bottle, I don't need to use varieties with lighter tannin in order to ready them more quickly for the market-place. But the reality is that if one artisan thinks he can make a finer product by using 100 percent varietal, while the other chooses to blend, I think they should have the freedom to do so. Vintners have a way of doing things pragmatically then backing into their marketing plan to justify what they did in the first place.

An argument can also be developed to counter those who would claim that you can only make a fine red wine by using French Nevers oak for aging. You'll find that if you visited five wineries, you'd get five different versions of how to do the job properly. You see, vintners, like most artists, have strong egos, and my own attitude is if it works for them, bless them; just don't let them claim it's the only way.

Because wine is my passion, I stock a large personal cellar. It covers about 800 sq. ft. and holds 5,000 bottles. I arrived at the size rather simply. My wife wanted a good-sized pool in which to swim laps. I figured if she could have a 700-to-800-square-foot-pool, I could have a wine cellar the same size. I also began to collect vintages for each of my children with the hope that when they were 21 years old, I could present them each with a 2,400-bottle cellar going back to their birth years. (When I've told this story to wine groups, I've had many solicitations for adoption.) The kids now average about halfway to the drinking age and, unfortunately, their wine is taking up too much space in my cellar. The problem may cure itself because as I run out of some of the vintages from my own collection, I may start dipping into theirs—just to make sure everything's aging properly of course!

Having a cellar this size permits me the luxury of drinking older wines and I don't drink just wines I've produced. Whenever I taste something I like—and you must remember that my cellar contains probably 90 percent reds—I'll buy seven cases, one for each of the kids and four for me. My bins hold four cases each and I figure if I'm paying the tab, I get the lion's share. In this way I can drink five-to-ten-year-old wines on a regular basis to determine how I think they're aging and if they've reached their peak. Once it occurs to me that wine has peaked (again, let me emphasize that this is a subjective judgment), I tend to drink up the balance of the inventory a little quicker.

Once I tasted wines with one of my professors whom I respected very much. Most of the samples were a similar age but I threw in one much older that I thought was "pruney" and "over the hill." It turned out to be his favorite. As I reflected on it, I came to the conclusion that all his life he had been able to drink older wines than I; therefore, he had come to appreciate what a good old wine tasted like. I believe that most consumers today are used to drinking tannic two-to-three-year-old reds and it will be a while before we educate them to appreciate well-aged reds.

Another common question is, “How long will this wine age?” That’s simple—until “it’s over the hill.” The quote at the head of the chapter said it very well: A wine is youthful, it reaches maturity, and at some stage it begins to fall apart, just like you and me. Wine aging is a bell-shaped curve. A vintage grows better and better for a while. Hopefully, when it reaches its peak, it plateaus for a period, then it begins to decline. I’ll bore you by repeating that all these judgments are subjective. I remember, for instance, when I was a kid and my father was 35 years old. He was a mountain of a man, about 6’1”, 280 lbs., a railroad laborer who rolled boxcar wheels like you and I would roll a car tire. He generally had neither the energy nor the enthusiasm to play with me after a day of hard work so somehow, he always seemed old. I have just turned 50, with children 8, 12, and 13. I imagine that I seem old to them but it’s amazing how my perspective has changed. Yes, I tire more quickly and I take longer to recover after I play racquetball with them, but I feel like I’m as productive as I’ve ever been in my life. Similarly, how a particular vintage is aging has a lot to do with perspective.

Frequently I’m asked, “What’s your bet wine?” It’s the one you like the best. You see, wine is really a very simple subject. I’ve said it many times and I hope by now it’s sinking in. It’s so simple that it sometimes scares us, but confidence is the key. Believe in your palate; believe in your judgment. You paid the tab if you’re happy with what you got, that’s what counts.

I love the question “How long does a wine keep after you open it?” Around my house the answer is about a half-hour. And, “What do you do with an unfinished bottle?” I don’t know; it’s not a problem at the Meyer residence. But, realistically, if you don’t finish a bottle, recork it and put it in the refrigerator. The colder temperature will slow the chemical reactions and permit less deterioration. Better yet, there are devices that evacuate the air from a bottle’s headspace before replacing the cork. Air is usually the culprit causing the break down. That’s not to say, however, that a partial bottle will last forever just because you took the above precaution. Each sample is slowly deteriorating once opened, even if recorked, and should be drunk within a reasonably short time.

How about if you find a bottle with ullage, which is a fancy name for excessive airspace between the cork and the liquid. Obviously, it indicates that some wine has been lost, either through leakage or evaporation. I’ve tasted some wines with considerable headspace in the bottle and found them to be magnificent. On the other hand, a leaky cork might permit air to enter and cause a wine break down. Ullage by itself is neither good nor bad. It does indicate that something unusual has happened. The proof is in the smelling and tasting. I wouldn’t pay an exorbitant price for an old bottle of wine that had a lot of headspace. Sediment also doesn’t mean the wine will be bad. I’d be perfectly willing to try any bottle that had sediment in it. I would, however, be careful that it was poured very gently or was decanted into another bottle so that my guests or I wouldn’t get much sediment in our glasses. If it turned out that the wine was faulty because the sediment was caused by microbiological action, I wouldn’t be afraid to return it. But I’ve tasted many fine vintages which had considerable sediment on the bottom or crustiness on the inside shoulders of the bottle.

How about this one: “Will this wine travel?” I’ll guarantee that if you carry it on a plane with you, it’ll go wherever your ticket takes you. I can’t say with certainty that I’ve never tasted a wine that was “tired” or “travel sick.” I’ve tasted some poor wines whose defects were blamed on travel. Speaking of travel, I remember once having a “run in” with a wine writer in Houston, Texas. He must’ve asked me 10 times in the same evening why I did not make half bottles of wine. I guess my real answer was that I thought any two people worth their salt could drink a full bottle. Besides, it costs a lot more money to put wine in half bottles, and it develops much faster in the smaller bottles so it doesn’t age nearly as well. Anyway, he wouldn’t give up and kept asking me until I

finally told him he should start his own damn winery, then he could produce any bottle size he wanted. In his next article he made some sarcastic remarks that suggested I'd been on the road too long that trip and thus was in bad humor. That wasn't the case; I was in bad humor because I was bored and tired of him asking the same silly question over and over. It's much like a wine that you don't like or that you find defective but since it happens to come from one of your favorite producers, you blame it on travel sickness.

I could go on and on. Over the last four years, while I've been working on ideas for this book, I've been noting some of the questions I'm more commonly asked. I hope I've addressed your queries somewhere along the line. But just use your own common sense. Wine is food; it should taste good. It should be fun; you should look forward to it and not be intimidated by it. While there may be lousy wine, there's no such thing as the wrong wine. Maybe you just served it to the wrong people. Maybe you just read the wrong reviewers. So, get out there and experiment. Let your palate be your guide and for goodness sake—enjoy yourself!