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The Pour

In the World of Fine Wine, There'll Always Be a France

By ERIC ASIMOV

PERMIT me to speak briefly in praise of France.

Yes, France, the greatest wine producing nation in the world.

Don't look so shocked. I've heard about the Judgment of Paris, the famous blind tasting in which French and American wines went glass-to-glass in 1976, and the French lost. I know all about the greatness of California cabernets and shiraz from Australia, and I understand that the French lag in the clever global marketing of instantly recognizable brands of wine.

Nonetheless, no country comes close to matching France, either in setting demanding standards for its wine industry or in producing such a variety of consistently excellent wine. Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne and the Rhone go without saying, but those famous regions are simply the most visible. From Jurançon in the southwest to Jura in the east, from Nantes on the Atlantic to Alsace on the German border, France makes wines that are endlessly compelling and should be endlessly inspiring.

Why is it necessary for me to state what should be obvious? Because a prevailing attitude toward France and its wines, in the New World at least, seems stuck somewhere between pity and glee for an industry supposedly rotting from within.

New World producers and journalists like to jeer at the sacred French notion of terroir as a myth constructed to preserve French status in the industry, and they laugh at the rigidity of the French appellation rules, which dictate what French growers can plant, where they can plant it, and how they should tend the vines. The [European Union's](#) recent decision to spend millions of dollars in an effort to diminish a European wine glut by digging up vineyards and turning excess wine into ethanol contributed to a confused perception of industry-wide crisis. The perception springs from an oversimplification of the French wine business, and no doubt a bit of wishful thinking.

The latest chorus of American gloating was heard around the time of the 30th anniversary celebration of the Paris tasting, even as many of these same gloaters were lining up to pay record prices for the heralded 2005 vintage of Bordeaux. When French winemakers were understandably reluctant to participate in yet another re-enactment in May, American wine writers were quick to play the cowardice card. And when the event feebly played out, and the Americans won again, writers exulted.

"Sacré bleu! Make that red, white and blue," Linda Murphy wrote in The San Francisco Chronicle, which can perhaps be forgiven for boosterish support of an industry in its backyard. In maybe the unkindest blow of all, Hollywood is apparently considering a movie version of the original event, based on the book "Judgment of Paris: California vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting That Revolutionized Wine" (Scribner, 2005), by George M. Taber.

Maybe it's payback for years of supercilious French sneering at the American wine industry. Or maybe Americans just need to lash out to pump themselves up with competitive energy, like football players pounding their lockers in an adrenalin-fueled frenzy. Any way you look at it, American wine partisans have got themselves a punching bag and they call it France.

Business-oriented types look at the French wine industry as old and tired. Through rigidity, bureaucracy and lack of creativity, they say, once-dominant France clings to old and outdated ways, and can no longer compete with modern wine powers like Australia, the United States, Chile and South Africa.

Those sympathetic to France heave a sigh, shrug their shoulders and say, What can you do? Meanwhile, some of the harshest critics are among the French themselves, particularly growers and winemakers in less prestigious areas, or entrepreneurs who feel hamstrung by French wine laws.

Make no mistake. France's troubles, as far as the wine business goes, are many. Consumption at home has dropped precipitously as the culture that once prized the long lunch and the arduous construction of a meal has taken a route toward convenience foods,

quickly gobbled. The quest for productivity in a globalized economy, no doubt, has also taken its toll on daytime consumption, while stricter drunken-driving laws have also had an effect. Troubled fortunes in the wine economies of Bordeaux and the Languedoc are well known, if not well understood. And France's share of the wine export market has tumbled as well.

What's crucial to understand is that France has two entirely different wine economies, and one should not be confused with the other. The first produces oceans of cheap, occasionally palatable wine, sold for immediate consumption under lowly appellations, like plain Bordeaux or Beaujolais, for example, rather than the more prestigious and more specific St.-Julien or Juliéna. This industry is indeed in a deep crisis, with many growers hurting badly. Historically, much of this wine was for domestic consumption, and this segment has taken the biggest hit as the market has shrunk. Producers who would like to sell these wines overseas say they feel hampered because they cannot compete against the cleverly branded bottles of New World producers, who often use winemaking techniques unavailable to French producers.

The other industry makes the middle to high-end wines, those sold around the world, consumed in restaurants and reviewed in publications like *Wine Spectator*. Producers like Sylvain Pitiot, who makes the seductive, voluptuous Clos de Tart, a grand cru Burgundy, are doing exceptionally well, regardless of how many gallons of French wine the European Union wishes to convert to fuel. Like Clos de Tart, much of the high-quality end of the business is prospering.

In many ways, the French A.O.C. laws, for appellation d'origine contrôlée, which protect quality at the top, are simultaneously responsible for the demise of the low end. In other words, the law that insures the meaning of St.-Julien by dictating what the wine is made of and how it is labeled can stifle the producer of ordinary Bordeaux, who might want to legally blend some syrah into the cabernet sauvignon, or call the wine by a cute, memorable brand name — not Yellow Tail, but maybe Red Head. But while a producer in the Languedoc might wish he could pull out all his grenache and replace it with syrah, a Burgundy producer like Mr. Pitiot would be appalled at the idea of somebody wasting precious pinot noir territory by replacing it with merlot.

It may be that both ends of the French wine industry can only work at cross purposes, with the Old World tradition of exalting specific place names struggling against the New World merchandising power of the brand name. For France to try to accommodate the low end by compromising the standards that have insured its high-end dominance might in the end be catastrophic for the whole industry.

"Europeans should realize they can't play that New World game," said Neal Rosenthal, an American wine importer who is devoted to the concept of terroir. "They're better off protecting what they have and making sure people better understand the reasons behind it."

Not that the standards can't be beneficially modified. In a recent column in Decanter, a British consumer magazine, Michel Bettane, the French wine critic, suggested that St.-Émilion would be a fine place to plant chardonnay, which is currently not permitted under A.O.C. rules. Maybe so. And as in any bureaucracy, a stultifying rigidity often makes rational decision making difficult. But on the whole, the A.O.C. rules do far more to protect greatness than to prevent it.

While a further decline on the bottom end of the industry will have a tremendous social and human cost in France, it won't undermine the greatness of French wines. It's possible to imagine that France will be joined at the top by countries like Italy and Spain, which produce distinguished, singular wines like Barolo and Rioja, and are working hard to improve the quality in distinctive regions that have long been ignored.

It's harder to imagine New World countries like the United States and Australia reaching the same pinnacle. Their leading wines, whether made of cabernet, chardonnay, shiraz or pinot noir, will always be measured against the French, and regardless of the blind tasting here or there, few people really take seriously the notion that the New World wines will surpass the French reference points on a large scale. What's more important about New World wines is how they have improved their quality on the low-to-middle ranks, to the point where today it is possible to say that very few bad wines are produced.

No, France will always set a standard, barring some sort of colossal, self-destructive move, like gutting its appellation rules. Should that happen, Americans and the rest of the world would then have great cause to jeer.