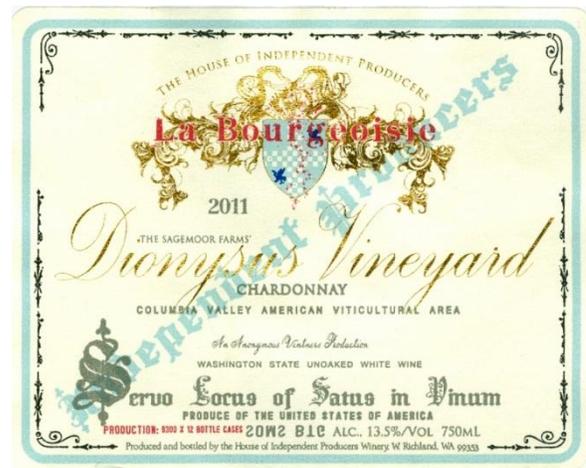


Buying Fine Wine

I went out to dinner with friends the other night. We chose a fancy restaurant, one especially noted for its wine cellar. According to the website (yes, the place is fancy enough to have its own website), it has received accolades from numerous regional and national magazines, including *Wine Spectator* magazine's "Best of Award of Excellence" for the current year. I've eaten there before, and the food's good though a bit overpriced.

We were seated and the waitress brought the two-page menu and a wine catalogue. The latter weighed about three pounds and contained a listing of the thousands of wines available from the restaurant's cellar. The selection had both depth and breadth, with prices ranging from less than \$50 to well over \$1,000 per bottle. As I figured such a fine place wouldn't dare serve a bad wine, I ordered the cheapest chardonnay on the menu, a relative bargain at \$38 per bottle. The sommelier showed up shortly with my selection, made a show of having me approve the label, and then with a great flourish unscrewed the cap and poured a sip for my approval. The wine was really bad, but we drank it. By the third glass it tasted pretty good.

As we waited for dinner, I got to studying the wine label. It was terribly posh, with a complicated coat of arms, an untranslatable Latin phrase at the bottom, and "La Bourgeoisie" (roughly translated as "The Middle Class") written in red across it all. It was said to be "unoaked," meaning it was cooked in stainless steel vats instead of aged in barrels. It was sort of label you might seek out if you knew nothing whatsoever



about wine and wanted something cheap that looked expensive to give for a gift. But what really caught my eye was a little logo on the back, a "100" with a red stripe through it. It was a sign that "La Bourgeoisie" are rebelling against Robert M. Parker and the independent rating of wines. Herein lies the story.

To many in the wine world, Robert M. Parker is either a messiah or the devil incarnate. He is the one person, more so than any other, who has in the past three decades transformed the retail buying and selling of wine from an arcane ritual to a simple objective decision. In doing

so, he is said to have nearly destroyed the French wine industry, while increasing the overall consumption of wine worldwide.

To understand all this, you have got to understand how wine is classed. Basically, there are two ways, by origin of the vineyard or by type of grape used to make the wine. Up until the 1970s, the French wine industry was said to be among the world's finest. The actual classification system of French wines is complicated, but at its heart it is based on *terroir*, meaning locale or soil. Hence, we drink Champagne or Bordeaux, wines named for the region in which they were produced. In America, as in most of the rest of the world, wine is classed by grape variety. Here we drink merlot, or pinot grigio, or riesling. Champagne, which is made primarily from chardonnay grapes, might be most properly called "sparkling chardonnay."

The whole mystique of French wines was (and is) based on the belief that the same grape vine planted in two vineyards a few miles apart will produce different types of wine. It sounds silly, and probably is on some levels, but think about Vidalia onions. The special soil in that part of Georgia produces a special onion. Or so they say. Hence, French wines are unique and very special because of French soil, or so say the French.

Parker, an attorney by trade, gave up the law in the 1980s to devote his career to the reviewing of wines. His theory is that while French (or California or Australian, etc.) wines might be unique, they all be rated on an objective scale of 0-100. Hence an almost perfect French wine might rate a 98, but it is quite conceivable that a similarly made wine from, say, Chile, might rate the same. In theory that's all well and good, but suddenly French wines were no longer unique. Suddenly a good vintner in California had the same opportunity to produce as good a wine as one in Burgundy, so long as they were being rated on the same scale.

Parker, via his publication, *The Wine Advocate*, rates wines ranging from 96-100 points ("extraordinary") to 70-79 ("average") to below 60 ("unacceptable"). Wine shops now routinely display ratings from Parker or one of the other similar ratings systems that have sprung up in recent years. Theoretically, no matter how fancy the label or big the price, if the wine's not rated well, you should look elsewhere.

The net effect of all this had been to level the playing field in favor of the consumer. No longer can the mere origin of a wine guarantee its superiority. The French and others are now forced to compete in a world-wide market. It has also had the effect of degrading the value (and selling price) of average wine, especially that of small independent producers. No longer is a

fancy label and or catchy name sufficient to sell wine—consumers look for an objective rating. I am certainly no wine expert, but I am happy to have some objective guide to purchasing wine. The bottle that I'd ordered that night in the restaurant was a good example of something I will remember, if only never to make the mistake of ordering it again.