

The hierarchy of wine quality

WARREN WINIARSKI

I returned recently from a sales trip to Los Angeles. In a popular restaurant I visited, the wine-by-the-glass list was interesting in that the most expensive wines on the list were French. The restaurant manager said the wines were "selling well" — notwithstanding the fact that they were priced at almost twice the nearest California wine.

Why is the public willing to pay more money for the French wine? Why does it perceive these wines as offering higher quality — more pleasure — greater enjoyment — a more interesting experience, "something special" and therefore worth the extra money? The fact that these wines are perceived as offering something special would appear to present a challenge to California producers — what is it that they have that we do not? Or cannot get? Assuming we can get it — do we want to?

The topic is interesting and timely. Interesting because the difference between the French wines and our own is explored, pondered over, and wrestled with by not a few California producers. Timely because, not too long ago, at another marketing seminar (WITS '86-Ed.), and perhaps to some of you here, a respected member of the wine industry advised us to forget what the French think and to strike out on our own . . . "Make wine for Americans" undeterred and uninfluenced by the example and patterns of French winemaking. The advice was, for example, to follow the beer industry in its innovative packaging and marketing techniques. Now, however meritorious this suggestion may be, — and I think in certain respects it has much merit, and is a bold and provocative suggestion — in other respects the suggestion needs much modification. Because, for example, it assumes a monolithic French structure. Yet this is far from true, since the French have the same variety of quality levels and a similar range of marketing possibilities in regard to types, sizes of container, etc. as we do. Thus we are, so to speak, in the same boat.

In other respects, the suggestion runs counter to the *need* of many small producers to look in the French direction to get their bearings for their styling of the classical varietal wines which they produce.

In this situation, it appears difficult to look in another direction without losing our landmarks and, thereby, our way. So there is some perplexity here.

Let us take a fresh start by making an assumption. The assumption is that in every class of product, there is a hierarchy of qual-

ity associated with its examples, and that there are those examples which most truly represent the whole class by being at the peak of the hierarchy.

Thus, being able to establish such a hierarchy presupposes that there are common standards of excellence. And that these standards of excellence, these models of virtue, transcend the barriers of the old and the new, the near and the far, as well as regional, national or geographic borders.

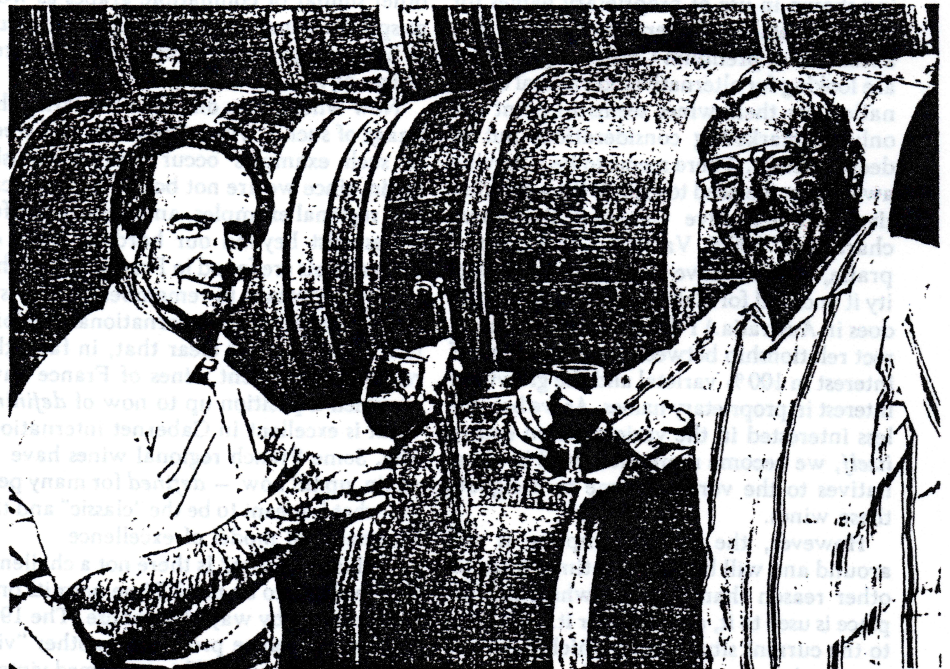
It is clear by our actions and our thinking that many producers as well as many customers of that restaurant I speak to you about, regard the finest of the French wines as examples of excellence of a very high, if not the highest, order.

To the extent that this is true, then the French wines indeed have gone beyond the regional standards of excellence and can be considered to embody standards which are not regional merely, but are international or "classic" in character. Here is an example of the polarity between regional standards and international or classic standards. Recently I judged at the Royal Agricultural Society show in Sydney, Australia. The Australians have a varietal called Shiraz. It

is well suited to their growing conditions. It makes palatable wines, and they have long relied upon it for their standard reds. In their terms, there are even "great" Shiraz vintages, and there is much pleasure among the Australians in assigning differences to the quality levels.

Yet outside of the region, and on the international scene, the varietal is not highly prized, and is of limited marketability. The regional excellence of the wine, no matter how elaborated, does not seem to translate beyond that. It has little international currency. The Australians know that. They have a dilemma. To the extent that they look beyond their own corner of the world, they are, in a way, at war with themselves. They want to be loyal to their own regional qualities of excellence. And yet, looking beyond these qualities to the classic standards — they know they cannot leave it at that and gain any distinction.

So what about ourselves? We have our own standards of excellence. We are in some respects like the Australians: we have the two Rs — Richness and Ripeness; these qualities are characteristic of our regional excellence. Do we, in pursuit of this regional



Warren Winiarski (left) of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars and Carl Doumani of Stag's Leap Winery toasted the end of their long legal feud with a glass of Accord, a special joint bottling of 1985 Cabernet Sauvignon. The occasion marked an end to almost 15 years of litigation between the two Napa Valley winemakers over the use of the Stag's Leap brand name and the use of a stag as a trademark. Late last year the courts decided that both men had a right to the name. The wine will be mostly for the private use of the vintners, except for one lot which was sold at the Napa Valley Wine Auction in June.

CONTROLLING BIRD DAMAGE ON TABLE GRAPES

A two-year test involving use of two bird repellents and standard plastic netting has been conducted in a vineyard at California State University, Fresno. Writing in the California Agricultural Technology Institute newsletter, Sayed A. Badr reported that use of netting is the most effective way to reduce bird damage in vineyards. But it is expensive and probably not cost-effective for a large commercial operation.

Birds—primarily house finches and starlings—caused a 30 to 40% crop reduction on a two-acre plot of table grapes at CSUF in 1983. Flame Seedless, Ruby Seedless, Perlette, Beauty Seedless and Delight were favored by the birds.

In a 1984 test involving the use of *Mesurool*, a commercial pesticide, and *Sevana*, a newly-developed repellent, and standard plastic netting the grapes were harvested, then weighted, segregated and sorted by degree of bird damage into four groups: no damage, mild damage, moder-

ate damage and severe damage. Only no-damage and mild-damage grapes were considered marketable. Organoleptic evaluations also were made to determine the effect of the repellents on flavor.

Grapes tested were Flame Seedless and Ruby Seedless. In the 1984 tests, Flame Seedless data showed that netting and *Sevana* treatments produced significantly more undamaged fruit and organoleptic evaluations showed no detectable effect on fruit flavor. In 1985 tests, plastic netting was again the most successful, with a 100% yield of undamaged fruit. In the 1985 tests, *Sevana* was used in both powder and liquid forms and yielded more marketable fruit than control vines.

The report concluded that although bird repellents offer an alternative to netting, experimental results from *Mesurool* and *Sevana*, though promising, were not sufficient to serve as a basis for recommendation to grape growers.

excellence, express these qualities to the fullest degree, or do we try to under-express or understate them? One could raise this question to ourselves: Are the regional points of excellence in fact forms of excess which we must abandon or moderate if we want our wines judged by classic standards?

This question has been raised in quite a few forms recently, and it seems to me the very fact that it has been raised in so many ways points to the direction we are taking. It also appears that the so-called "food wine" interest stems from the same causes.

Another revealing sign of the change of orientation can be seen in interest that is being shown in use of proprietary names for certain premium Cabernets. The fact that a number of premium Cabernet producers are looking for alternatives to varietal designation for their wines seems to point not only to marketing considerations but to deeper causes. There seems to be a moving away from the need to express the authoritative and definitive Cabernet Sauvignon character. "100% Varietal," as a term of praise, does not have the ring of authenticity it once did for Cabernet; (although it still does in Australia.) I think that there is a direct relationship between the weakening of interest in 100% varietal and the growth of interest in proprietary names. As we become less interested in the varietal as an end in itself, we become more interested in alternatives to the varietal name to designate these wines.

However, the varietal impulse is still around and will be for some time, if for no other reason than that the whole market place is used to it, and looks for it. This leads to the current situation in which there are two main approaches to the styling of Cabernet Sauvignon: (1) the varietal approach; (2) the chateau or proprietary approach.

(1) Now the varietal approach seeks to maximize the varietal character possessed by the grape variety in making the wine.

(2) The proprietary (or the transformed varietal) approach seeks to modify the varietal character of the wine, in general, by moderating it. Thus, the distinguishing impression of the wine does not have its source in the varietal, but in the varietal as transformed by the choice of a proprietor or a particular winery manipulation.

The varietal approach seems to be guided by the view that the character of *Cabernet Sauvignon* grapes must be articulated, emphasized and delineated in the wine.

The proprietary approach, on the other hand, guided by an image of a complete, perfect red wine in itself, uses Cabernet or other similar or compatible grapes as well as specific winemaking techniques to serve to bring about such a wine as the image requires of it.

Now where does one look to clarify the image of such a wine. Obviously, wherever such examples occur and, obviously again, since we are not bound by the local and regional examples, and since beautiful wines exist beyond our borders, some of these models are found in France — and this is very important to remember — this is a specific region of the international possibilities. Now is it not clear that, in fact, the regionally excellent wines of France have occupied a position up to now of defining what is excellent in Cabernet internationally. Some French regional wines have — again, up till now — defined for many people what is meant to be the "classic" and the international model of excellence.

Is this to endure? Is there not a challenge here waiting to be met? Time permits only one example by way of response. The 1982 harvest in France produced another "vintage of the century." This acclaimed vintage has many of the characteristics normally associated with the regional excellence of California: a certain abundance, generosity and amplitude. Many of the outstanding French growths of that year have alcohol in excess of 14%. How are we to respond to this flat-

tering imitation of our virtues? Not, I suggest, by freely abandoning ourselves to the principle of maximizing our regional virtues, but rather by recognizing how to fashion our wines to make best use of the riches we possess while still practicing restraint.

We have to look more closely at the relation between restraint and richness in our own wines as well as others — so that to the two Rs I spoke about earlier we add this crucial third — restraint. In other words, we are now ready to look beyond the qualities of our regional excellence to those which transcend them. We can and should be thinking about how to embody in some of our wines those qualities of structure, magnitude, scale, highlight, subtlety and balance which will make them into compositions worthy of attention and interest on a world scale. *Why shouldn't we put our regionally excellent wine in a position where they would define the "classic"?*

Some recent investigations have shown that such a goal will also require us to rethink our approach to grape growing. The adage that wines are made in the vineyard applies here. Our earlier efforts were made in the direction of making vigorous, healthy vines. It certainly appears now that this excess vigor can be a negative for wine quality. We have a problem of vigor in the vineyard, and need to learn to bring this vigor under control by spacing, canopy management, and other techniques.

Another contribution to achieving classic standards would come from understanding the longevity requirements in these wines. It appears that some of the wines made under the new regime did not age gracefully. While not making a fetish of this concern, as some have done, some attention to this factor seems appropriate: balance and moderation of the component parts of the wine appear to be the keys to longevity rather than massive structure.

This question of scale and magnitude for our international class wines brings me to some concluding observations. Normally the French, by their techniques of vinification, appear to be striving to maximize (for this class of wines) what they are getting from their grapes. We, on the contrary, appear to need, for this same class of wines, to exercise a certain moderation. This 180° difference of approach appears to be occasioned by the difference of our climates. Their leanness appears to be opposed to our fat. If the vintage of 1982 is any indication, they appear to be headed in our direction. If the restraint exercised in some of our practices is another indication, we appear to be headed in theirs. If the perfection we both seek is thus somewhere between us, then we appear to have greater scope for the exercise of art and choice, in the way we proceed, and in the natural qualities of our fruit. Our fruit, if we can come to terms with its inherent dangers and tendency to excess, offers greater opportunity to reach perfection for our wines.

Having shown what we can do with our fruit, it appears that we have now the information to consider what we ought to do.

The American (California) classic wines, of admirable proportion, finesse, symmetry and beauty are within our grasp.

It has been said that we should "Americanize" our wine making techniques for the American market. I believe this is only partly true. It applies, in part, specifically to those wines which are not capable of more than regional excellence. For them, certainly, we should accommodate our tastes. But we would be holding our sights too low if we applied this principle to the wines which are capable of competing in the world class. For these wines, we should look to the great models of excellence wherever they may be found, and nourish our vision accordingly. Only by this nourishment will we attain the stature our wines deserve. ☐

(Winiarski, co-owner of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Napa Valley, made these remarks at the CSU/Sonoma Wine Marketing Seminar earlier this year.)

Import News/Wine Merchant®

The United States and Spain have reached "provisional agreement," heading off a trade war with the European Common Market which had brought about U.S. threats of retaliation against European wine.

The agreement, announced in Washington, said that Spain will allow American imports of corn and sorghum to continue at current levels, at least until the end of the year when final agreement is expected to be reached. A similar agreement was reached with Portugal in May.

The U.S. had set July 1 as a deadline for agreement before imposing a quota on European wines and other products. Although the quota itself was generous, there was a possibility of additional tariff duties being imposed.

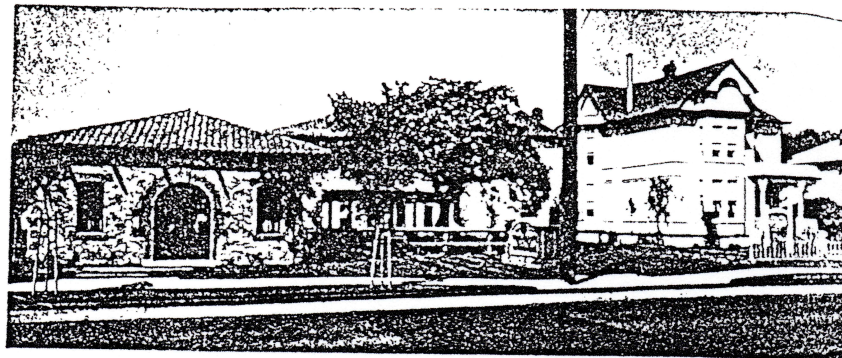
The problem with Portugal and Spain came about when the two Iberian peninsula nations joined the Common Market on January 1. That move, according to the Reagan administration, made both nations subject to the Common Market's protectionist agricultural policy, leading to quotas that would have cost U.S. farmers at least \$1 billion a year.

■ Menetrey Imports of Santa Fe, N.M. is introducing two lines of wine from South America, a Chilean brand called Villarica and an Argentine brand called Esmeralda.

The Chilean wines will be on the market first, with a Chardonnay, a Sauvignon Blanc, a Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Blanc. The Argentine wines will follow in the fall, according to Paul Kinslow of Menetrey.

The wines were sourced and in some cases blended by Roland Menetrey, the company president. They will be in national distribution and priced under \$4.

Menetrey can be reached at (505) 984-8666; P.O. Box 2753, Santa Fe., N.M.



OLD WINERY HAS REOPENED

The Joseph Mathews Winery, a 108-year-old winery in downtown Napa, Calif. has reopened as a producing Napa Valley winery after years of inactivity. The stone structure, at 1711 Main Street in Napa, is on the national register of historic places. Robert Pitner is owner and president of the win-

ery and Bruce Rogers is the winemaker of the 36,000-gallon capacity operation. Both champagne and table wine are produced.

The restored winery enclave includes the Sherry Oven Restaurant and Seafood bar and the Hennessey House Bed & Breakfast Inn, a restored Victorian residence.

■ A reference work of value to U.S. wineries exporting to England has just been published. It is the Wine & Spirit Trade International Yearbook 1986 (EVRO, 55 Heath Road, Twickenham, Middlesex TW11 4AW, England). The annual lists

U.K. agents of 75 California wines and their agents plus eight Idaho wines, one from New York, three from Washington State and one from Oregon. Geoffrey Roberts & Associates lists 22 California wines. Win Crush Wines has 18 U.S. wines: seven from California and seven from Idaho, plus the Oregon and Washington listings. Also included in the Directory are U.K. firms in the wine and spirit trade and a new listing of English and Welsh vineyards. ☐

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