

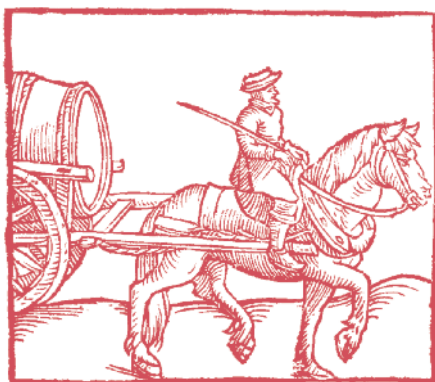
SEAN THACKREY



WINE · MAKER



INTERVIEW



**M**any years ago, Tim Gaiser, then sommelier at the Cypress Club in San Francisco, interviewed me as part of a series he produced for the restaurant's newsletter. For once, *🍷* for better or worse, the interview seemed to bear some resemblance to my own voice - a rarity in a universe of misquotation - so I thought it might be useful to continue it here. It's just questions and answers, mostly little changed from the original interview, the rest an ongoing aggregate of questions I've most often been asked since, along with, I admit, a few no one ever asks, but I think should.

*The quote below is from A.J. Liebling's advice to journalists, but also applies to wine-makers, for whom the freedom of a different kind of press should be, and for me clearly is, important as well.*



FREEDOM OF THE PRESS BELONGS  
ONLY TO THOSE WHO OWN ONE

*Q :: How did you get into winemaking?*

*A ::* A passion for the pleasures of great wine, and a desire to add to those pleasures by my own work. Not by imitating the wines I admire / something I've never done / but by acquiring through the experience of their pleasures a sort of classical education, by which I mean an evolved sensuality: an intuition for the possible pleasures of wine similar to the sense a classical education might give a writer for the possible pleasures of writing.

*::* And then, when I first actually did the work itself, I was amazed to find that I felt so completely at home. I loved the fact that it happens purely from the inside out, improvised from within the material just as it presents itself, with a sense of mystery and no safety net.

*::* It's still that way. Each time we get back from harvest, I turn off the engine, climb down from the cab, and look back at the truckbed stacked with grapes, tons of them, in hundreds of boxes. I just look. After a very particular moment of silence, I say to myself, "OK, Sean, there it is. Do something."

*::* It's very carnal, very immediate, and very real. It's right there in front of you each time, and whatever you have to offer either works right there, or it simply doesn't count.

*::* Winemaking consists in bottles of wine, not in wine-makers' intentions. That suits me perfectly. The first time I made wine, I knew I had found my vocation.

*Q :: Did you have any formal training?*

*A ::* In art history & philosophy, to say the least. But then Irish ancestry doesn't dispose me to training; I prefer study.

*Q :: But no degree in wine-making?*

*A ::* Well, so far as I know, no such academic degree is offered, by any institution, anywhere in the world. If this seems as strange as the fact that there's no word for "winemaker" in French, so it is; and it's equally true.

*::* What is so often taken to be the same thing / and so often pretends to be / is a degree in enology. That's an absurd confusion, and on the part of enologists, an arrogance, which of course can be quite damaging.

*::* Enology is the scientific study of wine, and is a perfectly valid and useful set of technical tools in its own right; but it isn't winemaking any more than "food science" is cooking. To pretend to train a winemaker by a degree in what is, essentially, beverage processing technology, makes no more sense than the pretense that a degree in food processing technology is the proper preparation for a chef.

*::* If chefs were trained the way winemakers are, you'd rarely eat out.

*Q :: So, no enology degree from UC Davis?*

*A ::* Well, no; pretty clearly not. I avoided it, partly for the reasons I've just mentioned, and partly because I just don't learn well that way anyhow.

*::* I've always had to reinvent the wheel to learn almost anything, and academic education, even at its best, rarely can take time for that. It wants conclusions, and tends to impart them along with a mind-set that makes them difficult to question, because their logic, which may be quite reasonable, makes them seem true. Unfortunately, while perfectly reasonable, they may be false.

:: In winemaking, this can lead to some serious problems. It is, after all, an art. You really do have to learn your tools by using them yourself, from within the work itself.

*Q :: But you're not saying that science isn't useful in winemaking, are you?*

*A ::* I'm not saying anything of the sort! I'm saying that no matter what my adoration for my Zeiss phase-contrast microscope or my worship of the utility of malolactic chromatography, science simply is not the essence of the process, and to believe that it is, is a fatal error. When science is useful, it can be acquired, used as a tool should be used, and kept in its proper place.

:: Back, as always, to the obvious analogy, does anyone ever suggest that gastronomy is a matter of crunched numbers, real figures, hard data, and all the rest of it? Of course not. To begin with, art isn't about reproducible results; science is, technique may be, but art isn't. Art is about unreproducible results. Even being "consistent" begins with the realization that each result / and certainly each wine / is an unreproducible result. It isn't even possible to open the same bottle twice.

:: All the science in the world isn't going to tell a chef what to do with a chicken. It may suggest some experiments and may explain some results, but the only result that counts is a better-tasting chicken, and the only judge of "better" is the pleasure the chicken gives the palate, and the essential job description of either chef or wine-maker is to make that judgment correctly, right now, right here, while the pan's still on the flame.

:: Nothing / absolutely nothing / counts here but the palate. Everything depends on the quality of its pleasures, just as the greatness of a painting depends on the quality of the pleasures of the painter's eye, and the greatness of a poem on the quality of the pleasures of a poet's ear. Nothing should deceive a winemaker into thinking otherwise about what matters in wine.

:: But I'm afraid that's exactly what enological training does. It says, "here's the science; the art will take care of itself." Actually, it's just the other way around.

*Q :: Is that why there are so many mediocre wines, and so many wines that taste alike?*

*A ::* Yes, it may even follow from what I was just saying. It may even make mediocrity sort of interesting, since if everything here depends on qualities of pleasure, then mediocrity must itself be a pleasure, which I think it is. It is one of the mysteries, because it is itself such a quality of pleasure. It actually fulfills a desire. It's no good saying that it depends only on inattention, indifference or lack of inspiration, because mediocrity can stay mediocre in the face of pleasures incomparably greater than itself.

:: What is it that mediocrity defends by offering such a powerfully anaesthetic counter-pleasure of its own? I can only think of Jean Giraudoux's observation / one of my mantras / that "only mediocrity is always at its best".

:: Perhaps that's the pleasure of it —the reassurance, the philistine dark side of "home cooking" & "comfort food"; since it doesn't have to be "good" to be loved, neither do you, and for many people, that's what love is. So perhaps mediocrity is a pleasure because it's so oddly reassuring.

:: But look, I don't really pretend to get it. I can't answer you. I'll have to leave it that mediocrity exists because there's a major market for it.

*Q :: How would you describe the market for your own wines?*

*A ::* Someone once asked me why they should buy my wines, when there are so many others out there; I replied that there are many people out there, too, but only a few are friends. They aren't interchangeable, and I like the thought that my wines would be prized for that - for offering pleasures uniquely their own. Of course this means my wines will have an equally individual audience, for that very same reason; after all, while they may be my friends, they won't be everybody's.

:: So I like to think of myself as making wine first of all for myself, not from ego, but as a plain necessity of procedure. I have to make the decisions and carry out the work, and I don't know any other way to do that other than to proceed according to my own pleasures. But this does simplify the question of offering those pleasures for sale. Since I never offer wines I don't enjoy drinking myself, my entire "marketing strategy" (!) is to find those whose pleasures agree, and then never disappoint them.

:: No doubt there are wine-drinkers, mostly Republican Bordeaux collectors, fortunately, who can't understand why anyone would like my wines; others think they're some of the best wines they've ever tasted.

:: Well, guess what, I want my wines to go to the second group.

:: That's their natural market. We agree about what we enjoy, and that simplifies life in the best way. Since I never release a wine I don't like, I can be quite confident they're going to like the wines I do release, simply because I like those wines myself. In that sense we agree about what good company is, and good wine should never be less than that.

:: Really, now: why have dinner with a wine whose company you wouldn't enjoy if it were a person?

:: The Pleiades is a perfect example, since its only intention is to be good company. But what is one's idea of good company if not the immediate expression of one's personal pleasures? When I used to eat at La Coupole in Paris years ago, I'd be seated next to a hooker taking her dinner break, or a Marxist accountant, or a pig broker and his wife from the Auvergne, and I'd find out all sorts of things which I hadn't had a clue about before; while being benevolently supplied with Belons and Sancerre, confit and Vacqueyras, and of course I'd wish I could eat out there every night. I want the Pleiades to be that sort of company; on the other hand, that isn't the sort of company everyone wants.

*Q :: But, do you really think that's a good approach to wine in general?*

*A :: Absolutely, unequivocally, yes, I do. I think the experience of a new wine should be approached as openly as the experience of a new person, and I'm very strongly arguing for openness in both cases.*



:: Restricting ourselves just to wine here, it has to be depressing to see the sterile filtration so many people put a wine through before they've even tasted it, and worse, the fanatic set of puritanical checkpoints the wine has to pass through before they think it's safe to enjoy it! It's as though the most humiliating mistake would be to enjoy a wine you weren't supposed to! As though it's more important to taste the label than to taste the wine!

:: And even when such an one so condescends actually to taste, still, "well, yes, it was the best wine I've ever tasted, but I had to mark it down, because it wasn't typical", as though the most important quality of a wine was to be generic! Or perhaps it violated the unbending rule that 13% is fine, but 15% is the End of Western Civilization! And so on and on...

:: It should be so much simpler, and yet the results so infinitely more complex.

:: You pop the cork. You pour a little in the glass. You savor what you've poured.

:: What does it mean to savor? It means to think, but in terms of the entire reciprocal presence you experience. The rational faculty is there of course, ratcheting away as it always does, but it's nothing like the whole perception, and celebrating the whole perception is exactly what savoring is.

:: So let the process happen, with the censorial function turned off for the moment. If that's not possible for you, seek therapy. Let the wine speak its own language, try to savor what's coming forth, and leave the possibility open that this may lead to something unique and interesting, perhaps even really enjoyable.

:: Or, if you think this is pointless because great wine was, say, defined by the classification of 1855, and anything else is thus by definition less, why bother tasting anything new?

:: Is it simply because nobility obliges you to endure so tiresome a fate?

:: Is the unrequited nobility of your palate really the problem we're facing here?

:: Anyway, I can't tackle the whole thing: the question of who takes pleasure in what and why is far too splendid, weird, and complex.

:: In the meanwhile, at least it's fair to ask, why waste an open bottle on a closed mind?

:: To Be Continued ::



:: Native Wines ::

