



INTRODUCTION

Some people will never learn anything, for this reason, because they understand everything too soon. —Alexander Pope

I owe my life in wine to two people: Hugh Johnson and Rod Stewart.

Rod came first. It was a Faces concert at the late, lamented Fillmore East on Second Avenue in New York City. Somehow I'd scored a front-row seat. Faces concerts in those days were like big drunken ramshackle rehearsals, with lots of boozy bonhomie. Rod would swig from a bottle of Mateus Rosé, and on one occasion he passed it down to some twitching rocker in the front row, who took a greasy hit and passed it along. Then it got to me. First sip of wine. I *hated* it. Passed the bottle to the next guy. Finally the last hippie handed the bottle back to Rod, who pantomimed being seriously pissed off to find it empty.

Metamessage for me: wine is cool, rock stars drink it. I want to *be* a rock star. This was crucial information. I had to at least pretend to like wine.

Looking back all these years later, I see that this was the very moment wine, or the *idea* of wine, came to reside in my life. Not because I liked the stuff, but because I'd absorbed the idea that wine was crucial as a social-sexual marker.

As I grew older, I (and my girlfriend du jour) would often score a bottle of wine—most of which I hated—for a Saturday night. The first wine I ever drank and actually wanted to drink again was . . . (here go my credentials) *Blue Nun*. It was a novel feeling to enjoy drinking wine. It was a relief to drink something with low alcohol and fruitiness.

I'd lived in Munich, Germany, as a middle schooler; my father was head of the Voice of America's European division from 1965 through 1968. Those middle-school years are when you form your persona and self-image; the bands and clothes you like, what pack you prefer to run with (or which pack will have you). For me, this seminal time was forever connected to being in Germany, and I was eager to return someday. I took what purported to be a hiatus from college and went with my girlfriend to Europe, where we drove around in a severely beat-up old Opel we bought on the street.

After many months of wandering, we ended up back in Munich, since old family friends had told me the army usually had jobs available for civilian "components" of the Department of Defense, and of course we'd run out of money in a fraction of the time we'd imagined. This, improbably, is where Hugh Johnson comes in.

Our Saturday evening bottle soon morphed into our Friday *and* Saturday evening bottles, which in turn became Friday-Saturday-Sunday. We liked drinking wine more often—fledgling

sybarites, you see. I shopped for wine each week, and all of it was supermarket plonk. Then three things happened.

I'd bought a random bottle we happened to like a whole lot, and when I went to buy more it was all gone, *ausverkauft*, never to return. The moral: when the wine's good, buy more fast. Thus was born a wine cellar, a terribly important way of describing our few dozen bottles on plastic store-bought racks. But any bunch of wine in excess of what you're drinking right now is a de facto cellar, and now I had one.

Second, I bought a bottle of something called "Riesling" for the first time. This was different! I had never tasted a wine with so *much* flavor that wasn't "fruity." It tasted like mineral water with wine instead of water. I needed to know what this odd new thing was.

One of our benefits was access to the army library, and one of the books in the army library was, yes, Hugh Johnson's *World Atlas of Wine and Spirits*. "The pictures are pretty, in case I can't deal with all these words," I reassured myself. But what words they were! Open to any page and there was something, an urbane turn of phrase, a stray bit of poetry, and, most striking to me, an unabashed emotionality. The Saar (which I could reach in a few hours' drive) "makes sweet wine you can never tire of: the balance and depth make you sniff and sip and sniff again . . . every mouthful a cause for rejoicing and wonder."

Rejoicing and wonder? All right, I can see rejoicing; I mean, after all, there's a moment of rejoicing in the first bite of a perfect cheeseburger if you're alert to it. But wonder? Was there more to this whole wine thing than I'd imagined? Was wine an object of beauty?

So I set about locating the wines Johnson wrote about, as best I could, and as best I could afford. I tried to taste them more attentively, to see whether they spoke to me. Sometimes they did, and sometimes I was groping. But the pictures in the book sure made wine country look pretty. Maybe it was time to see for myself.

And since we lived in Germany, and since these were the days before German wine became uncool, German wine country was the shortest distance from us. Armed and provisioned with maps and lists of recommended vineyards and producers, off we went. We parked at the edges of many wine villages, and went knocking on winegrowers' doors.

I don't suppose many of the growers we visited had ever been dropped in on by some hirsute freak with a list of geeky questions and a minuscule budget. But to my immoderate good fortune, then and many times since, I found German winegrowers to be *the* most generous and hospitable people I'd ever encountered. If you were interested and curious, there were few limits to the time they'd take or the samples they'd pour. If I asked about vineyards, they'd grab my arm and walk me up into the hills, explaining minutiae of geology and microclimate; if I asked about vintages, out came the bottles and the corkscrew. I protested lustily, but for naught. I said I needed to buy small amounts of a lot of *different* wines so that I could learn by surveying, to which they answered, Buy what you buy, it's no problem.

My entire world changed. It was May 1978, and I had found the thing I didn't know I was seeking. Or it had found me.

Wine, I discovered, could indeed be a thing of beauty. It could make you feel. It was endlessly changeable, and it played ever-wonderful variations on its themes; it wasn't just lovely, it

was *interesting*. It was made in beautiful countryside, by sweet-natured people. And in many wines there were flavors I couldn't begin to account for. Music was similarly evanescent, but music's effects could usually be described; happy, sad, eerie, morose, pastoral, ecstatic, tender . . . but wine? What was going on here?

I lived five more years in Europe and visited most of its important wine regions, spent far too much money on wine and far too much time obsessing over it, not to mention boring the eyelashes off anyone around me if, God forbid, the subject of wine came up. We are all a little insane when we're infatuated. But my run of good luck continued; I experienced each new wine region by actually being there, absorbing its vistas, smells, horizons, whether the dogs were on leashes or roaming free, if it seemed welcoming (like Burgundy) or austere and taciturn (like Bordeaux), and I did this with Johnson's (and others') prose playing background music in my mind. There is no better way not merely to learn but also to *know* about wine. I belonged to no tasting groups, attended no wine classes. There was no Internet with its bulletin boards and exchanges of geekery. I did it alone and feverishly. My girlfriend became my first wife, Tina, and she was a very patient woman. Wine, for me, became something most vitally *intimate*; only later did it become something I connected to social life and conviviality.

I was driven to write about it long before I had anything of value to say. I liked to write; it seemed to complete my experiences, both of individual wines and of wine in the abstract. Somewhere in a dusty old shoebox is a primitive manuscript of a wine book I had no business producing. I could find it, but I doubt I could bear to read it. Yet even that early need to catalog information and describe experience was helpful, not least when

I cannibalized sections of the book into magazine pieces for an American journal called *Friends of Wine*. They paid me! Spent the first check on wine, of course; 1970 Montrose and Las Cases, as I recall. Finally opened the Montrose after staring at it nostalgically for twenty-six years.

In early 1983, when I returned to the United States after ten years in Germany, I wanted a job in the wine business. Suffice it to say I made my way. My progress was hardly picaresque; it was tedious. But it was progress. I put together a little portfolio of German wines from most of my old friends. Years later I helped introduce the splendid new wines of Austria to the States, and, undeterred by the indifference and derision that had become my daily lot, I assembled a slew of small Champagne growers to sell to the wary trade, effectively strapping a safe to my back to add to the grand piano already there as I pushed my rock up an endless hill. I seem to have had a fiendish gift for selecting uncool wine categories. For reasons still obscure, German wine was dead in the water in the mid-eighties. Nine years later, no one had heard of Austrian wine except that they put antifreeze in it some time ago. And *no one* believed they could sell “no-name” Champagne.

It's not that I relished a challenge; I just wouldn't shrink from one. But I didn't go looking for weird or difficult wine categories, I just followed my odd little bliss. Years later, when interviewed for a magazine profile, I was asked, “So how does it feel to have perennially unpopular taste?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” was my reply then, and it still would be today.

In June 2008 I received the James Beard Award for outstanding wine and spirits professional, our industry's equivalent to

an Oscar. As I accepted the award I flashed back on those first formative years, overwhelmed with all I'd been given. This book will tell you how I got from those early quiet walks through remote, hilly vineyards to the longer-seeming walk onto the stage at Avery Fisher Hall after my name was called. It's time to give back. It's time to tell what wine can mean in a person's life.

But to do this I have to ask you to accept the ethereal as an ordinary and valid part of everyday experience—because the theme of this book is that wine can be a portal into the mystic. And we hate the very thought of the mystic, which seems so esoteric and inaccessible. But it isn't; it happens all the time.

A batter in a slump says (as one of my hometown Orioles did, just this morning), "It's like the ball is invisible." Another batter on a tear says, "I'm seein' the ball real good." Well, just what is happening here? It isn't mechanics; hitters and their coaches are seasoned professionals who know the basics. How does one describe these states of being in or out of "the zone"? I think we start by trying to describe what "the zone" itself is. And you can't do that without recourse to the mystic.

Musicians will sometimes reach zones of their own, often saying something like "I felt like a vessel through which the music was playing, as if I weren't generating it at all." And since that state exists but we don't know how to access it, what is its nature, and how do we find our ways to it?

My central argument is that wine can be a bringer of mystical experience—but not all wine. There are prerequisites, and I'll discuss them. In addition, there are collateral benefits to allowing oneself to be prepared for wine's mystical capacity. We also become sensitized to wine's *fun* capacity. But what is the process of cultivating this preparedness? That has been the subject of

millions of words on Eastern thought, but when has it ever been applied to wine?

It begins with understanding what a “palate” actually is, and how to truly know one’s own. It continues with cultivating a particular approach to wine, whereby one prefers the finer over the coarser virtues, the quiet over the noisy.

The ethereal can be forbidding when it isn’t grounded in counterpoint to the ordinary. I wish this book to be ethereal, since it is defending the mystic, but I don’t want it to be slack or nebulous. Neither do I want it to be too linear, though, because I don’t hold that all experience is reducible to logic. I understand the difficulty of using language to describe evanescent or ineffable states. But instead of surrendering vaporously (“such things are beyond words . . .”), I’ll confront the very limitations of language itself by asking what purpose it serves.

If you want to experience wine with your whole self—not only your mind and senses—the wine has to be authentic. And what confers authenticity is a rootedness in family, soil, and culture as well as the connections among them. These are aided by intimacy of scale. And they form the core of a value system by which *real* wine can be appreciated and understood.

Part of advancing this point of view is to identify what opposes it. It cannot suffice only to find the good and praise it, because the good is under ceaseless threat from the bogus and ostentatious. This tension forms the basis for a large quarrel between two sorts of wine drinkers, and they don’t always play nice. I’ll try to help us steer a decent person’s way through.

I was fortunate to learn about wine in the best possible way, in the Old World among the vines and in the company of the families who grew them. One could call this a “classical” educa-

tion, to learn the benchmarks of the subject firsthand, to place in the center what belonged in the center, and to appreciate the borders between the central and the peripheral.

In the end I'll share a few wine experiences with you, which will put these principles inside an actual life with wine.

If the text seems to meander or to sometimes repeat itself, I don't mind; in fact, I hope it does. It is less a strict cerebral argument and more a piece of a lifelong incantation. At times I might frustrate you by defining terms you already know, or failing to define terms you don't know. The actual you won't always be congruent with the many hypothetical yous I've had looking over my shoulder. I beg your pardon in advance.

Although this is not a wine primer, if I were an educator, the first thing I'd tell you is this: anyone learning about wines should begin in the Old World, where wine itself began. It's more grounded there. All things being equal, it is more artisanal, more intimately scaled, humbler, and less likely to be blown about by the ephemeral breezes of fashion. Its wines are made by vintners who descend from other vintners, often for a dozen or more generations. They are not parvenus, arrivistes, or refugees from careers in architecture, dermatology, software design, or municipal garbage disposal systems. They don't know about the wine "lifestyle," and if you tried to tell them, you'd likely draw a blank stare. You won't see a huge white stretch limo pulling out of their courtyards like the one I saw emerging ostentatiously from Opus One in the Napa Valley last year (I doubt it would *fit* in Ürzig or Séguret or Riquewihr or Vetroz). You'll never find *Bon Appétit* taking pictures in these growers' kitchens or at garden parties on the grounds.

Starting with Old World wines is also useful because they

don't do all the work for you. Non-wine people will wonder what I mean. Climate change notwithstanding, Old World wines (especially north of the Alps) have about them a certain reserve. They're not aloof, but neither are they extravagant, gregarious, life-of-the-party wines. They don't play at top volume, and they can seem inscrutable to people with short attention spans. They are, however, kinetic; they draw you in, they make you a participant in the dance. They *engage* you. They won't let you be passive, unless you choose to ignore them—in which case, why buy them? Yes, of course, I'm painting in broad strokes, but I won't clutter the prose with qualifiers; this is what I believe. Old World wines ask you to dance *with* them; New World wines push you prone onto a chair and give you a lap dance, no touching.

Other writers have clarified the disparate paradigms of Old and New World wines, and the rule of generalities applies; they are never more than generally true. Yet they exist for a reason. Notwithstanding the various honorable exceptions, New World wines are marked by a kind of effusiveness that turns the drinker from a participant into an onlooker. These big, emphatic wines put on quite a show: explosions and car chases in every glass. If you're new to wine, this can be reassuring. You get it. You needn't worry there are subtleties you don't grasp. But eventually such wines begin to pall.

Most New World wines cue off an Old World benchmark. The original is the great novel; the newbie is the made-for-TV movie based on the great novel. Not only is the complexity of the story squandered, but the entire experience of receiving it shrinks to a passive “entertainment” and obliterates the vital, breathing, imaginative life we bring to the act of reading.

Go on, call me opinionated! I accept it. But also call me a

man who stands for something. The alternative seems to be to stand for nothing, and that won't do.

I'm sitting at my dining room table with a glass of wine. On the walls around me are all the pieces of art I've collected. Laughably, these are mostly prints from calendars, but in my own defense they're Old World calendars with superior print quality! The scenes are all *peaceful*; they show cows, ponds, cows grazing near ponds, ponds reflecting the faces of cows, all these theta-wave-inducing scenes for which a city boy hungers. I have a stray thought: what will my son make of these? How will he remember them? Will they grow nostalgic for him; will he love them in retrospect? (I'm sure he finds them seriously boring right now.) My folks had a reproduction of a van Gogh that showed sailboats on a shoreline. It's probably famous. I saw it constantly when I was a kid. If I see it now, some kind of membrane grows permeable inside me. I don't even *like* the painting. But I'm plunged back into old, familiar waters. It's not associated with any discrete memory: I don't link it to my father burning the lamb chops or my mother cracking us all up. It is the sum of all the ethereal memory of being little, all the mystery of what I didn't know then and will never know, all the mystery of what becomes of the time, all the longing for what might have been said, said better, done better, how we might all have been better, starting with me. Sad, wondering, uneasy, oddly sweet.

Wine can talk to this thing in us. Some call it soul. Wine is not apart from this being within us. It doesn't have to be. It fits in tidily, and takes its place. All it needs is a soul of its own. It can't be manufactured; it can't have been formed by marketers seeking to identify its target audience. It needs to be connected to families who are connected to their land and to working their

land and who are content to let the land speak in its own voice. Wines like this are valid because they don't insist you leave 90 percent of yourself at the rim of the glass. This trait stands apart from how good they are; that comes after. Plenty of wine can be contrived to bring you to a kind of peepshow of flavor, if that's your idea of a good time. *True* wine takes its legitimate place as part of your entire, true being. You are complete and human. You have not been reduced to a consumer unit whose behavior can be anticipated.

I didn't know any of this in 1978 when I started. No one explained it. I was shocked later on when I saw that wine could be otherwise, could merely entertain with its noise and phony seductiveness. Wine, it seemed, could be just another thing, *product*, disconnected from any reason a human being should care about it. My spirit felt starved when the caring wasn't there. I found the any-old-soil, technical nirvana New World ideal to be vacuous and lamentable. And yes—*of course*—there's no end of schlock from the Old World, but the Old World is hospitable to meaningful wine in a way the New World hasn't yet attained. A couple hundred years from now, it'll be a different story. Or so I hope.

In the pages to come I will challenge many common fallacies about wine, and I will show how wine can enrich your life by describing how it enriched mine. This isn't any sort of challenge to you, innocent reader. I've always cringed at the self-help "wisdom"-dispensing swamis for the rebuke underlying their message: *You live these pathetic, suffocating lives because you're not as smart as I am, but I'll consent to get you smart for \$18.95 and a donation to my ashram in Boca Raton, Florida.* One of the great things about wine is that it will meet you wherever you manage to be.

I want to give you choices, and you can swallow what works for you and spit out the rest. I will make the case that wine belongs in a life of the soul, in an *erotic* life (in the Greek sense of *eros* as the force of life), but to encounter it there you have to be unsentimental and willing to demand authenticity from the wine and from yourself.

This doesn't guarantee exalted experience. It guarantees *real* experience. It guarantees that you won't have to curtail any aspect of your humanity to have a relationship with wine.

When my son was old enough to wonder what Daddy did, I had a hard time feeling satisfied with the answer that Daddy sold wine. I tried expanding it by explaining that Daddy sold wine he himself tasted and chose, but even then it seemed pretty mingy. Daddy sells stuff. Doesn't matter how adorable it is: Pop's a salesman.

How then does one define the larger questions? Is it even possible? It seems as if it must be, since I feel so stratified all the time. One layer is the garden-variety mercantile wine guy dealing with all the "issues" surrounding the zany categories with which I work. Everyone in the wine biz knows those issues: education, marketing, perseverance, dog-and-pony shows, "working the press." I try to be good at those things, or as good as my fallibilities allow. The other (perhaps deeper) layer is less concerned with the job and more concerned with the *work*. I have a voice in my head that always says, "Yes, *and?*" So if I ask myself what is the net effect of what I do, this voice propels me through ever more big-picture considerations.

I sell wine. *Yes, and?* I help ensure the prosperity of good artisanal winegrowers. *Yes, and?* I contribute to the continuing existence of cultures *containing* small artisanal winegrowers. *Yes,*

and? To remain sustainable, I need to tell people why this is a good thing. *Yes, and?* In telling people why this is a good thing, I have to detail the reasons, which compels thoughts of soil, of family (the two are often combined into the word *terroir*), of a person's proper relationship with nature and to his human history. In short, I have to assert *values*. *Yes, and?* In delineating these values, I find I can't escape matters of soul. *Yes, and?* If soul enters the equation, you can't select what it inhabits, because soul inhabits either all of it or none of it. So what I finally end up doing is placing wine in the context of a life of the soul. *Yes, and?* So now I am defending and delineating the idea of living with conscience, gratitude, eros, humor, all the things soul imbues us with. And further, I'm placing wine squarely within this matrix and insisting that we don't have enough time to settle for less. *Yes, and?* And we seem to need certain things: to know where we are. To be connected to something outside ourselves. To be connected to something *inside* ourselves. And the only wines that actually speak to our whole lives are *authentic* wines, which are themselves both located and connected. Confectured wines are not designed for human beings; they are designed for "consumers." Which do you want to be?