

THE PETER ALLAN SICHEL MEMORIAL LECTURE

TRANSCRIPT OF HUGH JOHNSON'S ADDRESS

Friends and colleagues, good evening, and thank you very much for braving the weather and coming here tonight. I know that it is a very special occasion, each January, for this body to meet. It is the party that gets the year going, so I have had no illusions about why you came; it's just jolly nice of you to stay on afterwards and listen to me.

A year ago yesterday, most of us, I think, were here in this Hall listening to Peter Sichel giving a talk, which frankly I am quite unable adequately to follow. It was a very thoughtful talk and taught us a great deal. You can well imagine that being asked to give the first lecture to be named in his memory is a deeply felt honour. You see, a practitioner of deep experience like Peter and a scribbler, however bottled aged, are very different creatures. But the reason I keep scribbling - for 37 years and counting - about wine, is because I deeply love it and sharing my feelings and ideas about it has really become second nature.

Why is wine so fascinating? We each will have our own answer to that question. To me it is really very simple, it is because there are so many kinds, and every single one is different. This is why I chose for the title for my talk this evening "The Identity of Wine" - how we identify the various sorts and grades of something which is infinitely various, and indeed why, and how we try to understand it. And when I have got through with my jottings, there will be time for you to add yours, because obviously we all have feelings on this.

It is clear that there are very few products, and certainly no agricultural product, which shares with wine the fact that "where it comes from" is the whole point. Its value lies in its identity.

What would you pay for a bottle of wine with no label? Precisely. The wine trade lives by labels and so do wine lovers. Yet far from there being a single convention about how we identify the wines from all the different regions, there are as many ways of doing this as there are regions. In fact there are far more ways of doing it than there are regions. So I thought I'd explore some of them and the philosophies behind them, how they started and how they are developing.

Leaving aside at this stage the great historic regions whose wines have evolved to make categories of their own, it seems to me that there are four fundamental facts that we might well expect to appear on all, or most, wine labels - what, where, who and when. That is, what grapes, from what region, who takes responsibility and the vintage date. They make up the most intelligible, simple label formula, - Riesling, Alsace, Hugel, 1996. This is pretty clear; its identity becomes clearer precisely where the vineyard is named. It could be called wine's variation on the Linnean system of nomenclature. Wine of course is a lot less simple than nature.

In fact that system could set an international standard, except - which is a very big except - wine producers, both collectively and individually, have egos. They want to tell you what they want you to know. And if the rules don't let them tell you on the front label, they'll put it round on the back. And since a round object doesn't have a front or a back, they can do more or less what they want with the label. They can have two labels with equal billing, one for the Authorities and one to do the selling job. This does happen as you know and you've seen them.

To see what a shambles labels can get into, just look at some of Italy's. Nothing will prevent a red blooded Italian grower from covering the paper with whatever names he pleases, in whatever order, so he gets in folklore, fantasy, the family, his grandmother too, the fattoria, the grape variety, even a DOC or an IGT might get in. So you find yourself looking at this label, thinking, "what the hell is this wine actually called?"

Now we go to the opposite extreme, to Germany, of the logical, literal pronunciation of exactly what happened to what and when. This goes on equally long but less sympathetically, or so it appears that many people think. I'm never quite sure why so many people give up half way through a German label, but it's a sad fact that they do.

Anyone looking superficially at the labels on the shelves over the past few years would say that things are changing in a certain, perhaps predictable way. They are all pointing in one direction; they are going away from the geographical or generic identities and towards varietals. The best way, of course, for the new wine regions to define themselves used to be by reference to old familiar ones. But as it became unacceptable or just too naff to call your red wine Burgundy and your white wine Chablis, the next step was to name the fruit.

Though, by the way, if anyone thinks this process is over, and this style of labelling quite dead, there is a current California wine, which I have seen billed as "true French-style Meursault".

Varietal labelling has been seen as the New World approach since it started in California,, I think it was in the 1950's. It started with that great wine journalist and importer, Frank Schoonmaker. So Chardonnay as a brand was an American invention, introduced only quite a lot later into Australia, South Africa and South America, not to mention of course,

Italy, Spain, and everywhere else. And you can time the arrival of this New World frontier back here in the old world, by the time they started doing it, and calling their Chardonnays, Chardonnay. But of course now, with Chardonnay, which has become probably the strongest wine brand name of all time, we can begin to see it unravelling. We can see the trend of dropping geography and embracing the varietal name going into the reverse. An age-old pattern is repeating itself. Labels are becoming more specific. From California, North Coast, Sonoma County, Anderson Valley, we get to “Old McDonalds’s ranch” and then finally to what the Australians so charmingly call a “single paddock”. And with more and more specific identification, of course, up creeps the price. The rule that a narrower geographical identity - a single vineyard - means a higher price and by inference quality, is pretty much general across the board. There are exceptions. It doesn’t exactly work like that with port, with sherry and champagne, wines dominated for centuries by merchant houses who saw brand building as their main priority. I suppose because, in the main, these are wines which need more fabrication, more secondary processing, ageing or blending, and the vineyards, the press and the cellar are not the end of the story. But even here now, we see some single vineyard sherries have appeared, there are a few single vineyard champagnes, there are certainly single quinta ports.

To see this process starting we can go back to when the Dukes of Burgundy started putting their foot down about growing Gamay, which they described as “disloyal”, and said that everybody had to plant Pinot Noir. Or even before that, to the Cistercians walling the Cbs de Vougeot and the Steinberg. They were narrowing the identity to raise the value. Just how narrow it got, and how much they were associating that with the quality of the wine, we can see for example, at Maximin Grünhaus, where part of this great vineyard is called the Abtsberg and made the wine for the Abbot and another part is called the Bruderberg, which is

what the poor old Brothers got to drink. Outside the cellars of Dukes or Abbots, such niceties had only a local application; they weren't used in any marketing way until the century which marks the beginning of modern wine, which was the 17th Century. It is no coincidence that sparkling Champagne, Bordeaux Châteaux, Port and Tokaj, to name just the most prominent, all emerged within the second half of the 17th Century. It was actually at the same time as that, although much less recorded and talked about, that the lawyers of Dijon, like the lawyers of Bordeaux, started buying land that used to be church land in the Côte d'Or. Bordeaux lawyers moved into virgin territory in the Médoc. In the Côte d'Or, lawyers started buying land from the Abbeys and the Cathedrals and investing in it. There was a general move towards quality and the money that could be made out of it. This was the time of the famous scrap between Burgundy and Champagne, about which wine was better for the Roi Soleil.

I think it seems evident now that one of the important reasons for this activity was alarm in the wine trade, that a host of new-fangled stimulants - chocolate, coffee, tea, spirits, beer with hops, even tobacco, were about to put their very primitive and fragile wine out of business. To know how fragile wine was in the 17th Century, you have to read that wonderful little book called "The Myserie of Vintners", which was published, not here, (*sic. Vintners' Hall*) but by the Royal Society in 1669, where it tells you what to do when your wine turns "ropey" or starts to "fret". This, by the way, is the book which indicates, without actually saying so, how champagne first came to sparkle in England. I was pleased by the way, to see Tom Stevenson, in his new book, corroborates this story - which is still very hard to sell in France!

There was another reason at the time, - very important, a longed-for means of controlling quality and hence fighting back for market share, against Nescafé and all the other things that

had just been invented. I mean, of course, the advent of bottles and corks. Until you had bottles and corks you were not going to ever have anything mature tasting and you were certainly not going to have any fizz. So at this point in history, we can see discrimination and identification beginning to take their modern forms. Most famously, in the creation of the Château by the go-getting Arnaud de Pontac with Château Haut-Brion. I'm sure you are familiar with the story about how he started a restaurant in London, sent his son over to sell Haut-Brion as a brand, how he immediately got a premium for it and the rest is history. So within a generation, First Growth Claret was a concept well understood, highly profitable here in London because this is the market that it was aimed at.

The first exact vineyard classification was dated 1700 and, if you will allow me one little plug, it was the Prince of Transylvania who classified the best vineyards of Tokaj into *primae*, *secundae* and *tertia* classes in 1700. So they were really beginning to think about how to name it, and how to sell it.

The new-coined concept of a Château brings into focus a fundamental split in how the identification of different wines was to develop. The Burgundian way, and also the German way, introduced by the monks, was based on *terroir*, meaning actually the soil - already in some places so finely discriminated that, as Lalou Bize once memorably said, she believes the monks actually tasted it. And they would need to, because the Côte d'Or does not give its secrets away.

It is hardly rocket science to say that a steep south slope, well drained, with slate soil, in a bend of the Mosel is potentially a top site to grow grapes, but learning the sub-soil layers in the Côte d'Or is another matter. What was started by the monks was gradually extended and

refined by the later owners who bought their land, as they realised how distinctive their wines could be if they vinified them separately. There was a priest called Claude Arnoux who wrote his "Situation de la Bourgogne" in 1728 and he said, "those who opt to make the best wines only put in the vat the grapes from the single vineyard". But who was to say what was a single vineyard? Those wall and hedges had been put in by people who had been discovering the differences for a long time but it was a long slog arriving at definitions. In fact, in Burgundy it is much more recent than we may think, because Burgundy didn't get its classification until after the Bordeaux one of 1855. Probably in jealous response, they decided to have a classification in 1861, the top vineyards were then classified as "tête de cuvée". The terms familiar to us now, "Grand Cru" and "Premier Cru" were not cooked up until the 1930's when the Appellation laws came into being and the whole thing was officially codified. There is incidentally, a very interesting book which has just been published by Mitchell Beazley (whoever they are!) called "Terroir", by an American geologist called Jim Wilson, and I do thoroughly recommend it because it goes deeper into the matter, literally, than any book has gone before.

You could easily regard the "Château principle" - that it is not the soil but who owns it, which identifies the wine - as the polar opposite of the "terroir principle". Much is made of the many changes of owners, boundary changes, amalgamations, which have made a logical nonsense of the old Bordeaux classification of 1855. Yet, of course, parts of Bordeaux are just as soil sensitive as the Côte d'Or. Pétrus and la Fleur Pétrus next door are yin and yang, (should that be yang and yin?) or Haut-Brion and La Mission or indeed Mouton and Lafite. Clearly there is great soil sensitivity and the fact that somebody owns one and somebody else owns another strikes me frankly as being a bit of a miracle - how did they know where to put that line when they were only just starting? Suppose that some new owner bought Pétrus and

la Fleur Pétrus and decided to make their wines together, besides there being a mighty outcry, there would be a sort of identity crisis. But I'm sure they would talk about added complexity to get around that one.

So what is the identity of a Château as opposed to a vineyard? It is the terroir. Yes it is, more or less, but at heart it is much more than that. It is this matter of a culture – it is inward looking, intense, competitive and repetitive. The object is to make each vintage as like the last as possible given the variables in the weather. The manager knows every vine. He's excited, he's frustrated or he's baffled as each season tries to blow him off course. But he's got this idea in his mind of what the wine is supposed to be like. He is very reluctant to change the recipe, because the identity of the wine lies in the combination of all the elements that make up the estate and its traditions. He's not certain what, just for one example, the resident yeasts in the vineyard or the cuverie bring to the wine, but he is going to be very careful about bringing in any other yeasts and will do everything very gingerly because he could blow it. And so a Château has an identity not only because of where it is, but because it sticks to what it knows - and it follows the suggestions of critics, popping in for a peek at the infant wine in April, at its peril. The spirit of the Château has to be kept pure.

Bordeaux's problem, as Peter Sichel said here last year, is that it has an unrealistic number of châteaux, and the egos that go with them. And the market, certainly the export market, can't handle so many marginally different wines in small quantities. They end up competing with each other, rather than against the Australians.

The obvious answer is the blended brand. If you think about the generic character of Bordeaux, it is even stronger than the character of the varieties that make it. You'll recognise Bordeaux even if you are not quite sure whether it's a Cabernet, Merlot or a blend – you will

know it is Bordeaux. It begs to be given access to a wider market by a more efficient marketing principle - but I'm wandering a bit off piste here! I think if anything proves that we like our wine to be complicated, it is our preference for Petit Château over, what I might call "Cuvée la Gironde".

Perhaps there is another reason for the different traditions in what we could call the Bordeaux school. The name could be applied to Chianti, Rioja, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, everywhere that is estate – rather than soil – driven, and the Burgundian and German monkish way of looking at it. Because Burgundy and Germany are one grape, or at least one grape at a time, regions and as it happens their grapes, above all Riesling and Pinot Noir, are the most transparent of all in character. You really can, or you should be able to, taste the soil through the limpidity of the flavours of the grapes. It is not that they are monochrome, no - quite the opposite, they are sensitive. And the beefiness of the Cabernet and its cousins blended together makes them opaque in comparison. It can take years and years of bottle age for the essential character of a Bordeaux Château to be revealed.

There is possibly a lesson in this for regions without long-studied pedigrees, and happily they are learning it. There is no virtue in single variety wines for their own sake unless they are perfect interpreters of a singular terroir. As far as I am concerned, we can hardly have too many experimental brews of this grape with that - at least in places where the terroir is still under investigation.

As I said, the legal codification of the terroirs of France had its origins centuries ago. It only came to a head in the 1930's with the Appellation Contrôlée laws. The first of which, funnily enough, was not about wine at all, but about cheese. It was Roquefort, which was the

defining moment because the first draft of this appellation only stipulated that the cheese should come from the Roquefort caves. In a second draft they realised what they had missed out and they gave the necessary variety, which was sheep's milk.

Since then, terroir and variety, hand in hand, have not only defined identity; they have had another role too, which is defending it. Sadly this otherwise praiseworthy aim has become distorted by politics, as any ambitious grower in France tormented by the civil service will tell you. The INAO regularly makes a fool of itself fighting rear guard actions for obscure and justly endangered grape varieties while preventing go-ahead growers from having a stab at something better. The outlawing of Riesling from everywhere except Alsace is only the most absurd of cases. Pierre Galet as you probably know, is France's senior ampelographer. He is so old, so senior, he actually was there drafting the appellation laws in the 1930's. This is what he said recently. "I have always regretted that the best quality varieties are not allowed everywhere in France leaving it to private initiative to experiment".

One can see the point of the French authorities. They want Burgundy to remain Burgundy, and so do you and I. They also want to stop any other part of France from competing with it. To put it into what they would call an "anarchical situation". Your "fonctionnaire" avoids discord like mint sauce. He is nurtured on the notion of degree - of hierarchy.

When Italy started on its DOC system 20 years after France, it put conservation even higher on the agenda. You probably remember how it works. To get a DOC, a deputation of producers has to convince the Roman office that there is a tradition of them making wine in a certain place in a certain way. That's it. It doesn't have to be the best way; it's just the way that they do it currently. Which is how the DOC for Chianti came to include Trebbiano,

which had no business in there, and to exclude Cabernet, which quite arguably did. But, as I said earlier, Italy is not France. The French recoil from anarchy whereas the Italians are world champions. "Snook cocking" started immediately with vini di tavola and the poor DOC started getting buried. The ingenious Professor Mario Fregoni produced what looked like a typically elegant Italian solution, a pyramid on top of which was single vineyard wines. We don't hear very much about it these days, while wines which are off the official "piste" proliferate all over the place.

Most of what I have said so far sounds as though place and grape and of course, grower and vintage are the only variables to worry about in identification. But, of course, there are hundreds of others. There is not much problem with the myriad eonological conventions which give one much more focus on identities, terms like brut, fino, oloroso, tawny, LBV, trocken, aszú, ausbruch, vendange tardive, virgin..... Such necessary descriptions are like 16-valve, or 4 wheel drive, or GTI - technical specs which are essential and generally uncontroversial stuff. "Gôut Américain" might be a useful addition to that, if a little more controversial, to designate a blockbuster with "gobs of fruit".

A much broader and vaguer area of claimed identity is the quality codings endemic in some wine countries. I mean terms such as reserve, reserva, gran reserva; some regulated, some not, and such "puff" as special selection, proprietor's cuvée, sometimes single vineyard (which.vineyard?), or often, I am afraid, vieilles vignes - how vieilles do they have to be? There are some very useful codes that have been introduced like this - in the Wachau in Austria we have Smaragd, - wonderful word, which really does mean a recognisable style of wine which is fiercely self-policed by its growers. If you have tasted Smaragd you will know it!

All this is very confusing for countries with no traditions to refer back to, which none the less are moving, and having to move, towards some kind of Appellation system - like the United States or indeed Australia. Australia has some marked and highly appreciated regional characters, but has a great reluctance to be pinned down to them. One suspects because the growers there might get too uppity. Pinned down they will be though, because they want to sell the wine in Europe. And Europe is making it a condition of access to its markets to play by some kind of recognisable version of the European rules. The burning question is what sort of identities of appellations, - the word they will probably use is "styles" - they will agree to be pinned down to. And I think that they are right to be reluctant to let Brussels hurry them. It is wonderful how a Shiraz from the Hunter Valley is a different beast entirely from one from Barossa. Coonawarra Cabernet and Margaret River Cabernet are totally different wines, Riesling from Clare and Eden Valley ditto; they have distinct and precious characters; not to mention Hill of Grace and other blessed plots. But it is also wonderful what Australia's great winemakers have done in the past by dreaming up and blending brands quite across the regions. Wines grown thousands of miles apart. I suppose not so unlike the curious old English habit of beefing up Lafite with Hermitage because we like it that way.

So terroir gives you the possibility of making unique wines in small quantities. But it shouldn't be allowed to force you to do that. Last year the Mondavis put on a conference in their winery to discuss the future AVAs, the American Viticultural Areas, in the Napa Valley. They asked top growers from each of the recognised sub-regions to come along with wines which to them epitomised the character of their patch - Carneros, Rutherford, Oakville, Spring Mountain and so on. To me, the tasting was not all that conclusive. It certainly was not conclusive enough to base any system of appellations on. At the same time there was

discussion about whether the AVA Oakville, or Yountville or Rutherford should include the whole township or just the benchland or go right down to the Napa River, or just pick the best bits. And who was to demarcate the best bits? - There was a long way to go.

What struck me, listening to this discussion, was that there was no point in rushing it. The identities that stick out a mile, whether they are Carneros Pinot Noir or Barossa Shiraz, should be accepted, respected and promoted. There are vineyard identities too which have already, in California especially, (and nobody would argue with Montebello, To Kalon or Benedict), really made their mark, but there needs to be a lot more dirt tasting before there can possibly be a general appellation system that will stick, and be as useful to consumers as it is to marketing departments.

It can't surely be coincidence that the most precise, pinpoint accurate distinctions of identity in the wine world are found in the regions that have been known and nurtured for longest.

Thank you.