

ANTE-VINTI-HELL  
NEUTRALS (UNRATED)

VACHERON

- 1. LIMBO (PRE-SPECTATION)
- 2. ESPOUSERS of "GRACIOUS LIVING"
- 3. WINEMAKING CONSULTANTS  
PROMULGATORS of "INTERNATIONAL" WINE STYLE
- 4. WINE TECHNOLOGISTS  
EMPLOYERS of REVERSE OSMOSIS, MUST  
CONCENTRATORS, PURVEYORS of "MEGA-RED"
- 5. THE AVARICIOUS, THE WINE  
CONGLOMERATES (PINOT GREEDIO ETC.)

CHYZ

- THE WALL OF DISSID
- 6. MANUFACTURERS of COLMATED CORKS,  
NATURAL CORKS, and SYNTHETIC "CORK-LIKE"  
CLOSURES

PHENOLEGETHON

- 7. THE VINE-OLENT
- AGAINST THE GRAPE: DRIP IRRIGATORS,  
NITROGEN FERTILIZERS, CLONAL SELECTORS,  
OVER-CROPPERS, PINGT NOIR CROWERS IN FRESNO ETC.
- AGAINST WINE CONSUMERS: OVER PRICERS,  
PRODUCERS OF OVERLY ALCOHOLIC, OVER-CAKED,  
OVER-EXTRACTED WINES, MERLOT MONGERS,  
MANUFACTURERS OF SWEET "DRY" WINES, ETC.
- AGAINST BACCHUS: INVENTORS OF GREEN  
HUNGARIAN, BLUE NUN, "WHITE" ZINFANDEL,  
RED TRUCK, WINE COOLERS, COASTAL MIST, ETC.

8. WINE MARKETERS

- SLAVISHLY IMITATIVE PACKAGERS
- FLANGED BOTTLE TOP AND CIGAR-  
BAND IMPLEMENTERS
- FRAUDULENT GEOGRAPHICAL  
DENOMINATORS
- PROPAGATORS OF CUTE  
WINE LABELS
- ANDRÉ SIMONISTS
- WINE  
THIEVES

9. TREACHERY

- ANTITODEA
- CONUNDREA
- DIAGEA
- ARGENTUM
- QUERCUS

LUCÉ

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# DA VINO COMMEDIA

BY AL DENTE ALLEGORY

*The Vinferno: Part III*



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## DE CANTO XII

"The god Bacchus suffered dismemberment, death and rebirth.  
And despite the *œnvil* that whine-men do, which is well observed,  
His spirit, the grape pip emerges, triumphant to prove its worth."

In colloquy, Noblet had touched upon a poignant nerve  
Anent the regenerative nature of the fruit of the vine.  
Might He, the Grape One, return to find *heavin* on earth preserved?

We had come through circles so unequivocally malign,  
I wondered what *malofactor*, what Rhône Estranger we might next meet.  
Grateful I was for these uplifting words, these pearls before Cline!<sup>2</sup>

Noblet and I meandered a bit and *toute de suite*  
We found ourselves ankle-deep in a bright red, slimy muck.  
Oddly enough, the oozy *rouge* appeared to be treacly sweet.

"*Maître*, my low karmic point score or perhaps our bad luck  
Has caught up with us at last, and we remain bloody well mired,  
Arrested, as a stressed-out ferment; how might we come unstuck?"

"No worries, old son; my own 'sell-by' date has long since expired  
I am but a pale shade of myself, barely an *eminence gris de gris*.  
But, mark, we shall not here perish, after all that's transpired.

"You travel under the aegis of *Mme. Lalou*; greatly feared is she  
By the vinferral minions, demijohn demiurges,  
Rutherford dust-devils, *vincubi*, yeastieboys & other *malo*-evolent *œntities*,

"These fearsome, blisteringly heavy-toast scourges  
Are in truth but *vinpotent* bureaucratic *Naparatchiks*,  
Ultimate *vin*insider traitors, fearful themselves of nitrogen purges."

While fascinating was Noblet's discourse on *vin*ternal politics,  
I remained creaked out by this slog-fest, this grueling mire-a-thon.  
Where in Hell were we, sinking doon & soaking up to high Brix?

Noblet: "We are in the marshy trenches of the River Phenolgethon  
A stream that flows a concentrated *teinteurier* red."<sup>3</sup>  
"But, whence, *Maître*, this syrupy stream, this rubescent Rubicon?"

"This singular Whine River exists, as it is said,  
To float the boats of sacchrophiliacs, a *malo*-practice I deplore."  
I had heard on earth a catchphrase that had stuck in my head:

"Twenty eight is the new twenty four."  
"The mania for *surmaturité* is a case of abnormal psychophenology,"  
Overripeness is all, for now and seemingly forevermore.

"Whinemakers are drawn to the *Cab*-alah, a mystical numerology.  
*Viz.*, numbers beginning with a 'nine' open the celestial gates  
And those nonically<sup>4</sup> impaired portend *vine*-ancial catastrophe."

1 If an Annotator might take some poetic liberties: 'Tis striking to observe the poet's recurring thematic/Anent matters vinous and porcine./Close observation may be slightly traumatic/regarding production of both sausages and whines.

2 It is believed that that poet may have had some suboptimal dealings with Mr. Fred Cline, *vis-à-vis* the sale of *mourvèdre* grapes at some point in the distant past.

3 The poet has already mentioned the ubiquity of red juice concentrate in *New World* wines.

4 The poet's disposition to neologism is here further evidenced. "Nonically impaired" would likely signify a point score that is absent a "nine" in the first position.

This was a topic 'pon which Noblet would oft dilate.  
But we were then distracted by the sudden appearance  
Of a strange whineman-beast whose visage seemed to adumbrate

My growing sense of horror at our present circumstance.  
'Twas the monstrous Vinotaur, run-rigged up in an *outré* outfit.  
Half man, half Red Bull, shooting fiery arrows,<sup>5</sup> clad in *toreador* pants!

This was no damned publicity stunt for *Archerony* Summit,  
Seeking vinfernal distribution for its new brand, "Flaming Arrow."  
But *mirabile dictu*, we became unmired and made a good run for it.

## DE CANTO XIII

I quivered still from our escape, which had been incredibly narrow.  
To be piercèd by a Vinotaur-dart or by *la maladie de Pierce*<sup>6</sup>—  
Either prospect horrified me *doon* to my deepest marrow.

My *Maître* essayed to distract me from my obsessive fears  
And to divert me from recurring thoughts of our parlous scrape  
By providing a running vinfernalogue of our present sphere.

"We are in the 7<sup>th</sup> Circle—the vine-olent against the grape."<sup>7</sup>  
I beheld the zidders who had been given to drip irrigation.  
Their lips were dry; their tongues hung out, mouths agape.

"To the great Bacchus it is a great aberration  
To countenance the wretched '*goutte-à-goutte*.'"  
'Tis like growing vines *en flowerpot*,<sup>8</sup> a fruit-abombination

"The plants are dumbed doon, lacking *gravitas* and adequate roots,  
They never become themselves; they remain an exquisite fake.  
Notions of *terroir* and sense of place are left forever moot."

The irritated irrigators were punished for their mortal mistake  
By the drip-drops contrived to fall just past their tongues.  
They were to æternally endure a thirst ne'er to be slaked.

We continued a ways and found that our eyes were stung  
By a powerful, acrid aroma that all around us fumed.  
We beheld a vast plain of large hillocks of dung.

To my horror I observed that men were therein inhumed.  
"Maître, who might these unfortunates be to given such a fate?  
How came they here, to end up so bonny well doomed?"

"These are the N<sub>2</sub> fertilizers—deployers of urea and nitrate,  
Contract growers who cared only for agronomic considerations,  
And thought that captive wineries their obscene yields would tolerate."

5 No problem in virtue of the elevated ethanol level and hence flammable nature of the River Phenolgethon, somewhat evocative of the Cuyahoga in the late '60s.

6 The poet's beloved vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mtns. was terminally afflicted by Pierce's Disease.

7 The punishments are far more ænerous for the truly malo-olent, who have committed zins of vine-olence and are dooned to the farthest circles. In comparison, the punishments meted out to those whose zins were of mere vincontinence, are classically considered to be more or less vinial.

8 When plants are dripped frequently in more or less the same area, they lose interest in growing roots outside that area, with numerous untoward consequences, including but not limited to inability to tolerate heat stress and a grossly compromised ability to absorb minerals from the entire soil profile. To the real point, they are incapable of truly expressing a sense of place.





I am ashamed to have beheld these *zimmers* with such exultation,  
But I gladly shoveled more clods of cow manure on their pates,  
High-fived Noblet and enjoyed a brief moment of *vindication*.

The fertilizers and overcroppers embodied greed *vincarnate*  
And the justice of their *ænternal* punishment was just sublime,  
So smugly certain had they been on earth and so unregenerate.

We then observed four gnarly “Doctor Dick”<sup>9</sup>-head-trained vines  
Who suddenly began to speak, which gave me a start.  
“What sort of vine-men are these who so glibly spout lines

Anent canopy architecture, pruning weight ratios, with pie graphs  
and charts?”

“They are the Talking Head Vines and can not cease their chatter,  
Needful they are of hard *arcane*-pruning, less gray matter, more heart.

“Great wine is mysterious and deep, neither formulaic nor *flatteur*.  
Technical mastery may be useful but can itself be a trap.  
One must look *vinwardly* to get at the real art of the matter.”

I had myself made wines that while “correct” were still utter crap,  
That is to say *vinonymous*, like fathering a child without a name  
That is not a place as well—how else to put *terroir* on the map?

These brooding thoughts evoked in me a great sense of shame  
But were quickly dispelled by the sounds of whining and moans.  
I saw a queue of scolding harridans—each and every one the same!

Said Noblet, “Somebody must have sent in the crones.  
To punish the clonal selectors, there is no better retribution  
Than hearing the same grape gripe again and again for aeons.

“Vinferral logic is thus deployed to provide the *vine*-al solution.  
'Tis utterly fair, despite the appearance of a Grand Guigal.”<sup>10</sup>  
Noblet’s words carried great authority, spoken as it were,  
in *vrai mamaloshen*!<sup>11</sup>

We then came upon a vast *vintrepôt*, or warehouse of *sols*,  
Far from the madeirizing<sup>12</sup> crowd (or so we thought),  
but opening the door a crack,  
We were overcome by the pungent reek of *furfural*!<sup>13</sup>

More startling was the array of gripe-growers tightly packed,  
*Les pieds sur la tête*; I thought at once of Bloom and Molly,  
And Champagne bottles, *en latte*,<sup>14</sup> neatly nestled front to back.

For anybody who was *ænobody*, this was a rather bizarre finale.  
I asked about these poor *sols* and why their punishment so *outré*.  
“These are misguided growers from the San Joaquin Valley,

9 The poet may be referring to Drs. Richard Smart, Peterson and Vine, all well-known consultants, who do not lack for opinions on all matters *vini-viticultural*. The fourth “Dr. Dick” might be Richard Thomas, who, while not in fact a “doctor,” was known to act like one. He was notorious for his voluble beliefs and might therefore qualify as a Talking (Dick) Head (Hon.).

10 The poet is on a punning jag here, and certainly intends to mean, “Grand Guignol.”

11 (Yiddish) Exceptionally candid speech, literally “the mother tongue.”

12 To madeirize a wine is to oxidize it by subjecting it to elevated temperatures, as in the case of Madeira. Madera, Calif., unlike its namesake, is truly *vinfernal*.

13 Hydroxymethylfurfural is the strongly raisinated/prunish component associated with vastly overripe or “cooked” grapes.

14 The technical term for the densely packed nested rows of Champagne bottles stored *en tirage*.

“Who, upon the release of the popular film, “Sideways,”  
Grafted vast acreages to the well-known Burgundian *cépage*.  
The results you can smell yourself—note that particular bouquet.”

These late *Burgunders*<sup>15</sup> were compelled to take *bon courage*  
As they straw-sipped sideways from new heavy-toast *tonneaux*  
Their penal *noir*, and pondered the prospects of æternal coprophage.

They were to drink from ne'er ullaging casks of Big Valley Pinot.  
Myself, I could not feature a torture more meet  
For those who had planted this shy, sensitive grape in Fresno.

## DE CANTO XIV

We gained some relief from the vinferral heat,  
As we quit that place where *sols* were *pinot*-boarded.  
My own feelings about the grape remained semi-sweet.

This was a *cépage* I had once ardently courted,  
But when I had considered clearly my “realistic” prospects,  
I lost my will and quit, dispirited, *doon*-hearted.

It was no great skill to kibitz anent the obvious defects  
Of wines produced from such a fussy grape, hence easy to malign.  
Another matter to find a personal *terroir*, a *Graham Cru*, in effect.

“Easier said than Doon,” Noblet pronounced, reading my mind.  
“But essential *quand meme* if you are to save your æternal *sol*.  
*La Route du Vrai Vin* stands before you, as you have well *divined*.”

It had lately become my *idée fixe*, my most heartfelt goal,  
To discover a place where both grape and I belonged,  
Truly married to one another, making one another whole.

But would it be *pinot*, *fer servadou*, *gros* or *petit manseng*  
On granite, limestone, slate or righteously good schist?  
A few permutations are *vitting* and right, a billion likely wrong.

The patent complexity of the proposition was just this:  
Finding a new Great Growth, absent twelve centuries of iteration  
Was like finding a *Côtes de Nuits*-dle in a haystack, essentially *vit-or-miss*.

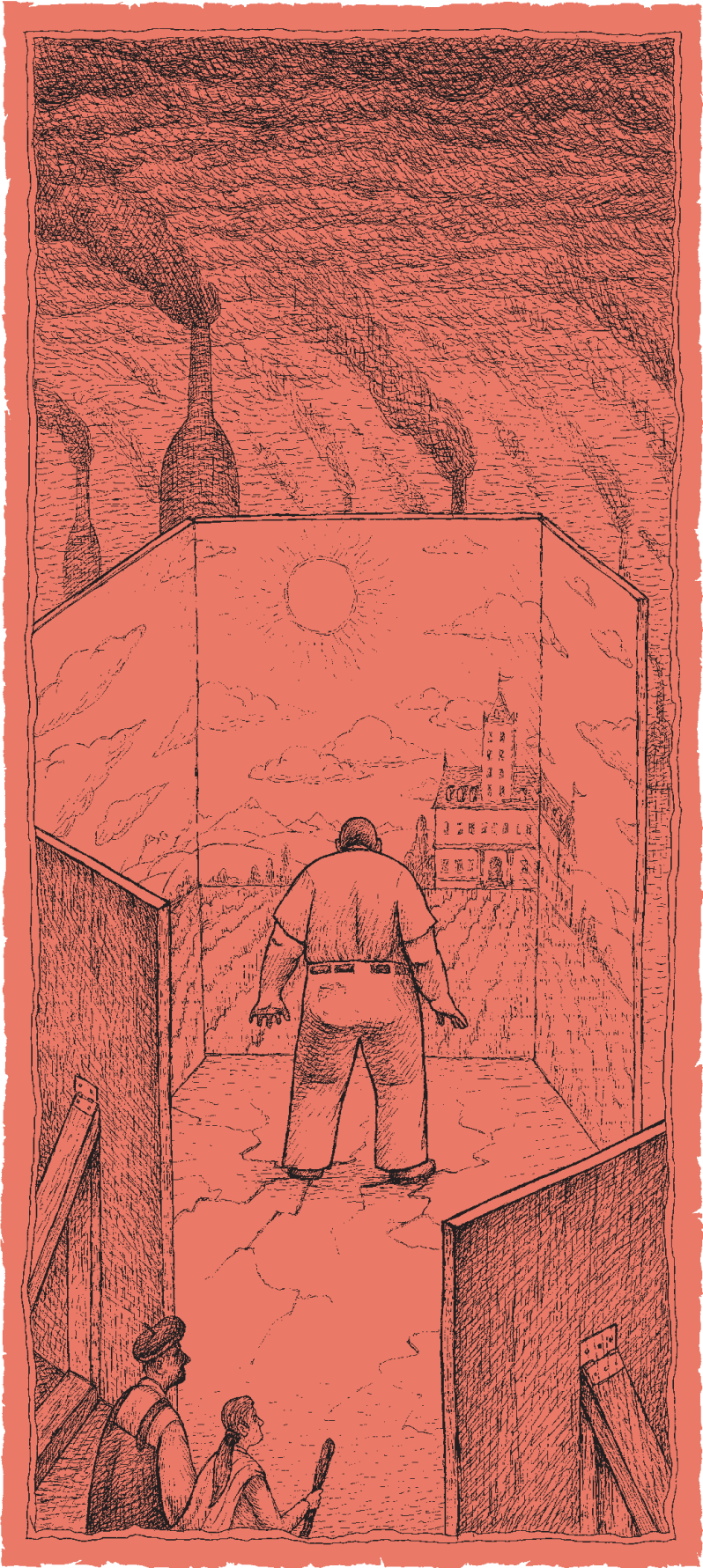
I brooded on this *vintractable* poser with ever-increasing frustration  
'Til *Maître* reminded me our work was still quite far from *doon*.  
There were more *zinf*ful *sols* to witness in the vinferral appellation.

Noblet led me deeper into the unearthly gloom,  
We came to a spot, eerily glowing, emanating a raucous noise.  
A portal appeared and we stepped inside a blindingly white room.

15 *Spätburgunder*, or “Late Burgundy” is the German term for *pinot noir*. The *Fresnians* are clearly *Zuspätburgunders*.







“’Tis the ‘marketing space,’ conceived by the B-school girls and boys,  
Naked capitalists, doing what they do best, these devious cohorts,  
Vinforming/deforming our world with the dark arts they employ.”

A cacophony of names of imaginary idyllic venues issued forth:  
“Napa Ridge, Brook Hollow, Forest Glen...”—the banal litany of  
    ænvil was read,

“Counter-terroirists they are,” sniffed Noblet, “spume and froth.

“There is no *there* there in these sani-fantasized brands; they are  
    ‘white bread.’

Sans *gravitas*, they are blighted red and whited sepulchers.

This wretched domain of *blagueurs*<sup>16</sup> is all, alas, Jest Red.”<sup>17</sup>

“Behold before you the fraudulent denominators,  
Vine-olent with consumers, and as such meriting vituperation.  
On earth they averred to be but gifted entrepreneurs!<sup>18</sup>

“There is a long Old School tradition of wholesale appropriation  
Of protected whine names, a sort of proto-identity theft,  
*À la* ‘Chablis’ or ‘Champagne,’ which trade ‘pon the reputation

“Of real appellations, with marketing *legerdemain* quite deft.  
We observed then a solitary *v*individual, cursed to a desolate fate.  
In shadow, he appeared to be of redoubtable heft.

“On earth, this man occupied a vast chunk of real estate,  
As a counter-terroirist he now has no ground ‘pon which to tread.  
He strode and, the earth gave way, due to his formidable weight.

“*Maître*, how is such a wide swath of the domain of the dead  
Taken up by just one whine-man?” I was truly awed.  
“That is Mr. Franzia, son, known to his closest fiends as ‘Fred’

“His presence here is twice insured by provision of vinferral law.  
Remember that he is also the mind behind  
‘Two Buck Chuck’, more properly yclept, ‘Charles Shaw’

“Vinferral justice is once again well *doon* and condign,  
To spewers of *v*industrial waste intent on making a killing,  
To overpricers of overboozy, overoaked, overwrought whines.

“To *merlot* mongers, peddlers of *pinots egrigious*, *chardo-nay-sayers*, shilling  
Their *v*inonymous whines to poor Fat Bastards, true believers in Santa...  
Margherita and Yellow Tail—the Coalition of the Swilling!”

Noblet was het up, on an anti-jammy/jelly roll, and quite the ranter.  
“Fruit bombs away! *Ich bin ein Jelly Doughnut! pardon, Berliner.*”  
This was a far cry from the genteel critiques proffered in *Decanter*.

“*Maître*, what is to become of those miserable *z*inners  
Who promoted their *vins ordinaires* as the Nectar of Bacchus?”  
We then were given to witness the Ultimate Whinemaker Dinner

16 (Fr.) *Jokers*, though with a slightly different meaning in Piemontese dialect, where the word signifies someone who exposes himself.

17 The poet clearly has no sympathy at all for perpetrators of whine-schtick, though he is personally chagrined and deeply embarrassed in his own role in this recent phenomenon.

18 The poet is undoubtedly making reference to the lawsuit brought by the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association against Mr. Fred Franzia of Bronco Wine Co. (Ceres, Calif.), in regard to his alleged misleading appropriation of the name “Napa” in his Napa Creek brand.



From Hell, and my question was answered, in the unholy fracas  
That unfolded before us—a *grande bouffe de gourmandises*,  
Giving me the feeling of *déjà bu*, or bad tartaric acid flashbacks.

I had myself assisted in more than my share of these<sup>19</sup>  
Exercises in gluttonous *maximus*, the Wild Kingdom deep-fried.  
Eighteen courses in all, with whines, five desserts plus cheese,

Nary a green veggie or legume on a platter espied.  
But the worst was not the food—narcolepsy-inducing, I'll admit,  
But the droning whine of the winemaker who tried

To enlighten the unlettered public on vinous arcana, *to wit*  
Percentages of new versus one-year-old oak and degrees of toast,  
*Alliers*, *Nevers* or *Tronçais* forest? quarter-sawn or hand-split?

And whether the malo was full or partial, the host  
Would take pains to excruciatingly elucidate.  
Phenological parameters were also addressed, which for most

Was the part exquisitely designed to stultify, with inarticulate  
Ramblings anent Brixes, VAs, pHs and total acidities.  
The winemaker 'pon these matters would endlessly pontificate

And explore other banal *vinutiae* with single-minded avidity.  
If I were to hear the term "physiological ripeness" ever again<sup>20</sup>.  
I would fain lie *doon* and die of *ænnui* (cf. *Oennals of Morbidity*).

*Oeno*-babble filled the dining hall, like purple prosodic rain.  
"Maître," I nudged Noblet, his eyes now distant and glazed,  
"I suggest we leave at once 'ere we both become *vinsane*."

## DE CANTO XV

We missed the Tower of Scrapple dessert, *avec crème anglaise*.  
But were quite relieved to be quit of that lethal venue.  
We came to a beastly place I'll remember to the end of my days.

It seemed to be a conservatory park, perhaps some sort of zoo.  
"Please don't feed the marketers," an officious sign bade,  
In the *Marketiergarten*,<sup>21</sup> they swarmed in a filthy, cagèd milieu.

"*C'est très animale*,"<sup>22</sup> Noblet could not help but add.  
He was certainly correct in regard to the pungent bouquet  
That attended the perpetrators of this particularly execrable fad.

"From my vintage vantage," began Noblet,  
"I am alarmed by 'critter wines,' or as we say, "*vins des bêtes*,"<sup>23</sup> a  
Vinous transgression that is here routinely appraised

19 The poet has written about this experience in the elegiac poem, "Lard Randall, My Son," (*Bonny Doon newsletter*, Spring 1995).

20 The term "hang time" might also be applicable to the swift justice due perpetrators of endless vinous cant and jargon.

21 *Tiergarten* (Ger.): zoo

22 "It is very gamey" — an expression typically reserved for wines afflicted with *brettanomyces* or certain sorts of reduction aromas.

23 *Vins bêtes* would of course be "stupid wines."









"As grievous as those that mortify the zoophiles of PETA.  
We have descended into the 8<sup>th</sup> Circle—the Vale of Market-teers  
Where Bambi meets Rexzilla in a grudge-match *vindetta*.

"Their punishment's term is measured out in dog years.  
Multiply (or is it divide?) forever by 7 and still you are screwed  
By an æternity spent, under the aegis of 3 Blind Mooseketeers,

"Scores of Smoking Loons, Mad & Blue Fish, Fat Cats and Emus,  
Roaming Goats, Goliath Roosters, Grizzly Bears, and Rheas,  
Lizards, Leaping Stags and Frogs and Yellow-tailed Kangaroos.

"A cute, fuzzy critter wine had become the *à la mode* idea.  
California label-fauna might here safely graze,  
    floor-stacked to the woof they'd climb,  
Muzzle by jowl with their beastly brethren of Antipodea."

It appeared we had arrived at the marketeers' feeding time.  
The *plat du jour* was announced by the little penguin *maitre d'*.  
"Tartare de *Bicycletteur Rouge paillardé par Un Grand Camion Rouge*,"<sup>24</sup> he pantomimed.

It was an offal sight to behold, proffered by a dapper wallaby.  
Jereboams of Road Kill Red were poured from a very recent year  
And the toasted-head waiter wished us all a hearty *bon appetit*.

"The animals are running this show, or so it would appear,"  
I remarked, as an overly familiar seal nosed Noblet most rudely.  
Startled, he yelped, "Get the *phoque*<sup>25</sup> outta here!"

I don't know whence arose this beastly craze, but to put it crudely,  
It was the critters now that kept the bestial *vetiquetters*.<sup>26</sup>  
The Vinferno, ever just, had designed its punishments shrewdly.

## DE CANTO XVI

You would think that we would have known better  
Than to linger any longer in this den of *viniquity*,  
Suddenly, at our heels was Cerebrus, a right wrongo dongo triple-header.

"Nice doggies, good doggies," I ventured with some timidity.  
The triune beast(s?) just snarled and slavered.  
I cursed Jorge Ordonez and his brand's<sup>27</sup> great ubiquity.

Noblet and I had no time for any further palaver,  
As we continued our descent into the marketing space,  
And found that we had soon come to a spot that I'd rather

Not dwell on in the finest detail, as it was the case  
That some very private issues at this time arose,  
Which made it for me a most *vinhospitable* place.

<sup>24</sup> *Raw Thin Slices of Red Bicyclist flattened by a Big Red Truck.*

<sup>25</sup> (Fr.) Seal. *Phoque Blanc Chardonnay* is in fact an actual wine, and not the product of the poet's sometime overactive imagination.

<sup>26</sup> A neologism that perhaps signifies an unleashed "producer of animal labels."

<sup>27</sup> *Wrongo Dongo Monastrell from Jumilla, España.*

"This is the most abject corner of the 8<sup>th</sup> Circle, I suppose,"  
Said Noblet, as we beheld the hateful vinous hypocrites,  
Consigned to one of the Vinferno's rottenest boroughs.

The mournfulness of their dirge was heartbreaking, I'll admit.  
"Who are these *sols*, who now seem so remorseful?"

"These are the whinemen, given to excessive cleverness and wit,

"Who, despite their prodigious gifts, were less than resourceful,  
And squandered the vast reservoir of good will and largesse  
That was once showered 'pon them, and are now of course full

"Of excuses as to why their whines no longer incandesce.  
They became diverted from the vine's true, righteous aim.  
These whiners, who once a deep love of Bacchus professed,

"Became distracted by that which to them easiest came.  
Far more amusing to plot a brilliant public relations *coup de grâce*,  
Witty labels, screwcap videos, or other *connerie* one might name."

I then beheld among the *zinner*s a most familiar face.  
It was hard for me to stomach it, without beginning to feel sick,  
But I now observed my own keening self, the paradigm of disgrace.

What sort of illusion was it, or perhaps a parlor trick,  
That I had myself been to vinfernal depths consigned,  
When I was (at least 'pon recent inspection) still sentient and quick?

I'd always imagined that there would be ample, nay, infinite time  
To get around to the work of becoming an original creator,  
*Enfin*, I was but a mere whinemaker, with a clever product line.

"We may wish it so, but there is in fact no such thing as 'later.'  
You are always in Wine Hell if you are forever deferring  
Your vinous longings; you become the ultimate whine spectator."

## DE CANTO XVII

To Noblet's words there was indeed no demurring.  
I was damned as a blatant *zinner*, most wretched,  
And felt the searing shame inside me, *cab-burn*, baby, burning.

I have, dear reader, refrained from self-pity, nor have kvetched  
Anent my own discomfort, in this true and faithful account  
Of my *sub rosé* journey, these *tableaux mortants* I have sketched.

For I was to find myself once again totally busted and caught out,  
In mortal humiliation, we're talking *pantalones abajo* here,  
The embarrassing incident occurred at just about

The time when we had quit the place of hypocrites and marketeers,  
We then walked down a road littered with broken flanged bottle  
Tops and "cigar-band" neckers, indicating the vintage year.

(To my *Maitre*, I admitted that I had always wished to throttle  
The imitative packagers, who themselves had seemed to lack  
An original idea in their toasted heads. "Were you not flattered  
but a little,"

Queried Noblet, "By these hopelessly derivative hacks,  
Who only sought a little marketing mojo for their brand?"  
But I digress from the incident and will now presently backtrack.

Among the rubble and debris in that blasted land,  
Amidst the discarded corkscrews and broken glass  
We came upon a lovely terrace and a beautiful stand

Of stately old, *gobelet*-trained vines and at last  
I felt the old stirrings that had once in my breast reposed  
Around the real work of a *viticulteur*, a genu-vine enthusiast.

"I see you're ready to return to your *métier*, so I propose  
To furnish you with the requisite tools and apparatus  
To do the job properly. Come then, let us stroll the vine rows."

He handed me an unfamiliar gizmo I could not at first identify.  
"*Maitre*, what matter of strange implement is this?"  
"Tis a pair of pruning shears," he rather brusquely replied.

I felt as if I had just tumbled into a vertiginous abyss,  
And had been inextricably bound over to an *æno-da-fé*.  
Noblet, my *Maitre*, seemed to morph into a *vinquisator*,  
a vinferral catechist!

"Son, what sort of grapes might these be, pray?  
Their traits are too obvious for aught but a fool to miss.  
Are they *roussanne*?... *picpaul*? or maybe just... *viognier*?"<sup>28</sup>

This last *cépage* he pronounced with a scornful hiss.  
I felt dispraised and contused and found no relief  
In the certain knowledge that I was being mortally dissed.

"That you cannot distinguish 'tween an entire or lobèd leaf,  
Or note the open petiolar sinus, glabrous surface or striated wood  
Of these well-known varieties, simply beggars belief."

I walked on in shame, shoulders stooped and head bowed.  
It was barely the smallest consolation to observe  
A dead zeppelin,<sup>29</sup> crashed and smoldering by the side of the road.

<sup>28</sup> The poet is alluding to a senseless and bitter lawsuit in which he had been caught up some years prior, which ultimately devolved to the question of how much ampelographic (pertaining to the study of grapevine identification) expertise might it reasonably be expected for a grape grower to possess.

<sup>29</sup> There was a wine on earth called "Red Zeppelin," which was an unabashed, appropriation of Le Cigare Volant.

## DE CANTO XVIII

At this point in the journey I confess I nearly lost my nerve,  
Having a glimpse of my æternal fate been shown,  
And for the œnousness of my *zins*, meted a punishment well deserved.

While Noblet could not my *vindiscretions* entirely condone,  
He was conciliatory now, advising me not to abandon hope.  
There was still time to mend the error of my ways & *cuvées* and atone.

But it was becoming ever more difficult just to cope  
With the vicissitudes of the journey and the piercing psychic pain.  
What had begun as a great escarp had defaulted to a slippery slope.

These thoughts I had not but a moment to entertain,  
As we began to mount a steep defile that was quite precarious,  
Impossible now it was to return to the spot from whence we came,

Caught in a rock-hard place 'tween *silex* and *calcareous*<sup>30</sup>  
We were surely *dooned*; I prepared to bid my *Maître adieu* & good-bye.  
I knew we'd presently meet up with something lethally nefarious.

Noblet then shouted to me, and bade me to well cover my eyes.  
"We are about to encounter the dreaded Gorgon, Dagueneau,<sup>31</sup>  
The guardian of the 9<sup>th</sup> Circle, whose steely gaze is sure to petrify!<sup>32</sup>

"An extreme makeover that is certainly *à propos*  
For those whose whines are jammy or 'fruit-driven.'"  
I did not, of course, see Didier but heard his hog's *fortissimo*.

"That a real wine must express minerality is a 'given.'  
And yet the New World winemakers this verity ignored  
At their own peril—their *zins* remain irrevocably unshriven."

I heard Dagueneau zoom off and his big bike's deafening roar.  
"It is safe for you now to open your eyes," *Maître* informed me  
Yet I could not grasp what I observed and remained just utterly floored.

We beheld in the valley below us a *tableau* of whine luminaries,  
Makers of high-scoring whines of no provenance, no guardianship.  
Napasonomendacious' finest had all been turned into stone statuary!

"Glad to see that Cal-trans is back on the job," Noblet quipped.  
*Sol*-less whines—I never grasped what consumers got from them.  
"*Maître*, why do we abide these fakeries, these overpriced gyps?"

Noblet: "Frankly, even for *moi*, it's a real conundrum.  
But our time now is short and but one task remains, which  
Is to return to earth from the depths we have plumbed, then.

"There is only one minor, just slightly complicating hitch."  
Noblet paused for effect and his words left little doubt:  
"We must pass directly through Sa-tannin's own unholy niche."

<sup>30</sup> *Siliceous and limestone-based soils, respectively.*

<sup>31</sup> *Didier Dagueneau is an iconoclastic winemaker in the Loire, known for his steely, mineral-intensive wines,*

*if not also for his dreadlocked appearance.*

<sup>32</sup> *Not exactly the "mineralizing process," as it is classically understood by geologists.*











"I.e. the only way through was the way *w-a-y doon* and out,  
Smack o'er the back of MepHisto, The Father of Lees and Untruths."  
Candidly, I thought we might entertain taking a less scenic route.

My instinct was to turn yellow-tail and run like hell, in sooth.  
But I had placed myself in the able hands of my *Maitre*, Noblet.  
As they say, the course of true Pinot NV never runs smooth.

We then descended down a roughhewn, dark passageway  
In vaporous silence, we prepared to meet the beast.  
Fetid fumes reeked & swirled, as we lurched towards Doonsday

To say I was scared spitless is to say quite the least.  
Then, whoosh, all at once we plunged down a great sinkhole drain.  
We were there then in the lair, in the dark heart of the *vino caviste*.

We smelled him before we saw him, Auld Petomaine,  
How He conducted a proper tasting in this state is hard to convey,  
But there He sat, at a vast *table d'hate* that was blood- and wine-stained,

With tens of thousands of wineglasses around him arrayed,  
This immense iridescent, wingèd beast, his great maw crammed  
With Mssrs. Parker and Shanken,<sup>33</sup> their eyeballs serving as a tasty *entrée*,

An amused *bouche*, as the French say; P. and S. were damned  
Put out by this double blind tasting, conducted by this *oenographivore*.  
Old Mel-nick,<sup>34</sup> the *Teufelweintrinker*,<sup>35</sup> was just getting slammed,

As he busily made tasting notes, looking for the greatest rapport  
'Tween texture and flavor of whine scrivener and whine,  
The felicity of which he would award his numerical score.

"Astonishingly full-bodied, with good, firm backbone and spine."  
"Rather fleshy 'round the middle with a huge and complete nose."  
"Great legs...a long and excruciatingly dramatic finish, I find."

As His Sa-tannic Majesty His brilliant whine pairings composed,  
We scampered o'er His shoulders and across His leathery back,  
Made for daylight and bid the Vinferno a warm *adios*.

I returned to *terra firma* with body and *sol* intact,  
And found that I had traversed diametrically through  
To the other side of the world (ironically enough<sup>36</sup>), in fact.

I had traveled in the worst Circles with Noblet as my *passé-partout*,  
And survived to tell all about it in this cautionary tale I relay,  
But would I take the deep lessons to heart and my great passion renew?

I blinked in the bright antipodean light, as I stumbled to find my way.  
But I had been transformed—a new life, a new man.  
*Ecco Domani*; it was the doon of a new day.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Parker is the editor and publisher of *The Wine Advocate*, Marvin Shanken, the publisher of *The Wine Spectator*.

<sup>34</sup> Melnik is the most successful grape variety in Bulgaria.

<sup>35</sup> (Ger.) The devilwine drinker, a pun on *Tafelwein*, or "table wine." The joke also works in French, with *vin de diable/vin de table*.

<sup>36</sup> The irony is presumably the poet's extreme aversion to Australian wines.

## THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF TERROIR

I have called this talk, The Phenomenology of *Terroir*; you may therefore have some expectation of a degree of philosophical rigor. Your expectations, however, will be nonsystematically thwarted, as I was, as a *philosophe manqué* many years ago, never particularly rigorous; I found that the more sensual, tangible medium of winemaking and grape growing was a far more congenial playground for intellectual exploration. I will instead talk about what one would call the poetics of *terroir* and how an appreciation of this idea conditions and deepens our experience of wine.

You may wonder what this very specialized, wine-geeky word has to do with neuroesthetics. If we really grasp its meaning, I think that we will be squarely within the purview of today's conference. *Terroir*, I am hoping to show, is something like a Platonic form, or perhaps more concretely, a beautiful, ordered waveform that arises from a harmonically attuned vineyard—one wherein every element is in perfect balance. The formal information that is in this special vineyard is preserved, amplified, perhaps refined during the fermentation process of the grapes and emerges by dint of the winemaker's skill, as the flavor characteristics of the wine. Some as yet unelucidated mechanism involving the minerality of the wine acts as a medium to transform this information into a distinctive, unmistakable taste, analogous to the transformation of radio waves into aural sensation.

*Terroir*, for the as yet uninitiated, is one of the most beautiful notions derived from the Gallic sensibility—that singular and extraordinary fusion of the highly analytical and highly sensual. *Gout de terroir* is sometimes mistranslated as the “taste of the earth” or “earthiness.” It is something like that but rather much more. *Terroir* is the quality found in some wines that transcends the winemaker's personal style or aesthetic and somehow captures and renders transparent the distinctiveness and individuality, the unique fingerprint, of a particular vineyard site.

A great *terroir* is the one that will elevate a particular site above that of its neighbors. It will ripen its grapes more completely more years out of ten than its neighbors; its wines will tend to be more balanced more of the time than its unfortunate contiguous *confrères*. But most of all, it will have a calling card, a quality of expressiveness, of distinctiveness that will provoke a sense of recognition in the consumer, *whether or not the consumer has ever tasted the wine before*. Without becoming overly anthropomorphic, I would suggest that a great *terroir* site has something akin to

intelligence, which is the ability to successfully adapt to a variety of climatic challenges. The soil of a great *terroir* will have particular physical characteristics that allow it to extract more or less the correct amount of moisture from the soil appropriate to its needs, and trigger certain physiological signals (*Dude, where's my fruit? It's time to stop growing.*) in the plant at appropriate times, again, more consistently than its neighbors. The soil will have a chemical makeup that provides for all of the macro-elements in more or less balanced ratios, and very critically, will possess a definitive, eclectic assortment of oligo-elements.

No one knows how this works, but perhaps the presence of these trace elements adds more complexity to the vineyard color palette, which in turn enhances the complexity and distinctiveness of the wine palate. Withal, the crop yields must be kept severely limited to enhance mineral concentration and the vine roots need to explore the entire soil profile. Note: the pernicious practice of drip irrigation, as it is routinely practiced here in California, essentially infantilizes plants, turning them into pure sterile consumers, as if they were grown in flowerpots, making them gatherers rather than hunters, the viticultural equivalents of Chauncey Gardner, if you remember Peter Sellers in "Being There." Needless to say, this essentially negates the possibility of the expression of *terroir*.

Very naively I once imagined that you could simply analyze the mineral content of "great" *terroirs*, do a regression analysis and simply chuck in a little bit of manganese or whatever it was that you were missing. But this in fact misses the whole point: if there were a *terroir* extract or even a *terroir* "formula" that the lazy or ill-favored winemaker could add, sort of like oak chips or organoleptic tannin, all wines would begin to taste the same (such as they in fact do in the New World) and the essence of *terroir* would become trivialized and devalued.

The *terroir* intelligence does not entirely repose in the site itself, of course, but within the relationship that exists between the land and those who have farmed that land over generations. It is through experience, observation and countless iteration that some very clever person or persons determined that a very particular grape variety or individual genotype thereof on a particular rootstock on a particular soil type produced a wine that had a unique, special quality. (More auspicious and important than the discovery of a new star, to paraphrase Brillat-Savarin, but maybe slightly less significant than a determination of the current reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.)

*Terroir's* differentiating signal somehow shines through the nontrivial level of noise of climatic variation that occurs from one vintage year to the next in the Old World, at least. You could possibly argue that the absence of significant climatic variation, such as we experience for the most part in the New World, precludes an expression of *terroir*. For the other part of the equation is the skill of the winemaker not only in rendering *Clos de Vougeotness*, but also in capturing the positive qualities of the vintage itself—its 200Iness. This notion is somewhat anathema to American sensibilities. We are happiest of course when every year behaves more or less the same, ideally a “great” vintage, of course. Perhaps this is because as recently-come-to-the-party wine connoisseurs we behave a lot like small children; we never tire of hearing the same song played over again and again.

*Terroir* is a composite of many physical factors—soil structure and composition, topography, exposition, microclimate as well as more intangible cultural factors. Matt Kramer once very poetically defined *terroir* as “somewhere-ness,” and this I think is the nub of the issue. I believe that “somewhereness” is absolutely linked to beauty, that beauty reposes in the particulars; we love and admire individuals in a way that we can never love classes of people or things. Beauty must relate to some sort of internal harmony; the harmony of a great *terroir* derives, I believe, from the exchange of information between the vine plant and its milieu over generations. The plant and the soil have learned to speak each other's language, and that is why a particularly great *terroir* wine seems to speak with so much elegance.

We are talking today about beauty and how we apprehend it when we are lucky enough to see it or sense it. I would like to talk briefly about the vast chasm that exists between Old World and New World understandings of vinous beauty—the great Transatlantic Misunderstanding, if you will. As you know, we can make an effort to quantify the qualitative elements of classical physical beauty—ratio of nose length to distance from the eyes and so forth—and create an idealized model of a beautiful person. But as we also know, this idealized model will never be as beautiful as the beauty of a particular individual, whose features may in fact be utterly out of whack from the parameters of so-called classical beauty. There is just “something” about the singular beauty that stands out, and likewise there is just something intangible that is missing from the composite beauty.

In the Old World, excellence is linked to typicity, on a macro as well as micro level, which is to say that a St. Emilion (a fairly large geographical appellation in Bordeaux) can only be great,

if it is recognizable as a St. Emilion, but obviously it must also have something more. This typical St. Emilion must embody both its generic identity *qua* St. Emilion, as well as a certain uniqueness within the appellation—the exception that proves the rule—as reflected in a brilliant *terroir*, such as Cheval Blanc, where its Chevalness is always unmistakable. Does the consumer need to have a mental map of a wine’s provenance to be able to fully appreciate its quality? Yes and no.

Really grasping the concept that a wine can be both a wine *and* a place is like suddenly acquiring the ability to taste the wine with two tongues, or to now hear a mono recording in stereo. Feeling the place through the wine triggers something like synesthesia. If you have a history with the place, there is no doubt that it will create an even far deeper limbic reaction. But a great *terroir* wine will provoke a feeling that I can only describe as akin to homesickness, whether or not it is for a home that may only exist in your imagination.

*Somewhereness*. For a European it is everything. You need to come from somewhere and probably your family has been in that somewhere for years upon years; you need to know where you stand in a hierarchy, where you fit in. In our New World egalitarian, meritocracy, it doesn’t matter where you came from, it’s what you have achieved. New World wines are really all about achievement; they are *vins d’effort*, rather than *vins de terroir*.

Some of you may know that the most influential American critics, Robert Parker and the Wine Spectator, favor a particular style of wine, one that is not impossible to build from the bottom up, as it were, in the New World—the so-called “fruit bomb,” a wine of hyper-concentration and hyper-fruitiness (the vinous equivalent of a triple C-cup, without being too crude about it), largely in virtue of its extreme level of ripeness, something that is less easily accomplished in the Old World. I don’t think that Robert Parker himself single-handedly created the current wine aesthetic, but rather that he is the taster of the *Zeitgeist*, in a culture that greatly esteems surface over depth and is generally in rather too big of a rush. I suspect that our fixation on the soft, plump, ripe “International” style is in fact a variant upon the phenomenon of our recent but seemingly permanent fixation on comfort food; I’m sure that it involves neurotransmitters—a subject far beyond my ken. Why we are seeking to medicate ourselves this way at this time I will have to leave to the shrinks.

Why do people like these very obvious wines anyway? How do they end up winning blind tastings side-by-side with great

French *crus*? Have the world's wine tasters lost their collective minds or at least their collective palates?

The answer I think is in our primate brain, one that tends to make us favor the fully ripened flavors of New World wines over the slightly less ripe, more elegant and restrained flavors of Old World wines. Whether it is a banana, a mango or the tannins of a grape seed (which itself turns from green to brown when it ripens) I believe we have a strong hardwired genetic predisposition to dig totally ripened fruit. Further, our culture seems to reinforce the precedence of instant gratification and physical pleasure over the more time-consuming and sometimes challenging process of the discovery of qualities that lie beneath the surface and are needful of excavation. *Terroir* has the power to evoke in us primal memories and associations. And certainly human intelligence is in part about perceiving and judging memory—in soil, wine and self. The construct of *terroir* is perhaps an atavistic product of our deep human need to link to the natural world, a need that has not vanished, despite its being systematically thwarted at every turn in the times in which we live.

The other reason why not all of these apparently *grand cru*-come lately wines are not in fact so *grand* is very simply that we, as tasters, are extremely fallible; we are sometimes very easily taken in by very showy, obvious characteristics; the wine is *très flatteur*, the French say. If we are tasting a rather large number of wines of an afternoon, such as is done by the most powerful and feared professional wine tasters, generally we are capable of discerning only the grossest, most obvious qualities—concentration, texture and balance, presence or absence of gross defect and maybe just a hint of the subtle *je ne sais quoi* of a wine, which we can call its “charm.” But the real soul of the wine, its real essence is invisible to us in such a fleeting encounter. Wines, like people, take a long time to get to know.

The powerful, concentrated impressive New World wines are capable of shocking and awing us into submission, and perhaps that is all that they really need to do to establish credentials of their legitimacy. But they impress, they don't charm. They are all bluster, which tells you with absolute certainty that they have something to prove, that they are in fact, lost.

*Terroir* speaks in a very still, small voice. It is easy not to hear it above the stentorian tones of 100 percent new oak, 15 percent alcohol and extreme tannic extraction. It is hard to hear it above the clamoring for the new, the novel; it's not new, it's as old as the hills.



We New World winemakers don't really know where we stand; we are lost, but most of us don't know it, and that's as lost as you can be. The modern language of wine criticism is an anatomizing one—it slices and dices a wine into its component parts. Fruitiness, check, tannin, check, concentration, check. We have liftoff and a 90+ point wine. We use this language to calm ourselves like a character in a fairy tale might, walking into a dark wood. But the sum of the parts in this case is in fact orders of magnitude less than the whole. The anxiety of influence operates on New World winemakers as efficiently as it does on writers and artists. We Californian winemakers are always thinking about French wines and how we can make wines that are both like them and unlike them. Because we can never really convince ourselves that our wines truly and deeply belong, on some level we reject the notion that belonging really counts.

At this point in the presentation I would like nothing better than to trot out a real *terroir* wine or two and let you taste for yourselves what I'm talking about. Instead I will offer some florid language and show you some pictures. But, before I do, I need to bring up again the concept of minerality in wine and what its relation to *terroir* might be. I believe that virtually all of the New World wine critics utterly miss out on the importance of minerality, especially vis-à-vis the ageability of a wine, where I believe it plays the signal role. It is obvious to me that every wine of distinction must contain a rich concentration of minerals in some sort of favorable ratio, but no one to my knowledge has worked out an algorithm for this. I have lately become convinced that it is not just the mere material presence of minerals that lend a wine stature, but what is really at issue is how these minerals are organized.

Because when you taste a *terroir* wine, what you get above and beyond the particular aromatic nuances associated with a particular soil type (schistous soils, for example, are said to give wines a sort of raw petroleum-like aroma, a benign thing, by the way) you get, more importantly, a *sense of the organization* of the wine. Somehow the intelligence of the soil and the vine interaction has been transformed into intelligence in the wineglass. There is the manner in which the various taste impressions sequence on your palate. You get the sense of the multi-dimensionality of the wine. This sort of flitting, playfulness is enhanced as you, the taster, interact with the wine, smelling it with your nose well in the glass and then from a distance farther away, swirling it, giving it a dose of oxygen. This is like rotating a precious stone, so as to be able to view its facets from many different angles.

You get the feeling that there is something like capacitance at work—the release of different flavor components seem to be gradually released, almost metered out. Minerals are most certainly linked to the redox chemistry that goes on in a glass of wine—chemistry that is so complex that you understand why acid-base chemistry has historically been the default point of entry for comprehending wine chemistry or alchemy.

To be an inspired wine taster, you must be capable of experiencing synesthesia. “*Ça descend la gorge comme le bébé Jesu en culottes de velours,*” the French say. It goes down the throat like the baby Jesus in velvet underwear. A great *terroir* wine you can visualize as possessing a center, a core; I sometimes visualize *terroir* wines as planetary systems, with the minerals exerting the gravitational pull of the sun. Or, I see the minerals as the backbone, the skeleton of the wine, that which gives the wine stability and persistence. The various nuances of flavor radiate out from this center, as do the symmetric ripples in a pond.

I have always felt that language is highly inadequate to really describe the sensation of tasting a wine, certainly the language that merely breaks a wine down into its constituent components. Maybe a haiku, a spontaneous response, would make for more cogent wine criticism. But it turns out that there is a very odd, particular technique called “sensitive crystallization,” employed by practitioners of biodynamics, a system of farming based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century anthroposophist. Biodynamics deals with how we might seek to harmonize our farming practices with the subtle forces of the universe, following the astronomical calendar—free cosmic fertilizer, you might say, and utilizing the biodynamic preparations, which essentially is a form of viticultural homeopathy. All of this is done with the aim of capturing and preserving more life force in our agricultural product, as well as more originality in our wines. Sensitive crystallization is not a precise science, at all, by a longshot. You do a number of replicates and they can all be a little bit different, but you do begin to see some recurring patterns that are quite suggestive. To do it, you take your material, in this case a couple of milliliters of wine, mix it with a copper chloride solution, put it carefully into a petri dish, and allow it to evaporate in a controlled environment. *Voilà*, you will observe a distinctive pattern, which is interesting if you have some inkling of how to make heads or tails of it.

I am somewhere in the subneophyte category as far as my ability to read these crystallizations. Certainly for many of the

scientists here, this will seem like utter mumbo jumbo and the pictures mere artifacts of phenomena very imprecisely grasped. But use your imagination and see what these pictures tell you. For me they can sometimes capture the essence of a wine far more accurately than words can do.

Here is a 2002 Van Volxem Riesling from the Saar. The great acidity of the wine makes for a deep relief, but nevertheless you can see how powerful this wine is, like a sunburst. Note the highly articulated, dense and symmetrical branching pattern, indicating a strong presence of organizing forces in the wine.

Compare and contrast with a 2005 Riesling from a very young vineyard in Soledad, California, which just happens to be ours. You see the pinelike needles that seem to shoot out very forcefully. They indicate strong growth forces in the vineyard. The vacuoles just below center indicate that the wine has a strong aromatic potential. Perhaps as the vineyard gets older and the vines and soil become better acquainted, we will observe a greater degree of organization in the crystallization, and more importantly, in the wine. The one saving grace is the tinge of green at the periphery; this is an indication that this is an organically grown vineyard and contains some life force.

This is a wine called Kokopelli made in southern France in Collioure, from very, very old vines. It is a real mineral wine—notice the depth of relief of the branching crystals and the absence of vacuoles. Note also that there are two loci in the center of the picture—this wine is made from two separate vineyards with slightly different soil typologies.

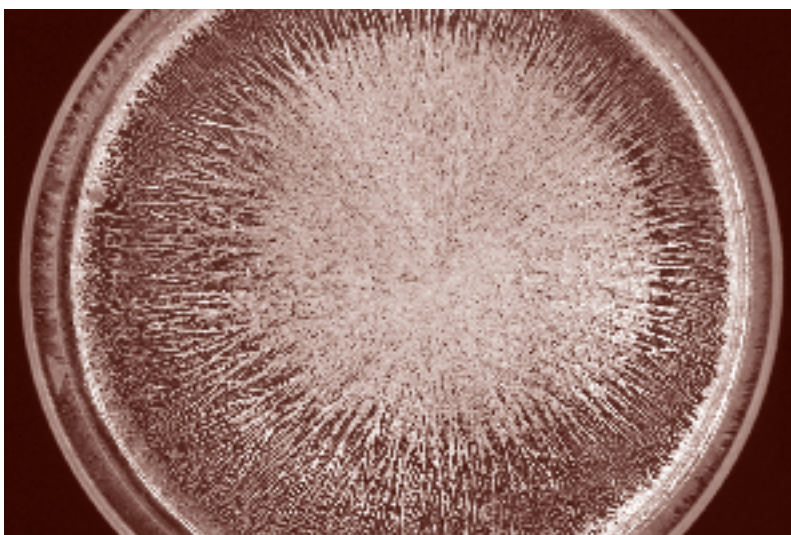
Here is a sensitive crystallization of a rosé wine made from a funny grape from Provence called Tibouren. Note the aromatic vacuoles and the very dense branching and the fact that the crystallization moves out to the very edges of the petri dish. The peripheral zone of the picture speaks to the connection that the vine has to its soil. The crystal seems to hit the edge of the petri dish and bounces back, indicating that these vines are very deeply rooted.

Here is a picture of a very famous and fairly expensive California Cabernet Sauvignon, a 2000 Silver Oak, for which I'm told people line up in the cold, wee hours of the morning at the winery to purchase upon release. Note that there is a discontinuity in the peripheral zone, indicating a lack of connection with the soil. There are numerous gaps in the crystallization and parts of the image are rather blurry. This is not a *vin de terroir*,

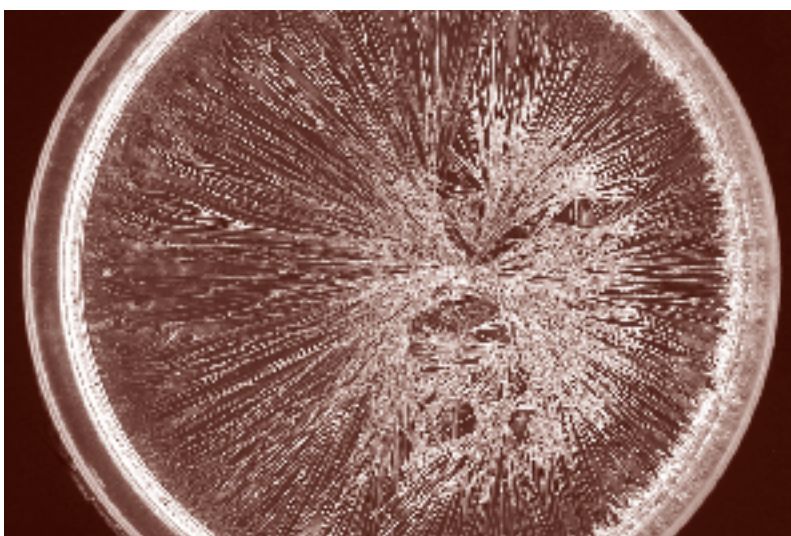
that expresses a strong sense of place. I suspect that the vacuoles signify the very strong expression of highly aromatic new American oak.

In conclusion, *terroir* is a descriptive mechanism that speaks to the intelligence or organizational force of a particular viticultural site, and miraculously persists through the vicissitudes of fermentation and maturation of a wine. It is a very special lens that allows us to experience a wine in a profound manner, sparking a sense of recognition and connection to a larger whole, which is the basis of true aesthetic satisfaction.

*(This talk was delivered to the 4th Annual Symposium on Neuroesthetics at UC Berkeley, on January 21, 2006)*

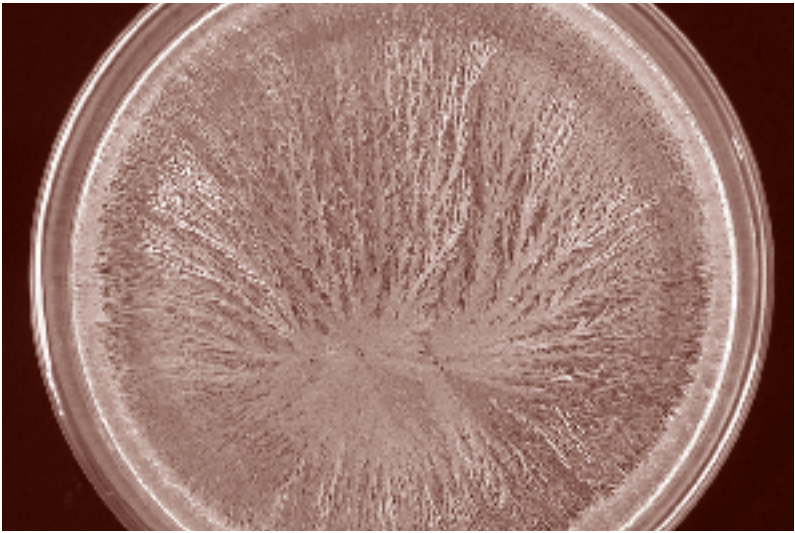


2002 Van Volxem Saar Riesling

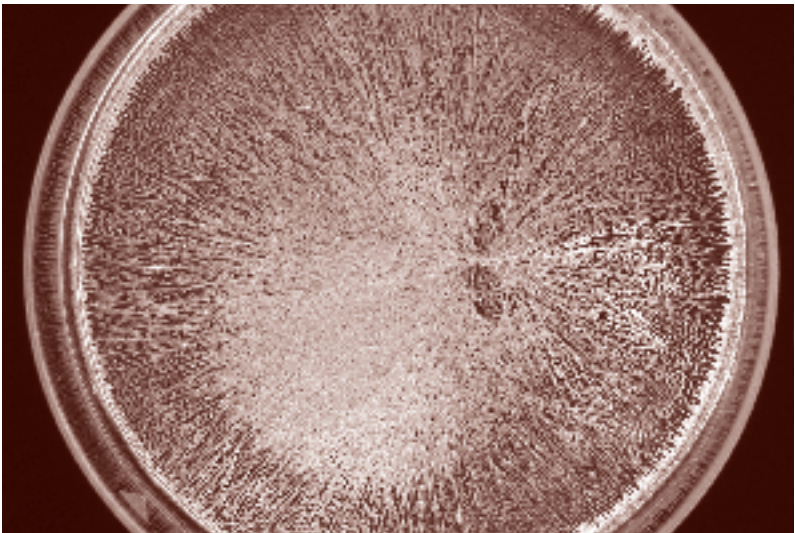


2005 Monterey County Riesling (D.E.W.N.)

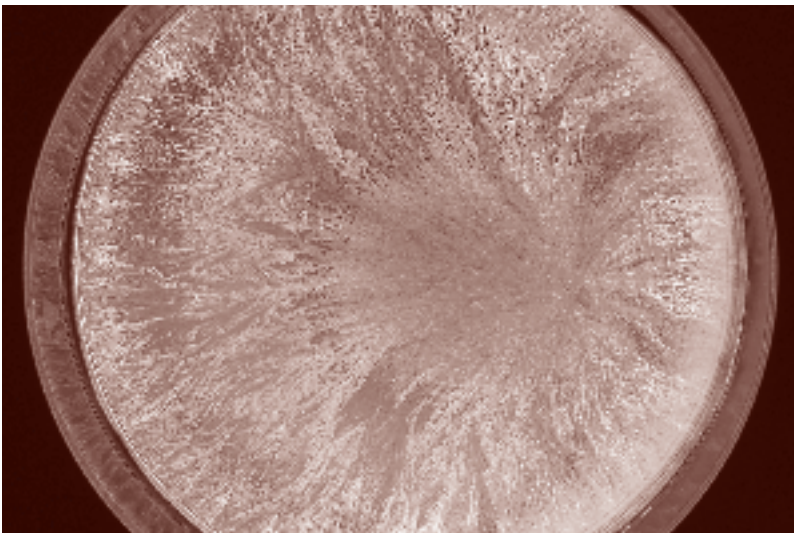




2003 Sauvage de Kokopeli (Banyuls)



2003 Cote de Provence, Clos Cibonne (Cépage Tibouren)



2000 Silver Oak Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley



## THE WINES (New Releases)

(Tasting Notes by John Locke and Randall Graham)

### 2005 Big House White

\$10.00

There is no getting around the common perception that we are the house that *muscat*, *riesling*, *malvasia* and other linalool<sup>37</sup>-intensive grapes built. It was therefore incumbent upon us to zig where we might otherwise zag and render Big House White in a rather different timbre. Here *sauvignon blanc* strikes the dominant note with its slightly grassy, gooseberry note. This is an exceptionally aromatic Big House distinguished by a strong note of pineapple, vanilla and Granny Smith apple, and perhaps the most complex Big House White to date. It more than Sing-Sings for its supper. (JL)

### 2005 Ca' del Solo Malvasia Bianca

\$13.00

How any Bonny Doon wine managed to make it to 16 vintages with so few major overhauls is a mystery that will occupy generations of Doon scholars. Through the ups and doons of *microbullage*, lees therapy, transnational mixology, and a fear-no-tannin phase, *malvasia* has remained remarkably constant. 2005 was an exceptionally fecund vintage, producing heavy yields throughout California. We declassified approximately 40% of the total production (sold it off in bulk) and only included the more moderately yielding fruit. The result is typical and vibrant *malvasia*—strongly perfumed of jasmine and lichee with very crisp acidity. Perhaps, at 16, we are approaching the end of little *Malvasia's* cloistered, sweet-tart adolescence. We shall await with a mixture of sorrow and excitement the metamorphosis of our youthful, hydroponic lily into a curvaceous, biodynamic, hothouse orchid. (JL)

### 2005 Pacific Rim Dry Chenin Blanc

\$11.00

There is no question that *chenin blanc* is the great Rodney Dangerfield white *cépage*. And like great comedy, it looks far simpler and easier than it actually is. *Chenin* when young is fruity, straightforward, quaffable—there is literally a wholesome apple pie-like quality to it. But with even a couple of years of age, the wine develops great

<sup>37</sup> The aromatic terpene found in the famiglia *moscato*.



complexity and the smoky, vanilla *crème brûlée* elements begin to emerge. Our Pac Rim Chenin is a brilliant food wine right now, absolutely perfect with all manner of Asian/fusion cuisine. Drink it now or hold it for a couple of years and learn that there is far more on heaven and earth than dreamt of in the chardocentric paradigm. (RG)

*2005 Pacific Rim Dry Riesling*

\$11.00

We have been at this for a while now and have learned so much. The basic premise is as follows: Eastern Washington is a brilliant place to grow *riesling* for any number of *ries...*, sorry, reasons, not the least of which are I) the grapes are grown on ungrafted stock,<sup>38</sup> and B) the preternaturally cool, clear weather in late September and early October in these far northern latitudes enables one to both fully ripen *riesling*, as well as maintain a good, if not extraordinary, natural acidity—the ingredients for a well-balanced *dry* *riesling*. But as brilliant as the Washington grapes are, they are perhaps lacking a certain *ich weiss nicht* that occurs *only* in the brilliant wines of the *Mittelmosel*, a region known for wines of haunting floral perfume and crushing acidity.<sup>39</sup> We of course blend in approximately 25% German *riesling* into the Washington component, and we end up with a product that is absolutely stunning and unique—the best of several worlds. We did more lees stirring this year on the tanks of the Washington *riesling*<sup>40</sup> and I have found that this practice really opens up the wine, giving it a lot more depth and fullness. This is certainly our most complete and complex Pac Rim to date. Enjoy! (RG)

*2004 Le Cigare Blanc (73% roussanne, 27% grenache blanc)*

\$20.00

\$12.00/375 ml.

Winemaking is alchemy—of that I have no doubt and sometimes one feels more or less like the sorcerer's apprentice. When you bottle a wine essentially two things will happen. The wine will either continue to taste more or less as it has over the course of its tenure in barrel or tank, or alternatively, it will take a sharp left or U-turn in bottle and morph into something that you don't recognize at all. This can lead to a certain amount of gnashing of teeth and rending of garment, as at this point there is nothing further to be doon.<sup>41</sup> I will confess to you that the '04 Le Cigare Blanc was a wine of the latter category; it was brilliant throughout its entire tenure in the cellar and upon bottling, it just closed up shop. I have come to believe that a *roussanne*-intensive wine will invariably retreat into its shell upon bottling. This, to paraphrase the Doyenne of Domesticity, is a good thing. That which makes the wine retreat—I argue it is minerality—is that which also gives the wine substance, longevity and ultimately real interest. The '04 has begun to poke its head out; its stoical stoniness is now well counterbalanced by a beautiful fragrance of lemon chiffon,

<sup>38</sup> There are a lot of people, myself included, who believe that ungrafted vines are one (among many) holy grails, leading back to the truest possible expression of the vine.

<sup>39</sup> In general, one is well advised to steer clear of "dry" wines made in this part of the world.

<sup>40</sup> My colleague and friend, Johannes Selbach, from whom we buy the German component of this wine, is a ferocious stirrer of *riesling* as well.

<sup>41</sup> This is the winemaking illusion, that a winemaker can in fact greatly influence the quality level of a wine after the grapes are harvested.

pineapple and quince. The wine is very rich, with an unctuous mouthfeel, and a long, smoky finish. (RG)

2005 *The Heart has its Rieslings*

\$15.00

In 2004, The Heart had its reasons for being obstinate and uncooperative of which reason and winemaking knew nothing, or at least not enough, so we took a passaroonie on that vintage. 2005 represents a triumphant return to *riesling*. The '05 vintage may be the cause of some Pfalz alarm. The wine shows a very tropical flavor impression of Asian pear, pineapple and peach with a savory sage or mint note underneath. Reports from the field suggest that reason can safely be abandoned—and a state of grace achieved—when pairing this wine with Szechuan short ribs, Johnsonville Brats or innumerable preparations in between. We are encouraged that sacchrophobes among the *viterati* east and west are decreasing in number, a sure sign the world is ready to let love (and semisweet *riesling*) in. (JL)

2005 *Big House Pink*

\$10.00

When we first conceived of Big House Pink, I was somewhat anxious. After all, we already produced California's finest pink wine<sup>42</sup> (criminally under priced, I might add) and I wondered what other proposition might be posited of equivalent pink pulchritude. I needn't have worried, though I might have learned to go a little bit easier on the alliteration. While Vin Gris is definitely more of the refined, urbane sophisticate, BHP is a wild party just waiting to happen—so good that the cops keep coming back again and again. Principally derived from intensely/insanely fruity Italian varieties—*sangiovese*, *barbera*, *primitivo* (aka *zin*) and the like—Big House Pink delivers a tremendous nose of mixed red fruits, watermelon, cranberry, guava, raspberry and peach. (RG)

2005 *Vin Gris de Cigare*

\$12.00

We continue down the primrosé path of insinuating a substantial dollop of white wine—principally *grenache blanc* with a homeopathic tincture of *roussanne*—into our “typical” blend of red Rhône varieties, a protocol initiated with the 2003 vintage. We find the addition of rich white wine adds some incremental *gravitas* and minerality to the wine without jeopardizing the final blend's personal and electrochemical vivacity—a quality critical in this, the Platonic apéritif wine<sup>43</sup> 2005 was a coolish year and we find lovely filigreed fruit notes here—watermelon, cranberry and guava. Again, what is most remarkable about this wine is the brilliant interplay between the bright strawberry fruit foreground and the stony background; somehow this captures the very quality of life itself. (JL)

<sup>42</sup> *Vin Gris de Cigare*, cf. *infra*.

<sup>43</sup> *One that effortlessly washes down a salade niçoise on an afternoon in Provence.*

2004 *Big House Red*

\$10.00

This wine certainly fooled me. Rather rustic in its formative months, it has gradually morphed into an exceptionally elegant and intelligent red wine. The word that comes to mind is the unexpected adjective “pretty,” which can mean pretty much anything—in this case it is the signature BDV elements of raspberry compote, licorice wisps and black pepper spice along with the unexpected feature of wild alpine raspberries. The large component of very rich, very old (always an interesting proposition for May/December romance) vine *carignane* from Contra Costa and Mendocino counties, along with a goodly *schlug* of *petite sirah*, give this wine an exceptionally plush texture. Certainly our most refined Big House to date. (RG)

2004 *Syrah “Le Pousseur”*

\$16.00

After 20 years *plus* in the *syrah* trade, we continue to fine-tune our work with this lovely, if currently ubiquitous, variety. We used a smaller percentage of whole clusters in this vintage (the better to control pH from rising), but negated that stratagem by including very substantial portions of semidried, semi-pressed *viognier* (courtesy of our Viognier Doux program). Perhaps less wintergreen than the '03, this wine is still smokin' in the boy's room with a very meaty, bacon-fat character we expect from proper *syrah*. The archetypal roasted meat, cassis and white pepper character contributed by the Bien Nacido Vineyard is complemented by the more fleshy texture and violet-scented qualities from the Chequera Vineyard in Paso Robles. One has the impression of a wine that, while currently quite tasty and expressive, remains a coiled serpent. (JL)

2004 *Ca' del Solo Sangiovese*

\$15.00

Despite our more intensive efforts to seek and preserve the savory and mineral qualities in our sundry wines, our *sangiovese* is now on a three-year run of acting like a big, bad—but in a good way—New World jelly roll. This comes as a bit of a surprise, for if ever there was a variety that was more resistant to New World blandishments and is something of a *verbissene*<sup>44</sup> cuss in the Old World, it is certainly *sangiovese*, the Blood of Jove. The vast majority of Chianti—that is to say *sangiovese*—is rather lean, green and mean, all the qualities New World fruit bomb throwers most abhor. How this avowed and orthodox *terroirist* ended up jammin' in the name of the lard (saints preserve us), is anyone's guess. So a guilty pleasure it is—deep, dark and unrepentantly fruity. This wine gushes with plum, black cherry and a generous lap full of *lampone*<sup>45</sup> along with enough smoke and tannin to get the blood flowing. (JL)

<sup>44</sup> (Yiddish) Miserable, literally snarling and snapping.

<sup>45</sup> That's raspberry for you and me.

### 2004 Cardinal Zin

\$20.00  
\$12.00/375 ml.

2004 was a very challenging year for *zinfandel*—Contra Costa was a scorcher in the late summer. As a consequence, we saw a fair bit of Seinfeldian shrinkage and more Sunsweet character in the wines from Oakley than in years previous. To remedy matters we biased the blend northwestward to Mendocino, including a magnificent lot from the Elizabeth Vineyard in Ukiah, originally sequestered and destined for our wine club members. The Mendo components exhibit a high-toned fruit and benefit from much higher acidity. We often indulge our inner, impudent 13-year-old when we occasionally report that the best part of our *zinfandel* is the 20% to 25% *carignane* we include in the blend. But this year, perhaps due to the significant Mendo contingent, we are actually quite enamored of the wine's briary, exuberant, jammy-but-not-too fruitfulness that is the calling card of *zin qua zin*, rendered at reasonable levels of alcohol.<sup>46</sup> For good measure, the wine was aged in 10,000-liter wooden uprights, arrayed with lees hotels.<sup>47</sup> (Lees check in, but they don't check out.) This technique enhances the redemptive creamy and savory qualities deep in the wine, raising up many a poor *zinner*. (JL)

### 2003 Le Cigare Volant

\$32.00  
\$18.00/375 ml.

I feel like the boy who cried “everything”—*terroir*, minerality, complexity, age-worthiness, you name it. While it would be disingenuous to insist that this Cigare in any real sense expressed *terroir*—that quality that by definition reflects the individuality of a place (this wine comes from grapes grown in many places), one might claim that this Cigare at least represents something like a real congruity between intent and execution, the true *terroir* of the winemaker's soul. This is the most interesting and complete Cigare that I have seen in literally decades. Yes, the *grenache* component is somewhat attenuated, and for that I feel vaguely guilty. *Mea maxima culpa*. The wine affords a glimpse of what California can perhaps do best—absolutely exuberant fruit coupled with real depth. This Cigare will fly the distance; the meaty musculature of the *syrah* and *mourvèdre*, within the protective cocoon of the Stelvin closure, provide a solid framework for the spicecake, raspberry liqueur and peppery ornamentation to coalesce and evolve over the next 15 years. (RG)

### 2003 Old Telegram

\$32.00

2003 was a great year for *mourvèdre* in Contra Costa County and we were able to produce a bottling of Old Telegram for the fourth consecutive vintage. '03 was not precisely cool in Contra Costa

<sup>46</sup> 14 ish or lower and absent residual sugar.

<sup>47</sup> Stainless steel shelves employed to greatly expand the surface area of lees exposed to the wine, thus aiding in its absorption and integration into the wine.

County (We can safely say that by any calculus or definition, it's never cool in The CCC) but it was not a scorcher like '04. We harvested a full two weeks *later* than normal and the benevolent clime allowed for less shrivel and consequent *raisinette*-like character that often arises from infernally warm sites. Are we such genius winemakers? No, but clever enough to understand that 100-plus-year-old vines helps build elegant wines two ways: 1) The deep and widespread roots allow a vine some relief from hydrologic stress. B) The prodigious uptake of minerals in virtue of aforesaid ubiquitous root system acts as a moderating mechanism (maybe it has to do with surface tension?) to suppress the expression of heat. In the '03 bottling you will find all the elements which have made Telegrams of vintages past delicious and age-worthy—rich raspberry fruit, smoked meat, pipe tobacco, deceptively ample tannins and the wisp of wild herbs and grasses the French so poetically refer to as *garrigue*. (JL)

2004 *Recioto of Barbera*

\$25.00/500 ml.

This is what the Veronese call *Recioto*, a slightly sweeter variant of Amarone. Our methods for drying have ranged from desiccation in wind tunnels in Gilroy used to dry garlic (worked great) to platforms in our Santa Cruz parking lot (somewhat less well). We have recently settled upon the approach of picking the grapes into raisin trays and leaving them to dry in the vineyard for two weeks or so, under the shade of the vine. The fermentation begins in tank and proceeds very leisurely in puncheon. At some point, the yeast will experience a Ch. Marmontesque demise, expiring in a delirious haze of far too much fun. Final alcohol and residual sugar tip in at 14.5% and 7.2% respectively. You will forgive me a gross act of hyperbole, but this wine will blow your mind. Who would imagine that a garlic-drying tunnel in Gilroy would act as a portal to the alchemist Quintarelli's laboratory? (JL)

2005 *Viognier Doux*

\$18.00/500 ml.

Herstorically, *viognier* has always been a sweet wine, at least as practiced in Condrieu, before people began fretting about the sustainability of Falstaffian repasts, well before OSHA (the slopes in Condrieu are slippery), the minimum wage (read labor-intensivity), well before the innovation of Spandex, well before the dispensability of the apéritif and the disappearance of witty repartee at table. Our Doux, made by drying *viognier* grapes under the shade of the vine, is a bit atavistic in that sense. And yet sweet *viognier* is truly what it is about. We can prattle on and on about the pear and honeysuckle, but what makes the wine really special is its extraordinary texture—*viognier* has notably thick skins and nontrivial levels of polyphenols. The drying process adds a level of complexity to the already potent nose-candy;

the strongest fragrance is a tropical hit lilikoi frangipane and the more ubiquitous vanilla *crème brûlée*. (RG)

*2005 Muscat Vin de Glacière*

\$17.00/375 ml.

This is a classic BDV wine, one that we have been working at since 1986. How might one improve upon the delicious aromatic purity of *muscat canelli*—the very essence of the Divine Ms. M grape? Very simply by the addition of *muscats orange*, *greco* and most recently, *giallo*, from our own vineyard in Soledad. In addition to the somewhat typical aromas of cinnamon and clove and jasmine, we have the more exotic subtle citrus undercurrents of tangerine, orange blossom and Meyer lemon from the aforesaid. Very typical Wine of the Ice Box with a slightly more citrusy twist. (RG)

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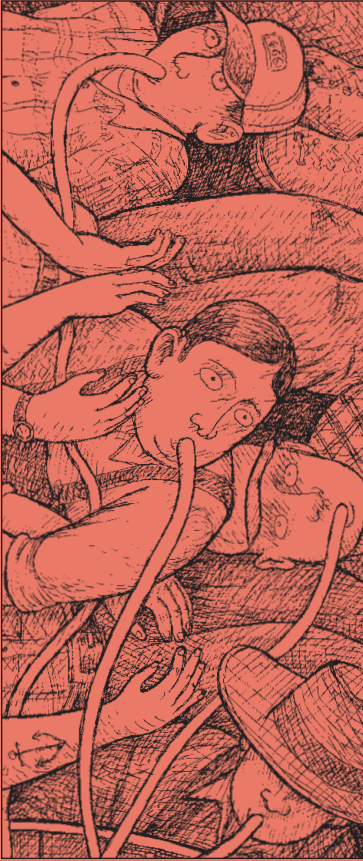
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