

Wine

A gathering of the best minds on fine wine

'French wine producers were berated for being poorer at encouraging tourists than counterparts outside Europe'

Jancis Robinson



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4 HOURS AGO by: Jancis Robinson

Get-togethers for wine professionals tend to follow a pattern. We meet, we taste, we sometimes eat, and then we disperse, usually feeling more well-disposed towards the world than when we arrived.

But two weekends ago I was invited to what sounded like a more cerebral gathering. The invitation promised “getting the best brains in the wine biz together with some leading lights of the international political, economic, cultural and tech world for a small Camp David-style powwow to wrap heads collectively around the big topics and trends likely to define the next decade”.

It came, perhaps self-evidently, from someone whose previous career had involved directing think-tanks. And if we weren't sufficiently intrigued or flattered by Nicole Sierra-Rolet's meeting of cultures, then the location of Fine Minds 4 Fine Wine was the clincher. I had been aware of her Chêne Bleu wine estate in the southern Rhône for some time, and of the care and cash lavished on it by her and husband Xavier Rolet, head of the London Stock Exchange, but had yet to visit. This seemed like the perfect excuse.

One of those fine minds we were promised belonged to him, and the sudden cancellation of the annual Mansion House dinner meant he was able to reach us much earlier than planned. Another belonged to Robin Niblett, director of Chatham House, which also fielded Elizabeth Linder, founder of its Connectivity Initiative. Her background in Silicon Valley provided just the sort of cross-cultural flow of ideas that characterised the event. She is clearly relishing her transfer from a culture in which a bottle of craft beer is the alcoholic drink of choice to the much more vinous atmosphere of St James's.

Her day job involves trying to drag corporate executives and politicians into the digital 21st century. Part of the problem is their natural reluctance to be natural. She confirmed the rise of amateurism and a decline of trust in experts — a running theme in virtually all discussions — and suggested that the wine business might profit from turning Instagrammers into brand ambassadors.

The principal application of Xavier Rolet's fine mind and financial background to the wine business was to bemoan its extreme fragmentation and inflationary regulation. He is worried that wine production is no longer economically attractive to young people (even if romantically alluring to retirees in possession of a fortune), and would like to see greater agglomeration of businesses to give them better access to capital and more muscle in a world where distribution is in so few hands. All of which is doubtless sound, dispassionate advice but rather at odds with another strong trend identified — towards extreme individuality along with authenticity and traceability.

Many attendees — who from the wine side of things included Steven Spurrier, organiser of the seminal Judgment of Paris tasting in 1976, and Michel Bettane, France's best-known wine writer — commented on the parallels between trends in eating and drinking.

As diners turn from three-star fine dining to more casual establishments, the definition of fine wine is infinitely broader than it used to be, even quite recently. The think-tank took place during the death throes of the 2016 bordeaux en primeur campaign, which, to judge from my inbox and website, elicited minimal interest. The number of views of the relevant thread on our members' forum is one seventh last year's equivalent number.

Drinkers today are more interested in a much broader array of wines, from all over the world, and there is no single objective measurement of quality — certainly not price. But while it is pretty evident immediately which beers are industrial products and which qualify as “craft”, definitive visual clues from wine packaging are thin on the ground. Wine producers need to work much harder on their most obvious point of contact with consumers: the label.

The wine business's need to communicate with consumers much more effectively was a constant theme of our discussions. Few producers use social media with any flair or consistency. Minter Dial, another figure from the tech world, pointed out that there were now so many opportunities to educate and inform via QR codes or augmented and virtual reality. He also threw in, perhaps not entirely frivolously, that driverless cars would do away with drink-driving and that nowadays you can decode your personal genome for hardly more than \$100. Could different wines, or at least wine types, be matched to a personal genetic make-up?

If more sophisticated use of social media could bring producers and consumers into the same digital space, and more tasting opportunities via retailers and educators could spread the liquid as well as the word, nothing beats the increasingly popular sport of wine tourism for total immersion.

French wine producers, with a few exceptions such as those in Alsace, were berated for being so much poorer at encouraging visitors to their cellars than their counterparts outside Europe. Our hostess explained some local constraints: French law prevents wine producers from charging for wine tastings on their premises.

With a fairly heavy French contingent present, it was inevitable that the generic wine promotional bodies came up for discussion. (All the local ones had been invited to the think-tank but shied away once they learnt that the word “fine” was involved; too difficult to justify to their members.)

One well-placed French wine-trade insider urged producers to take a much more proactive role with the generic bodies, getting involved with deciding how their considerable funds were spent. A notable trend in the European wine world has been disaffection with these organisations by those who are levied to pay for them.

But despite all this well-intentioned and illuminating discussion, I have to admit that my favourite bit of the whole weekend was the most familiar — a tasting of wines considered fine that we participants were urged to bring. My favourites are listed below.

Favourite wines considered fine

These were my personal favourites tasted from a selection of 32 bottles brought by participants in Fine Minds 4 Fine Wines in southern Rhône recently.

Whites

- Clos des Papes 2009 Châteauneuf-du-Pape
- Ch La Nerthe 2002 Châteauneuf-du-Pape
- Dom de Beurenard 1986 Châteauneuf-du-Pape (magnum)
- Au Bon Climat Chardonnay 2014 Santa Barbara

Reds

- Dom Fourrier, Clos Saint-Jacques 2011 Gevrey-Chambertin
- Clos de Trias 2010 Ventoux
- Clos des Papes 2010 Châteauneuf-du-Pape
- Ch Rayas 1997 Châteauneuf-du-Pape
- Gérard Bertrand, Clos d'Ora 2013 Minervois-La Livinière
- Lukasi Saperavi 2014 Kakheti
- Ridge Monte Bello 1991 Santa Cruz Mountains
- Tenet 2014 Columbia Valley

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