

CONFESSIONS
OF A
WINEGEEK
A CAUTIONARY TALE
BY
CHRIS COAD

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I was asked by my editors to pen a new introduction for the sixteenth edition of *Confessions of a Wine Geek* I was initially reluctant. What could be left to say at this point? Was the world really waiting with bated breath for more words about words about wine?

When I sat down to write what I thought would be an inconsequentially whimsical look at the odd subculture of wine obsessives in and around the northeastern United States I had no idea the sociological impact this would have. Who could've imagined that, for example, New Hampshire's Fairmont College would offer an examination of the literary implications of my little opus entitled *Hearing Wine Confessions: the Imbiber as Saint and Sinner in Early Twenty-First Century Popular Literature*?

Not I, that's who not.

I had no idea that *Confessions* would take off the way it did, would become something akin to a social movement, uniting wine lovers across the world who thought they were alone in being oppressed by the gobbledygook of "points" and the trampling parade of the dreaded P trio—Pomposity, Pretentiousness and Patronizationalism.

And yet I understand the craving for more, as the whole reason I wrote *Confessions of a Winegeek* was the utter vacuum I perceived in the vinous literary world for works that artfully combine profanity-laced ramblings and confusing inside jokes among a smug, drunken subculture with imprecise, often factually suspect information pieced together from fevered late-night Googling.

So I said no, I'm not doing it. The work speaks for itself.

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Prologue: The Education of a Winegeek

One question changed my life and sent it spinning off in a direction I'd never have imagined.

Here is that question, asked with a sly lilt and a half-smile: "Do you like wine?"

The voice that asks belongs to one Brian Robinson, Director of the Wine Department at Phillips Auction House. Despite the officious-sounding title, he's a boyish, vaguely collegiate guy, soft-spoken and cheerful, even in the parka he's wearing to keep warm in his makeshift 'office' in the basement.

In the last year of my innocence I was toiling away in blessed ignorance as a graphic designer when Phillips became a client. Brian was the Director. The Director of Fine and Rare Wines. He was a friendly man with a ready smile, around my age. Would I help him with his catalogue for his upcoming auction? Could I come into his cellar and take a look at his database? See if it was in the best possible format? That was the hook. Computer talk. I went willingly. I walked of my own accord into that chilly cellar, stacked full of crates and boxes and glasses and bottles and corks strewn about, and I fiddled with his database and tried to stay warm until, our work at a standstill, I sensed him standing behind me. I turned, our eyes met and he asked me the question that changed things for me.

"Do you like wine?"

I didn't know how to answer. I had nothing against wine at that point—I hadn't given the matter any thought. He might as well have asked me if I liked butterflies. But it was getting late and the implication was certainly friendly, so I answered in the affirmative and he disappeared into the dark and came back a moment later with a glass of something dark and red, with lots of little flecks swirling around in it. The little flecks gave me a moment's pause, but I put myself into his hands, assumed that this was what the 'good stuff' was supposed to look like and took a sip.

Hmmm. Not bad... not bad at all. Fairly harsh to my poor virginal palate, gave me a bit of a fuzzy-dry mouth, but... interesting. Different. A series of stronger, more distinctive flavors than I was used to. He asked me what I thought, which I thought was an odd thing to ask, so I told him my reaction and tossed in a disclaimer about Gallo Hearty Burgundy being my idea of fine wine. He smiled and nodded, but he was eyeing me in a way that suggested possibilities.

We passed a few more nights in the same fashion, working late and occasionally pausing briefly for him to go into the dark between the shelves, come back with a dusty green bottle and pour the contents into glasses to be peered at and sipped. It was certainly a pleasant way to work, but I didn't see it as much more than that. Little did I know that this was only the groundwork being laid, that larger forces were in motion, the bait was set and the trap ready to be sprung. At some point I asked him if he was a connoisseur, and he winced. "I prefer oenophile" he said, and I had learned a new word. A lover of wine.

I didn't know it on a conscious level, but I had just taken my first slightly giddy step down the road of winegeekery.

So You Want to Be a Winegeek?

Before we go further, I think it would be helpful to define our terms: what, I hear you asking, is a 'winegeek'?

A winegeek is an individual of either gender who loves drinking mankind's most storied beverage, thinks no great meal is complete without a glass of vino, and revels in the teeny tiny details involved in producing and enjoying the stuff, often boring non-winegeeks to tears with absurdly enthusiastic explications of everything from the benefits of lees-stirring and microbullage (don't ask) to why the year 1968 was a catastrophe all over the wine world (except Spain, blah blah blah...)

A winegeek is NOT necessarily accredited by any major organization (though some are), nor does a winegeek have to be a Sommelier, Master Sommelier, Extra-Jumbo-Bigshot Sommelier, Master of Wine, Doctor of Oenology, soil scientist, historian, farmer, world traveler, gourmet, nor endowed with vast piles of disposable cash, although any or all of these can't hurt. Especially that last one.

Winegeekiness cuts across social, cultural and economic lines. More winegeeks seem to be men (in the same way that most collectors of toy trains and rare stamps seem to be men), but that unfortunate imbalance seems to be improving as wine's popularity spreads across America. There are rich and poor winegeeks—rich winegeeks drink more expensive wine, poor winegeeks drink

cheaper wine, but there is a lot (and I mean a lot) of great cheap wine out there, and part of the geeky fun is hunting it down before the critics get ahold of it and inflate its price (see Chapter 11).

Winegeeks love to share. I have met with winegeeks from other continents who have lugged prized treasures across six time zones to pour them for eager friendly strangers, simply for the joy of sharing something rare and exciting with men and women who recognize and appreciate the rarity and excitement. I have sat shivering in small, cramped apartments as thousands of dollars of rare and treasured wine are swallowed up lovingly in one night. Kooky? Sure, but life is short, friend, life is short.

Winegeeks love to talk shop, fervently and passionately. Asking a winegeek some kind of wine-related question is the conversational equivalent of asking that nice pamphlet-bearing young man at your front door, "So what's up with this Jesus guy, anyway?" and I have seen winegeeks almost come to blows over the vital issue of whether a particular cabernet's aroma had hints of 'raspberry' or 'boysenberry.' Yes, physical altercations over imaginary fruit smells are a special bonus of this avocation.

There are scientific winegeeks, who love talk of sugar percentages, grapevine root uptake ratios and brix at harvest (don't worry about it). There are artsy winegeeks who couldn't care less about that kind of stuff, but will rhapsodize mercilessly about the transcendental evanescent quality of their favorite producer's vino. There are winegeeks who love statistics, there are winegeeks who love labels, there are winegeeks who love other winegeeks. As with any other group, a complex and diverse cross-section of humanity.

Winegeeks, like those nice young men with the pamphlets, love to proselytize and convert. If you show the slightest interest in a winegeek's favorite subject, be prepared for the long haul, as you'll soon be sampling and hearing stories and many hyphenated place names you've probably never heard before.

Generally, a winegeek will flinch if referred to as a 'connoisseur,' as that term has over the years acquired an acrid whiff of elitism, and winegeeks are for the most part populists. So stick with winegeek, or, if you prefer, oenophile, a lover of wine, what the French would call an amateur du vin (not a bad term in itself except for the fact that it's a bit Francey-schmancy).

So now that we've defined our terms, what exactly, I hear you

asking, are the benefits of all this winegeekery?

Don't get me started.

Wine makes food taste better. Wine is good for you. Wine is social, and friendly and familial. If you like to cook, or even if you just like to eat, knowing which bottle to put on the table with which food is a skill that will impress your friends and break the ice at parties. You can develop friendships with the guys who work in wine shops, some of them very fine folks and not at all the disturbed loners that conventional wisdom would suggest. Plus, you should see the looks of admiration and awe the first time you drop the phrase 'nose of wet stones' into a conversation. You will have the admiration of the gentlemen and the ladies will swoon (or vice versa if you prefer). Your heart will thank you, your spouse or significant squeeze will thank you, and you'll be the toast of the town. You might, unfortunately, find that your new enjoyment of food leads you to put on a few pounds and leave your shirt untucked a lot. Or maybe that's just me.

The bottom line is, you'll have fun. 'Wine equals fun' should be obligatory engraving on every wood-paneled Vivaldi-playing pretentious wine shop across the land. Whether you just want something crisp and zingy to go with trout, or whether you turn into the type of geek who sells a kidney to finance a taste of Château Haut-Trés-Chèr, or anywhere in between, there is fun to be had, delight in the happily complicated and happily simple bottled juice that gives all of us geeky types so much to talk about.

The Oenopiphany

There usually comes a moment in the lives of civilians that signals their transition into proto-Winegeekhood. This moment can be of many different characters—it can be the gentle realization that you’ve been having wine with dinner every night for a week or so and the food seems to be tasting better; it can be the tasting of a certain wine that suddenly makes you sit up and say ‘Hey! Where can I get some more of this?’, or any of a myriad other different incarnations. It can be a gentle dawning realization or the sudden appearance of angelic hosts proclaiming ‘You are now a winegeek!’ in three languages. The flashy realization means the exact same thing as the subtle quiet one.

I call this moment the oenopiphany.

After the oenopiphany there is no going back to civilian status. Oh, you can retire if you have to, but there is no returning to the innocent pre-oenopiphany state.

Chances are that if you’re reading this, you’ve already had one, or are on the cusp.

Sometimes they hit you out of the blue, sometimes you see them coming a mile away. Mine came mostly out of the blue.

It’s a cautionary tale for those happy souls who would rather have a beer or a soda, who would always cheerfully and automatically point to the second-cheapest bottle on the wine list, for as you are now, so I once was.

As I continued working with Brian on the wine catalogue I started noticing the florid descriptions of the wines for sale—“masses of jam, raspberry, anise and black cherry... coffee, smoke

and underbrush... an edge of leathery, smoky oak,” and on and on in a similar breathless vein. What in the world could all that mean? I had tasted plenty of wine, but never one that tasted like raspberries or an oak tree, much less ‘underbrush.’ Was it just that I was tasting the wrong (i.e., cheap) stuff, or did I not have the sophistication to recognize all these things? Or was this some kind of mass delusion that everyone involved pretended to go along with in order to sound savvy? The Emperor’s New Wine? “Oh yes indeed, the underbrush is very saucy in this little number, yes....” I was suspicious, but resolved to keep my eyes open for such things the next time I had the chance.

That opportunity arose sooner than I had expected when, the job being done, my wife and I received an invitation to attend the pre-auction tasting. I didn’t quite know what to make of that—what goes on at a ‘tasting’? Does everyone just sit around tasting things? Are you allowed to talk? Is it like some kind of a party, or is it deadly serious? I was nervous, but I supposed we would find out soon enough. And as it would give me an opportunity to look carefully for the underbrush and the oak and the jammy blackcurrants and the roasted elderberries and any of the other florid descriptors I could remember, we gratefully accepted.

Racing to make the seven o’clock starting time, we managed to become addled as to the exact location of the tasting itself, and somehow ended up coming in through the back door, meandering through a few startled waiter-types, clambering around some tables laden with bottles and glasses, and finally emerging into a substantial, somewhat formally-dressed crowd. Fighting a rising fish-out-of-water feeling, we set about to seeing what this was all about, and struck out in different directions. My wife, who knew far more about wine than I did from her years waiting tables, decide to brave the crowd, which seemed to be in some kind of feeding frenzy around the tables marked “Bordeaux.” I went in precisely the opposite direction, meandering over toward the less in-demand areas, mostly in the interest of getting some breathing room, in the meantime acquiring a printed list of what was available for our tasting pleasure.

This list proved key, for it quickly became clear to me that, in my fidgety condition, long-ago high-school french didn’t prepare me to try and wrap my tongue around “Ducru-Beaucaillou” or

“Pichon-Longueville-Comtesse de Lalande” (“Gruaud-Larose”?) without feeling a perfect goon and signalling to all the room that there was an imposter in their ranks. I could, however, happily handle “Opus One” and “Dominus” (I could’ve managed “Quo Vadis” too, for that matter, what was with the Latinate names?), so I headed towards the familiarity of California, wonderfully free of circumflexes and accents aigule, and it was there that I had my first wee revelation, for the wine that was poured into my glass smelled uncannily like the inside of my high school woodshop. Glory be—‘oaky’ indeed; and I thought back to the catalogue and its passel of modifiers... smoky... toasty... velvety... mellifluous... which was this? I had no idea, but a tiny light was dawning somewhere, a small warm flicker that I shall immediately run screaming from should I ever feel it again.

Once I had a glass in my hand (the better to blend in) and some elbow room I took a look around. The atmosphere was indeed somewhat festive, chatty in some groups, more intense elsewhere. A few people had clipboards and were studiously taking notes, some were spitting into large silver urns, some swallowing. The über-oenophiles seemed to have perfected the somewhat precarious-looking technique of holding their glassware casually between finger and thumb at the base of the stem, a balancing act that I found very impressive indeed. What I wanted most was to stay out of everyone’s way, so I decided that a cozy spot between the cured meats platter and the Burgundy table was sufficiently undertrafficked. With a great deal of relief, I spotted a wine near my elbow that I felt sure I could pronounce. I stepped up to the friendly wine-pouring penguin and asked for it by name. When he didn’t correct my pronunciation I thought well done old sport, gathered my rather substantial pour (they were mostly getting thimblefuls over in Bordeaux) and retreated to see what I had. Thank heavens I had avoided the minefields of “Beaune 1er Cru Les Chouacheux” and “Manière-Noirot Nuits St. George Les Damodes” and alighted by chance on a wine with as simple and euphonious a name as “La Tâche.” Okay, it had a circumflex, but I could handle that. After all, I was very well acquainted with “La Vache” (Qui Rit!), and I believe to this day that somehow the giddy bovine from the fromage package took me hand-in-hoof and led me to the promised land, for when I returned to my little corner by the cured meats platter

and lifted that half-full glass of tea-colored liquid toward my nose, something very unusual occurred.

Here is what happened: my nose encountered something extraordinary, something that I couldn't identify at all at first, but found entirely compelling. I can't remember ever wanting to just sit and smell something over and over, at least not since I was a child. It was like staring at one of those annoying 3-D art things from a few years back, knowing that there is a picture there, somewhere, but just not quite being able to make out its outlines. The aromas were achingly familiar, yet blended and layered in completely unexpected ways. My wife found me with a dazed expression and my nose in a glass. I held it out for her, wanting to share what I had found. She took a deep sniff, cocked her head in thought for a moment... "mmm, honey," she said, and yes! That was it! It smelled something like wonderful old honey, and more... like my beat-up leather jacket, and like some kind of flowers, and like freshly turned earth, and... and suddenly all those wacky descriptors leapt as a body from the nonsensical straight into the concrete.

At the same time the solitary nature of such a voluptuous experience was made very clear, for my wine did not make the earth move for my wife, and when I tasted her favorite, a beautiful deep ruby-red colored wine, it seemed on first impression to be harsh and bitter, more overpowering and brutish than the quiet presence in my glass. Indeed, I figured I just had cheap taste, since her Bordeaux was clearly the crowd favorite (they were all but dispensing it with an eyedropper) and they couldn't seem to find many takers for mine, which had come in a bottle the size of a small child. Nevertheless, I was thrilled with my little epiphany, and when I saw Brian I gushed about what a wonderful Burgundy I had found, and how I might just have found a wine that I could drink any time, and how thankful I was for the invitation. He seemed a little bemused, but perked up when I mentioned my find, the La Tâche.

"Oh, yes, that was quite something, wasn't it?" he said. "I wouldn't get too used to that if I were you. That was one of my own personal bottles. It was a gift from a client—a Methusaleh of the '72. That was quite something..." and he trailed off, eyes far away, until he was swept away by another wave of grateful guests.

Time passed and I began to try wines regularly and I did a little

homework and found out that, no, I wouldn't be drinking La Tâche every day, or probably ever again for that matter, barring a winning lottery ticket. And I kicked myself a bit for not paying much attention to the Château Margaux that Lisa had brought me, enraptured as I was with my pale, delicate flower. I suppose asking for more than one revelation in a day would be getting greedy, wouldn't it? In some ways I was a little sabotaged for Burgundies, for now they all have a long shadow to measure up to, and I have been disappointed with them far more than with any other kind of wine; but I wouldn't have had it any other way. My eyes have been opened and I can't go back to what I was before. Now the oenophiles and I exchange knowing looks at tastings. They know that I have seen the light, that I am one of them, committed to spreading the word, to plumbing the depths and scaling the heights of the vinous experience. Call me a wine geek, if that makes you more comfortable. I am at peace.

Now if I could only find that damned 'underbrush'...

Descriptors; or "What the hell is a 'bergamot'?"

A non-winegeek friend and I are sharing a bottle of cheap Aussie cabernet in a neighborhood grill one day when he looks up from his French dip, twists the bottle around so I can see the back, and asked “What’s up with all those weird descriptions? Black cherries... buttery oak... peppermint—bergamots—I mean, it’s just marketing bullshit, right? I mean, it all really just tastes like wine!”

Well. I take a measured breath or two as I try to think of the best way to respond to this, one of the most common queries that civilians have about the way we oenophilic-Americans relate to our favorite beverage. I think of asking the next logical question, “well then, what does ‘wine’ taste like?” since to me there are as many flavors of wine as there are of ice cream at Baskin-Robbins cubed, but I fear that might come off as snobbery, smartassery or both.

I can certainly understand—my first encounters with the wacky world of wine descriptors had left me utterly baffled as to what the heck was being talked about. Pineapples? Leather? Road tar? WET DOG?! I had figured it was either a big put-on or some kind of mass hypnosis on the part of wine cultists in the spirit of the old cliché of modern art lovers oohing and aahing over a blank canvas or a light switch, seeing what they want to see and oneupping each other with smug declarations of comprehension.

What I finally end up saying is yes, I thought it was partly marketing b.s., since the stuff they write on the backs of bottles is notoriously unrelated to what the goodies in the bottle actually taste like, but that the idea of the taste and smell of wine being described by all kinds of seemingly unusual, sometimes far-out descriptors is, for me, a pretty good one IF, and here's the big 'if' — it's clear that this language is not always so much entirely literal as it is an attempt to communicate via shorthand an experience that almost by nature defies communication.

In short, it's a way of establishing a common language to be able to discuss sensory experiences in ways that aren't normally discussed in mixed company. For the most part in our daily lives we don't really talk about taste, or about smell, apart from "that tastes good" or "tastes like chicken." The type of language I saw in wine catalogues struck me as almost farcical until, after being dragged to a tasting, I took a sniff of a wine that smelled, of all things, just like my old junior high school wood shop. I couldn't believe it—I had an actual sense memory flashback right then and there of lathes and sawdust and trying to get that damn box to be square, even though it was clear that hell would freeze over before that ever happened. It took that clear impression to key me into what people meant by these descriptors.

Most of us, after all, don't really think about what things taste or smell like. What does a chocolate bar taste like? Well, it's sweet... it tastes like... like a chocolate bar. But if you really sit down and compare dark chocolate side by side with milk chocolate, differences emerge—one will taste darker and earthier, more or less sweet, creamier, sharper, more bitter, and so on. Things you never noticed become apparent. 'Chocolate' can't taste just like 'chocolate' if three different chocolates taste entirely dissimilar.

Of course, it's all just grapes, and when someone says they find 'chocolate' in a red Bordeaux they aren't suggesting that someone has surreptitiously slipped some Swiss Miss into their Château Cheval Blanc. But grapes, and especially the fermented juices thereof, seem to have an uncannily chameleonlike ability to mimic other scents and tastes (you'll have to ask the chemists exactly why/how), and those of us who are true believers feel that wine rewards attention; that if you swirl and sniff enough of it, some thematic links emerge that most people can agree on. For instance, the distinctive smell of

wine made from the cabernet sauvignon grape is often called ‘cassis’ or ‘blackcurrant.’ Now, frankly I’ve never smelled currants in their natural state; I’ve had creme de cassis, and I’ve had currant jam, but I have smelled a lot of wine made from cabernet sauvignon and I now have a visceral sense of what someone means if they say that a wine has ‘dense cassis flavors.’ For me the cabernet is more real than the cassis, and if I ever am served something with real cassis in it I suspect I’ll take a whiff and say ‘mmm... cabernet.’

The best descriptors, to me, are the ones that call up the most vivid, clearest impression of a smell or taste that can’t be broken down any further. Some I understand clearly—I grew up in Hawaii eating lychees, so when that is given as a descriptor (usually for a gewürztraminer) it rings very clear and true to me, whereas for someone from Minnesota it may only be puzzling. Likewise, when I see the term ‘Asian spice’ I simply have no idea what could be meant by that; I tend to think of Asia as a collection of very different places and they seem to use lots and lots of spices over there, so I’m no clearer on what that is meant to convey than I would be if I read ‘European spice,’ so to me it has no resonance and I just kind of skip over that one if I see it in print.

Every now and then on the wine boards a thread will pop up inquiring as to everyone’s favorite descriptors, and what often gets trotted out are the outlandish or the poetic. James Broadbent once wrote that a particularly fine Burgundy was like a “peacock’s tail unfolding in the spring,” and if you’ve been lucky enough to taste a fine pinot noir reveal itself slowly and gloriously in your mouth that analogy makes sense to you. If not, it’s just florid nonsense. Some people only connect with concrete terms, some don’t see the sense of a laundry list of aroma-wheel approved descriptors; there’s a place in the great big world of wine appreciation for all of Dionysus’ chillun.

The Local Wineshop Geek

One of the easiest ways to dip your toes in the shallow end of the winegeek pool is to seek out and bond with the local wineshop geek. Assuming you have a local wineshop, of course. I'm lucky enough to live in a metropolitan area (New York City) that has dozens of them, so I'm spoiled, but even when I go back home to Honolulu or visit my wife's family in the People's Republic of Pennsylvania I can find a decent geek-oriented shop if I try hard enough (although Pennsylvania, with its 'state stores,' is pretty tough).

At any rate, local wine shop geeks are invariably *thrilled* to have someone with a genuine interest in wine ask them what they think of this and that, because they spend most of their days dealing with people who want 'that red wine with the castle on the label,' or 'the wine in the fish-shaped bottle.'

One of the first local wine shop geeks we got to know was a guy by the name of Kane, Brad Kane, who worked at a shop called Garnet on Manhattan's upper east side. Garrulous, cheerful and opinionated, he always seemed to be excited by some new wine trend. One week it would be "SPAIN! Spanish wine has come of age!", the next "AUSTRALIA! Wonderful value, great quality!" (I'm pretty sure his own angle at first involved hitting on my wife, but eventually I showed up and he got the message.)

So I'm in the early flush-of-enthusiasm phase, where I'm buying books on wine and surfing wine websites and bothering the

veterans on wine discussion groups with inane newbie questions and just generally annoying everyone around me. Interestingly, wine chat groups and discussion boards have a habit that's rare among internet subcultures--people go by their real names, for the most part, although there are exceptions. So when Lisa came home and told me about this guy at Garnet who always seemed unusually interested in helping her out, this Brad Kane guy, I recognized his name from several wine chat sites. And when she went and told him that, and told him my name, he recognized me too. Small world moment.

From then on, Kane became a resource for us, a window into the winegeek subculture. We met his colleague, Robert Callahan, the intellectual superego to Kane's bubbling id, who seemed to know everything about any wine you could think of. In fact, whatever it was he'd tasted several vintages of it last week with the winemaker and had some thoughts he'd share with you in a quiet, wry voice. Callahan was a kind of local legend, having become a noted anti-establishment crank on various internet wine sites when they were in their infancy. One odd thing about him: everyone who is familiar with his internet writings has the same reaction when meeting him face-to-face: "*This* is Callahan? I was sure he'd be older..." Yes, for some reason his online persona is that of a pasty sixtyish guy in a starched shirt with a yellowing collar, and square-rim glasses, so no one quite knows what to make of the slender, slightly owlsh thirtysomething who's always humming tunes from *South Park*.

These guys always seemed to be going to tastings, they were always talking about so-and-so the winemaker who was in town. Through them, we began to catch a glimpse of what it was that winegeeks actually *did* in their free time.

And frankly, it looked pretty cool.

Breaking the Ice

After months of chatting online, Kane drops a proposition in our lap when we're picking up our fix of Australian wine at Garnet. "Why not come out with us?" he asks. "It's a good group, you'll have fun," he says, and stands there looking at us expectantly.

Gulp.

Meet up with a bunch of folks who spend their days typing to each other on the internet? Won't these be pasty-faced social retards who haven't seen the sun in months? Won't they all know each other and wonder who the hell we are and what we're doing invading their strange rituals? Won't they make fun of our inexperience? They'll smell our fear and tear us to pieces, right? Or maybe they'll just be a bunch of pompous blowhards? Who the hell wants to sit around all night discussing *batonage* or *élevage* or anything else that ends in *-age*? I'm about to stammer something noncommittal that can be slipped out of at a later date when I hear Lisa saying "Sure, why not?" I fix her with the evil eye, but it does no good. The deed is done, the contract made, and Kane retreats, satisfied.

"Why did you do that?" I hiss at Lisa as we're heading back to the subway home. "I dunno. Might be fun," she says, and smiles in that pointedly fetching way that instantly disarms me and makes any further debate pointless. My spine melts: resistance, my friend, is not an option. Just bite the bullet and figure if it's a borefest at least you'll be able to get drunk—possibly paralytically so, if circumstances demand.

In the five day interval I do nothing but fret about what wine to bring, as I have no idea what's normal. Do people bring really expensive, rare stuff, or everyday wines, or a mix, or what? I haven't a clue, and start trying to dream up reasons to cancel before I am forced to find out. Maybe we could tell Brad our house burned down, or we came down with tuberculosis or flatworms or something that's hard to check up on later?

But the week goes by in a flurry of normal distractions, and before I know it it's Saturday night and we're headed to a place called 'Minetta Tavern' in Greenwich Village, near NYU. There's been email to the effect that this little gathering is in honor of a geek who's visiting from England, and that everyone should bring only Spanish wines. Having been paralyzed by indecision all week, I stop off at a wine shop in Hoboken on the way there and just point at something that has a conservative-looking label and costs forty bucks. I figure aiming at the midprice range is safe enough, at least I won't be too embarrassed either way. Lisa is meeting me there and brings something of her own, a sweet wine that one of her wine shop sources recommended to her. Where does she get all these sources? Have you ever noticed that cute chicks always somehow manage to get the best tips on wines? Stupid laws of nature.

I've insisted she meet me outside, so I won't have to face the weirdos alone, and there she is. Together we take a deep breath and plunge through the front door into the strange netherworld of the winegeek gathering. The maitre d', spotting our bottles, waves us towards the back of the restaurant, and there, that must be them, two long tables in the shape of an L, lots of guys, fewer women, many more bottles. Damn, that's a lot of bottles clustered in the center of the table, there must be thirty at least. Kane spots us and bounds over, "Hey, great to see you, glad you could make it—everybody, this is Chris and Lisa." Kiss, kiss, greet, greet, shake, shake, a blizzard of names and faces, Steve and Jamie and Joe and Andrew and blahp and bleehp and blorhp and on and on and on. We shake and kiss our way to the back of the room, find the only empty seats we can, and settle in to catch our breath. But before we can, glasses are being shoved in our direction, bottles, pours, my god it's a little overwhelming.

The next hour is a blur of chatter and sipping and swirling and chatter and appetizers and entrées and more sipping and swirling.

Things begin to resolve sometime in the afterglow of the main course, when a bespectacled banker-type in an Oxford shirt slides down towards us and sticks out his hand cheerfully. "I'm Joe," he says, "You might've seen me posting as SFJoe." I had, I admit, but had figured it was someone who lived in San Francisco. Was he visiting now? No? Why was he not NYJoe? "Oh, I just picked that name up when I lived there, it came with me when I moved, you know..." he trails off, pushes his glasses back on his nose and leans in at us, smiling. "You having fun? A little overwhelmed?"

I think we've tasted through ten or twelve wines at this point, so I'm feeling warmer and looser than before: "Oh yeah, this is great, so many wines... so many wines... hey, whatever happened to the one I brought, the Remelluri?" He looks pained, "Oooh, was that yours? Pity, it's corked, pretty dreadfully so." He wanders down to the other end of the table and brings back the three-quarters full bottles, carefully restoppered, and places it mournfully in front of me.

"Oh. Damn." I feel my cheeks start to flush pink. My bottle has let us down, goddammit! And I spent all that time. Suddenly I'm embarrassed. They're laughing down at the other end of the table. Are they talking about us, the dopes who brought bad wine? I sink back into the banquette, ashamed, and almost collide with someone sliding towards me from the other direction.

I draw back and am on the verge of apologizing when I catch sight of who exactly has slid in next to me. Farmer's overalls. Shiny red shoes. Thin, with close cropped salt-and-pepper hair and a surfer-dude mien that rings pleasantly familiar to my Hawaiian upbringing. "Dude," he says (somehow I knew that was going to be the first word out of his mouth), "I'm Andrew. I just wanted to come see this Chris Coad that everyone's talking about." I watch warily for a second for any sign that I'm being made sport of, but he grins so guilelessly that I quickly discount the possibility. "It's good to see some fresh meat—um, I mean NEW FACES at one of these things ha ha ha," he says, "Hi, Joe! I still like you too."

We're interrupted by a hubbub on the other side of the banquette. Someone is cooing "Ooh, tintilla! Who brought this? Where did this come from?" I peer over, and a Spanish guy whose name is, I think, 'Helio,' has seized the bottle that Lisa brought and is waving it around happily. What's going on here, what's the story...?

Lisa and I maneuver ourselves over towards him, she raising her hand and claiming the bottle as hers. It turns out that he has fond memories of drinking this particular wine at home in Spain, and he proceeds to regale us with them in a most endearing fashion. I'm relieved that at least one of our bottles seems to have contributed something of interest to the evening's proceedings, and I relax and allow the rest of the evening to wash over me like a warm tide, surrendering to the seemingly endless procession of bottles, none of which I'd ever so much as heard of before. The youngish Brit who's the evening's guest of honor meanders to the back and curls up on the banquette, muttering "Syrah. American syrah. So much potential..."

I look around at the roomful of tipsy happy chatterers. Mostly men, mostly early-30s to early-50s, a few younger, a few older, a few women... okay, it's a bit of a freaky scene, but I could get used to it, these seem like nonweirdos for the most part, plus you get to experience a helluva lot of wines. Actually, that's a problem, as I've been tasting all night and the details of what I liked and didn't like are even now slipping away from me—there was that big bully of a wine from Priorat... the sweet tintilla was yummy but a bit strange... lots of other stuff... shit.

As I'm riding back home in the backseat of a battered Nissan driven by a friendly guy who assured us he was spitting, I'm thinking about this, this not remembering. Really, this is a problem. I've come out to meet people and learn about Spanish wines, and all I've really done is meet people. What the hell good is that? Not that there's anything wrong with people, but they're a sideshow right now as far as I'm concerned. I actually brought my notebook but didn't bust it out because I didn't see anyone else taking notes and I didn't know if that was considered rude or what. Screw the people—next time, I'm taking notes, and I'll remember the damn wines.

Tasting Notes—Winegeek Homework

Okay, here's the deal:

Procure a bottle of wine, a notebook and a pen or pencil.

Open aforementioned bottle

Pour the contents into a glass

Look at it, smell it, taste it

Write down the name of the wine, and what you see, smell and taste.

That's it! Pretty simple, huh? No need to try and get all fancy-shmancy—here's what one of my first TNs looked like...

“Chateau Duplessy 1985: This wine is red. It smells kind of like... wine. It tastes pretty good, though. Smooth and tangy, I guess, but it kinda makes my mouth feel fuzzy.”

As simple and elegant a TN as you can imagine. Now drink as much wine as you can and do this for EVERY wine you drink. Yes, every last one, even that cheap plonk you're sucking down right now. Carry a notebook and pen at all times. If it tastes like nothing, write “this wine tastes like nothing”—don't feel obliged to come up with the “elegant notes of sauteed seashell puree flit about in a truffled mineral oil base and permeate the 96-second finish...” kind of note. Leave that to professional stuntwriters and people like me, who aren't afraid to look silly.

So that's the HOW.

The WHY is the important part of the equation. The actual exercise of taking notes forces you to truly pay attention to what

your senses are telling you, and to articulate clearly and specifically what it is you like and dislike. Winegeeks, always on the prowl for good jargon, call this building palate memory. In other words, it's easy to just sip something and enjoy it, but learning what it is about it exactly that you enjoy takes a bit of attention, which is where writing it down helps immeasurably. After a few months of this vinous dynamic tension, your palate will never be a 98-pound weakling again, guaranteed.

At first, you'll probably write notes much like mine above, but once you have some built-up palate memory it becomes easier to compare what you're tasting now with what you had before and to see the distinct character of individual wines (providing they have any), the effects of winemaking techniques, the differences in grape varieties, aging in oak, and other geeky stuff like that. Before I started taking notes I would enjoy wines, but not really remember how specific ones tasted and not be able to keep a handle on what each one tasted like—I would be forever thinking to myself, oh, this tastes a bit like that... that thing we had, you know, with the gold label... or was it red? and so on, until I realized that I was never going to get a handle on things that way. So I started writing things down, and soon after that lights started to go off in my head. Proper medication was eventually able to fix that, but I sure got a handle on vino faster than I would have otherwise.

Taste as much as you possibly can. Go to organized tastings, if you have access to them, or take classes, or get together with like-minded friends (you do have like-minded friends, don't you?), or just open things at home as often as time and budget permit. The more the better. Start cheap until you start figuring out what you like: there's (truly) lots of expensive junk and (truly) lots of wonderful cheap stuff. Most any wine shop worth its salt will have someone who can advise you.

Well? What are you waiting for? Grab the notebook and go! Start pulling those corks! Run like the wind...!

Meet Some Grapes

Wine is fermented grape juice. Different grapes taste differently, and have differing qualities. Most fine wine today is made from what geeks like to call noble grapes, the family *vitis vinifera*, which includes cabernet, merlot, chardonnay, riesling and most other grapes that people like to put the names of on bottles, although curiously the noble European *vitis vinifera* can't get by as a wine-grape without a hand from its country American cousins.

You see, back in the 1860s a nasty little root louse called *phylloxera vastatrix* emigrated from America (where the indigenous grapes were resistant) to Europe (where they were not), and quickly became winemaking's Armageddon bug, relentlessly destroying most of the vineyards in Europe within a few decades. As European winemaking was hanging by a thread, it was discovered that, by grafting the European *vinifera* grapevines onto roots from American varieties, the little bug was thwarted, and this is still the procedure to this very day. Disaster averted, wine world saved. Phew.

Enough history—here are some white grapes:

Chardonnay: Chardonnay, chardonnay, chardonnay. The name has become synonymous with 'white wine' in many places in America—you simply hear people in bars asking for 'a glass of chardonnay' when they want a glass of white. Why is this? Because it's easy to pronounce, and it sounds kind of Frenchy-classy, for the most part.

The spiritual home of chardonnay is in the Burgundy region

of France, where white Burgundies from great vineyards such as Le Montrachet and its satellites are usually held up as the ne plus ultra of the chardonnay world. California chardonnay imitates this model, aged in wood and secondarily fermented (malolactic) to soften and round the wine.

Wine made from chardonnay can be great, it can be sublime, it can even marry well with food, but too often in its American incarnation its merely an oak-delivery vehicle, saturated with creamy vanilla woodiness. The grape itself is fairly chameleonlike, showing off winemaking techniques to better advantage than more strongly-flavored varieties, and sometimes it's hard to reconcile the viscous butterscotchy-caramel-vanilla product of many California wineries as the same grape that produces steely, lean and crisp food wines when in the hands of the vigneron of Chablis. Nevertheless, many people are very fond of the style of California chardonnay, although not often for very long after repeated exposure, and they can certainly fit the bill at a cocktail party as wine-as-apertif better than they can match up with foods on the dinner table (I mean, you can't have lobster every day...).

Here's the deal, in short: big, goopy, oaky chardonnays from California SELL. That's the bottom line. As long as people buy them, they will continue to be made that way. My dollars go elsewhere these days, but I'm sure there aren't many Californian wine-makers losing sleep over that. If you like the style, fine. I used to, but tired of it fast and hard.

You want good chardonnay that you can pour at the dinner table? Stick with Chablis, or go with a bottle that's from a backlash producer. Yes, the words 'unwooded' and 'unoaked' are beginning to appear on labels as a selling point.

Riesling: Americans are afraid of riesling. It often comes in strange bottles with long Teutonic words on it, and the most common reaction I get from civilians when I suggest it is a wrinkled nose and the comment "I don't like sweet wines."

Well, in the first place they ain't all sweet, and even if there is some sweetness in German riesling, the wines can be exquisitely balanced with crisp acidity and deep richness of flavor that makes them a perfect match for many dishes. The sweetness issue is a bit of a cultural red herring—retailers have an adage that Americans 'talk dry but drink sweet.' If you really are sure you hate any trace

of sweetness, try one from Alsace, where dryness is far more the usual style, or keep an eye out for the word 'trocken' (dry) on a German label. Australia is also making some fine dry-style rieslings that can be great bargains.

Really, Alsatian rieslings can be a great step for those who are baffled by German labels—the wines are usually dry, unless noted as 'Vendage Tardive' (late harvest) or "Seleccion de Grains Nobles" (nobly rotted) in which case you'll know by the price tag.

A brief sketchy note on those confusing German terms: the top level of German white wines (called QmP or 'Qualitatswein mit Pradikat') are organized in terms of the ripeness level of the grapes—with ripeness usually coming across as sweetness—going from Kabinett (least ripe) to Spatlese (riper) to Auslese (riper still) and finally Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese (dessert-wine sweet and that plus botrytis-affected, respectively). These last two, along with Eiswein (pressed frozen grapes) make luscious, highly-prized dessert wines that age and age, growing deeper and more complex with time. If you've never had one, you've missed out. Of course, they cost an arm and a leg, but there you go.

Sometimes American wineries call riesling 'Johannisberg' riesling. Same stuff.

The skinny on riesling is that it is overlooked and underappreciated because the labels are confusing, the bottles are strangely-shaped and people are wary of German or German-looking wines (perhaps having memories of Blue Nun) and aren't sure whether they should be asking for 'reez-ling' or 'ryes-ling' (the former, by the way), but that few grapes offer more pleasure across the board at so many different price levels.

Sauvignon Blanc: Sauvignon blanc doesn't have quite the familiarity hurdle to clear as riesling does because the name sounds reassuringly Frenchy, so there's plenty of it around to sample. To generalize, sauvignon blanc makes a crisp, bright wine with a lot of backbone and hints of grassy herbaceousness. The Loire valley regions of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume are the center of Old World sauvignon blanc production, turning out lean, aromatically complex wines. In America this style is the model, with the best known example being Robert Mondavi's very successful Fume Blanc. New Zealand is also well known for making a more extravagant, slightly wilder style of sauvignon, more redolent of citrus and

grass and seeing little if any time in barrel. Sauvignon is also a part of the blend (with semillon) that is white Bordeaux and the famous sweet wines of Sauternes.

Just for the record, sauvignon blanc is a great match with many kinds of seafood and light dishes.

Chenin Blanc: Another grape whose spiritual roots are in France's Loire Valley, chenin blanc when is the star of wines from such appellations as Vouvray, Savennières and Montlouis, finding few serious footholds outside of France. But what a wine it makes in its home soil—mineral, strong dry wines full of character that can age for years or decades, developing beautiful secondary aromas and flavors. Best of all, truly great Loire chenin can be had for less money than generic buttery factory-made chardonnays because, for the moment, they are flying below the radar screen.

If sweet wines are what you're after the great sweeties from the Loire appellations of Quarts de Chaume, Coteaux du Layon and Bonnezeaux are as good as they get—rich, tropical and excitingly vivid when young, gradually turning layered and deep with time. Unlike France's other famous sweet wine, Sauternes, these see very little or no new wood, so the chenin fruit is left to speak for itself. And speak it does, in volumes that I usually hear as 'driiiiiinnnnk meeeee...' [See *Why Chenin Blanc Makes the Greatest Wines in the World* for more information on this, my own love story.]

Gewürztraminer: Gewürztraminer (ge-voorts-tra-MEEN-er) tends to be a love-it-or-hate-it kind of winegrape, as it makes wines that have a distinctively floral-musky-fruity aroma—a Winegeek will often describe it as smelling of roses & lychee—that invariably has the word 'spicy' attached to it (probably because the name of the grape means 'spicy grape from Tramin'). I admit I'm a fan, and love the distinctive aromas and slight unctuousness that is characteristic of the grape. The spicy-fruity quality makes it a good match for Chinese and Indian foods, or any heavily spiced cuisine that might overwhelm a more delicate wine. I'm also a sucker for sweet dessert gewürz, but it does seem to be a taste you either like or don't right off the bat.

Viognier: For decades the only place you could get viognier was the Condrieu region of France's Rhône Valley. Suddenly in the early 90s it got trendy and began cropping up as a California specialty, where it seems to be consistently and murderously over-

aked (hey, why change a winning chardonnay formula?). Viognier makes a flowery-rich wine, often dense and waxy in the mouth, and can be subtle and layered but seems to come off mostly in its New World incarnation as a flowery chardonnay clone. But it's early yet, and better things may come with time and experience.

Pinot Gris/Pinot Grigio: In France it's pinot gris (gray pinot), in Italy pinot grigio (gray pinot), in the U.S. we call it either of the foreign names, but never 'gray pinot'—the marketers wouldn't like that. This grape in its Italian incarnation usually makes a light, somewhat neutral wine that can easily go well with many dishes (like gray shoes go with many clothes). In Alsace they pump a bit more character out of it. I need to taste more of these to have much of an idea, though.

There are many more... gruner veltliner from Austria, romorantin from Cour-Cheverny in France, roussanne and marsanne, the white grapes of the Rhône Valley, semillon from Australia and Bordeaux, pinot blanc, silvaner, columbard (the most widely planted white grape in the U.S.!)[CHECK], and hundreds and hundreds more. I'm tired though, so I'll move on to some reds now.

Cabernet Sauvignon: in sloppy shorthand cabernet sauvignon is the king of the red wine world, the cabernet sauvignon grape is used in the great red wines of Bordeaux as well as the varietal cabernets of the United States and Australia. The Bordelais use it as the base of a blend, often mixing it with varied percentages of merlot and cabernet franc, while in the U.S. it usually comes straight. (California version of Bordeaux blends are given the silly, fairly unusable name 'Meritages'—most geeks just say 'blends.')

The styles of Old vs. New World winemaking is clear in the similarities and differences in the handling of this grape—the generally warmer climate of the U.S. west and Australia encourages riper, more fruit-forward wines, often seemingly pumped-up and rich and heavily oaked while the Bordelais, no slouches with the new barrels either, make their wines in a sterner, less overtly fruit-driven style that some critics would say is better for long-term aging. Frankly, in my experience I find that balance is the key, and if a wine has good levels of fruit and backbone it will last and prosper, regardless of its place of origin, and, for that matter, will grow towards a common ground. It's much easier to mistake an older California cabernet for a Bordeaux than it is a young one, as the plush fruit has given way

to a more layered complexity. Both of these approaches to cabernet have their partisans, and many geeks love a good example of either. That being said, no region anywhere has the track record for aging and long-term development that Bordeaux does, so it behooves a good geek to tip his or her hat in that direction.

But I digress.

The classic Winegeek descriptor for cabernet sauvignon is 'cassis' or 'blackcurrant,' and the wine can have an herbaceous streak varying from oreganoish to green-peppery aromas.

Merlot: Merlot is hot. Merlot is trendy. Merlot has become to red wine what chardonnay is to white, an easy-to-pronounce crowd-pleasing mediocrity. The idea that seems to drive the merlot bandwagon is that it is 'softer' and less tannic than cabernet, which is indeed often the case. In fact, the wine made from merlot is often fleshy, round and indistinct, lacking in character, the vinous equivalent of a processed chocolate ice-milk milkshake to go with chardonnay's vanilla version. Of course those of us who are merlot detractors in general always do well to remember (before it can be gleefully pointed out to us) that one of the most highly prized wines in the world, Château Pétrus, is made from that maligned grape. Okay, okay, but that's not really relevant to the kind of wines that most folks I know are drinking on a day-to-day basis. Yes, great wine can, and often is, made from this grape, especially in Bordeaux's 'Left Bank' appellations of St. Emilion and Pomerol. But that's not what most people are drinking in my neighborhood, nor what you will get in any restaurant where you order a 'glass of merlot.'

Zinfandel: America's own world-class winegrape, zinfandel's roots are shrouded in a bit of beguiling mystery. It must have come from the old world somewhere, but where? There is an Italian grape called primitivo that seems to be very similar genetically, but only appears in Italy well after zin has appeared in the U.S. At any rate, it's ours now, and we have every right to be proud, as it's a grape that has a lot of character and can be vinified many different ways, from a light, fruity quaffer to a dense, black and portlike monster. There is a longtime rule in geek circles that you want to go with 'R' producers (i.e., Ridge, Ravenswood, Rosenblum), but the market has widened in the past few years, and many people are making great wines from this grape.

There is some debate about the ability of zin to age well, although every year there are a few wines like Ridge's Geyserville (actually a mostly zin-based blend) that unquestionably do just that. But most of what is appealing about zinfandel wines is the fresh, upfront black-cherry and berry-style fruit, so I have no problem drinking them young. As they age this fruit tends to fade, and the wines become something more cabernet-like, muted and earthier. A different experience, and not necessarily one you look to zin for, but fine in its own right.

[WARNING: Do not mention the beverage called 'White Zinfandel' to a winegeek of the Zinhead persuasion, as it may cause seizures and the dreaded white-zin apoplexy as she tries to swallow her bile about what an abomination this syrupy-sweet pink soda-poppy plonk is compared to the true nobility of America's own only great RED winegrape which should only EVER be red, and that white swill is SATAN'S OWN TIPPLE and so on and so forth. It's true that to many people this drink provides a much-needed bridge to the wine world and that anything anybody enjoys drinking is a fine thing unto itself, but these Zinheads are purists and tend to look at things in an absolutist fashion that brooks no traffic with populism. Be warned.]

Syrah: Syrah is the great grape of France's Northern Rhône Valley, finding apotheosis in wines from Hermitage, Côte-Rôtie, Crozes-Hermitage and St. Joseph. On the other side of the world, it's the flagship grape of the burgeoning Australian wine industry, where it goes by the name 'shiraz' and was made famous by Penfolds Winery's Grange Hermitage (now just Grange, in deference to the original French Hermitage area), the first Australian wine to rocket to international attention. Californian winemakers have also been experimenting with syrah/shiraz in the past decade or so, led by the so-called 'Rhône Rangers,' who argue that the state's climate is more fit for Rhône grapes like syrah (and the southern-Rhône varieties grenache & mourvedre) than Bordeaux grapes like cabernet and merlot.

The hot climate of Australia tends to make for a much riper style of wine than the Rhône version, which is often leaner, earthier and characterized more by smoky, meaty, gamy complexity and balance while Aussie versions tend towards big, plummy blockbuster wines that overwhelm you with jammy rich fruitiness and

power. The Californian style, to the extent such a thing exists, seems to fall somewhere between the other two.

‘Rhône funk’ is another facet of French syrah that has its adherents—some folks love the gamey, meaty, almost manurey ‘barnyard’ aromas that can come from some Rhône wines (some of which are attributable to Brett). “A good Rhône makes you want to check your shoes” is a statement guaranteed to puzzle non-Winegeeks, but there is a certain delight to be found in the gaminess of a good glass of Rhône syrah that can defeat normal good sense.

Pinot Noir: Ahhh... pinot noir. The most fickle of the great red winegrapes, trickier to grow and more delicate to vinify, most changeable of mistresses and most likely to inspire geeks to bad poetry and dubious metaphors. Pinot noir has its home in Burgundy, where it is king and lord of all it surveys. Red Burgundy wine is not a blend, as almost all red Bordeaux is; it is pure pinot noir, and there’s not a lot of it to go around, which has led to some very healthy price hikes. Frankly, the best pinot noir is the heavenly, but there is a lot more variability in pinot than there is in cabernet-, merlot- or syrah-based wines. If you drop big bucks on a bottle of Bordeaux you’re fairly sure to get a wine that is at the very least decent and drinkable, whereas there’s a lot of expensive Burgundy out there that is thin, acidic and pleasureless. Burgundy is the area that inspires the most fervid devotees, but novices should be careful and seek out good advice before wading in.

The style of wine made from pinot noir in the U.S. is very different—more fruit-forward, riper, more exuberant in character, more puppyish. You wouldn’t think of calling most Burgundies ‘cherry-cola-scented’, but I hear that descriptor used a lot about U.S. pinot. Still, there are many areas where winemakers are getting a lot of fine press—Oregon is often cited as a good climate for pinot, as it’s on the same latitude as Burgundy. Or something. I’m not a map geek, so I’m just passing it on.

Enter Joe Dressner, Bigshot Wine Guy

BYO, or 'bring your own,' restaurants are a big deal in winegeek circles. They give us the opportunity to congregate and do what we like most: open dozens of bottles without fear of corkage fees and without having to have an 'in' with the owner or manager.

When a formerly non-BYO place goes BYO for any reason, word spreads like wildfire through the geek community. Now the words was coming down: Café St. John, way up on the Upper West Side, had lost its liquor license and wasn't going to be renewing it for a few months at least. Round up the winos, strike while the iron is hot.

And so it is that I find myself trundling uptown on the subway and wandering down some vaguely shady streets to find this place. The brain trust has decided that tonight's theme is to be 'Elegant Americans,' and I've brought along a Paul Hobbs pinot noir from Napa Valley, a wine I've never had but thought might fill the bill.

When I walk through the door I'm seized with that same clenching panic and urge to flee that I've gotten everytime I've gone to one of these things, but I spot Kane and Callahan across the room and I fight it down, take a deep calming breath and plunge ahead. I'm running a little late, so I say hi to the assembled geeks and grab myself a seat down at one end of the table, next to Callahan and some big guy who, from his expression, looks like he has a slight case of indigestion.

As the bottles begin their flow around the table, this guy's case of agita begins to grow. He takes a sniff of a supposedly elegant

California chardonnay and gags theatrically, “Oh my god,” he moans to Callahan, “you’re trying to poison me with oak juice. What did I ever do to you? Do you hate me? Did I deserve this?” Callahan just smiles patiently, and I watch in slack-jawed amazement as the bravura performance continues to escalate throughout the night: every wine is ‘fake’ or ‘wine candy’ or ‘industrial’ or something along those lines. I think the only good thing he finds to say all night is about a dessert zinfandel, which he indifferently describes as “Not bad, like an uncomplicated Port.” Everything else is either a “fakey wine beverage product,” “Fresca,” “cough syrup,” or just “horrible, horrible, horrible, fake yeast, too much wood, a plot to give wine a bad name.”

Most of the geeks in attendance seem to be taking this in with a good deal of amusement, but I’m more amazed than anything else. As he and Callahan make their farewells and head out the door I whisper to Kane “Who *was* that guy?” He looks confused for a second, then realizes who I’m talking about. “Oh. That,” he says, “was Joe Dressner.”

Okay. So who’s he?

When I get home I do a little research: turns out that Joe Dressner is some kind of a fringe wine importer, a guy who runs a small business bringing in terribly obscure wines from mostly terribly obscure little places in the wilds of France. I thought he was just another homegrown New York crank, and it turns out he’s a bigshot wine pro!

I’m a sucker for good-natured bile, and being fairly impressionable and insecure among the more experienced geeks, I’m finding the freedom to know what you like and what you don’t and to say to be rather exhilarating. One peculiar thing I’ve noticed at some of these tastings is that, once a wine goes around and everyone’s tasted it, someone will say “What do we think of this?” and then people talk about it until a group consensus emerges and everyone agrees that’s the way the wine tastes. Usually, one or two anointed tasters are deferred to and allowed to set the bar for everyone else. This strikes me as a self-mutilation of the tasting experience; I don’t necessarily want to know what someone else thinks just yet, I’m still trying to figure out what *I* think.

The next time I see Joe Dressner I make a point of referring to him as ‘Joe Dressner, Bigshot Wine Guy,’ a title he accepts with

equanimity. For some reason it comes up that in another life he did an apprenticeship as a typesetter, and we engage in an animated conversation about the relative merits of Bodoni Italic. From the confluence of wine and typography, a friendship grows.

Labelling

These days, wine is made all over the world, from Austria to Australia, from New Zealand to New York. Exciting regions are emerging from both the New World and the Old as the traditional areas of production price their wines past the point most consumers are willing to go.

New World vs. Old World Labelling: Speaking generally, New World wines (U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Canada) are labelled varietally—that is, by the variety of grape that the wine is made from. Different places have different specific regulations, for instance, in California the wine needs to be 75% or more cabernet sauvignon to be labelled as ‘Cabernet Sauvignon,’ allowing for smaller amounts of other grapes to be blended into the wine for complexity. Any wine from there that is not 75% pure is labelled as red or white table wine, or given a proprietary name like Dominus or Opus One (these Bordeaux-style blends are sometimes called ‘Meritage’ wines, but that’s a dumb trade term that nobody much uses).

France’s Big System: In the old world things are a bit different: they don’t care so much about what grape is inside the bottle as they do where the grapes are from. Most European countries have some kind of system that mirrors the Granddaddy of ‘em all, the French Appellation Controlee (A.C.) system, which rigorously monitors and regulates the place of origin of wines. Basically, this system is set up like a pyramid, with the largest, most general

region on the bottom and smaller regions and even individual vineyards on the top.

Take Bordeaux as an example: if you have an inexpensive red wine made by Chateaux Pampelmousse from grapes that they scrounged from all over the countryside of Bordeaux, the wine would say

“Chateau Pampelmousse, Appellation Bordeaux Controllee.”

Bordeaux=Large region

If the grapes were from the Medoc district of Bordeaux only, the producer would be able to use the district appellation, so the label would read:

“Chateau Pampelmousse, Appellation Médoc Controllee.”

Médoc=District inside Bordeaux

because the smaller region inside the big region is always what the producer will want to use. You keep going up the specificity ladder, to the commune inside the Medoc, Pauillac, to see a label that reads:

“Chateau Pampelmousse, Appellation Pauillac Controllee.”

Pauillac=Commune of Medoc District inside Bordeaux

So the idea is that the smaller the area that is cited on the label, the better the wine. That's the idea, anyway. It isn't always true, but it's a safe generality and it's kind of the point of the whole system. With that in mind, here are the way some specific regions handle the A.C. System, starting with Bordeaux because hey, we're already there and it's fairly orderly. Just wait until we get to Burgundy. Oy.

Bordeaux: First things first: you're going to see a lot of the word Château on the labels of Bordeaux wines. Why? Tradition! Châteaux means 'Castle' and refers to the large manor-type houses that have typically been the center of production in most Bordeaux vineyards.

Bordeaux is a big flat area in Western France. Back in the old days it was part of Britain, and the English developed a taste for the wines that they made there, which they insisted on calling 'claret,' that hasn't abated to this day.

SFJoe I

It happened one day, when we least expected it.

Yes, that's right. Fortune smiled on us, on Lisa and me. We received an invite to an SFJoe dinner. Remember him from the Spanish tasting?

Now, you might wonder why this is such a big deal? Let me explain the SFJoe phenomenon. First off, the guy's some kind of a science/high-tech/finance heavy hitter. I'm not entirely clear on what he does, but Andrew Scott, he of the red shoes, sums it up nicely for me. "Oh, Joe?" he says. "He's the guy who when he changes jobs you read about it on the front page of the *Times* business section the next day."

But that's not what counts—actually, that probably sounds like he's some kind of rich asshole, which couldn't be further from the truth. SFJoe is the foodie's foodie, he's the only person I know who I could even *imagine* having a friend named 'Sarah the Mushroom Broker.' He wanders the woods of the Pacific Northwest in search of strange fungi. He's actually got photo albums (that he'll be happy to show you) full of snapshots of him posed caressingly with an endless assortment of chanterelles, portobellos, puffballs. Yes, we're talking fungus pornography, *that's* how serious the man is about his ingredients.

At any rate, the point is this: I've made the A-List. Any winegeek who gets the call to SFJoe's place is a happening winegeek, the toast of the town, the *crème de la crème*, for with the town his

oyster, why would he choose anyone but the best and the geekiest?

So it is that Lisa and I arrive unfashionably early at Joe's soon-to-be-abandoned apartment (which he styles "le Vieux Donjon," as opposed to the new one he is renovating, the soon-to-be "Châteauneuf-du-Joe"), so that we may sit at the feet of the master hospitalist, perhaps be of assistance, perhaps learn a few of his mysterious and delicious secret gourmetic ways. We're been warned about 'The Line of Death,' the invisible border between kitchen and living room that one may never cross without direct invitation, so that the great man may have his the elbow room he needs to work his culinary black magic..

Joe has just poured us a nice Austrian starter bubbly when the phone call comes. It's Joseph "Lou" Dressner's security coordinator Mona Moore, calling to make sure the coast is clear and to assert rather forcefully that no photography will be permitted at this event after the great man arrives with João Roseira of Quinta do Infantado, tonight's guest of honor. Word is passed. Cameras are confiscated.

The doorbell sounds and it's Callahan, bearing his usual twelvepack of wine, saying only that he prepares the way for the one who comes after him. We know Joe and João can't be far behind. We gather in small groups in the kitchen and living room, with Marco Freitas, Jayson Cohen and the irrepressible Brad Kane trickling in one by one and shaking hands all around.

Another white, a Delager Chassagne-Montrachet Les Vergets 1990: Medium gold, deep color; whoa, very limp, buttery & flat. More oxidation, this time in spades. Callahan, wrinkling his nose, calls it a waste of alcoholic intake.

Marco and I chat about the soon-to-be-arriving guest of honor and the house style at Quinta do Infantado, a smallish producer of port and dry wines. I haven't had enough of the wines to offer up much insight, and Marco mentions that he's read a certain Mr. Callahan's notes on the Garnet website, so I suggest he go right to the source. He looks puzzled—you mean... he's here? Yep. I know. Not what you expected, universal reaction, had it myself. I point out the non-elderly, non-fusty guy with the glasses who's over by the table calling something or other 'fake,' and we're right back on track again.

I spot Brian My Vinous Godfather with his fiancée Virginie, but when I shake hands I find myself unaccountably calling her 'Josie.' Fortunately she either doesn't hear me or makes the merciful decision to pretend she doesn't, but I am mortified and decide not to open my mouth again for at least an hour.

Well, except to pour things into it, of course.

The handblown gruner glasses are beginning to circulate, and once we've all got one Joe begins the ritual gruner call-and-response, and even though we've all heard the words many times before they never fail to move me. The final refrain of "For ever and always, gruner without end, amen!" is roared lustily, and the gruner flows like wine. I tip back my glassful of Nikolaihof Gruner Veltliner Smaragd Wachau 1990, and the wine is a little green lizard sitting on a rock in the sun. Or so I am told. It does have a bit of green cast to the color, I must admit. The nose is lightly kerosened over green apple and yellow flowers, and the wine has a waxy accent in a big racy body. Very good gruner with a few years under its belt, a big package with nice focus.

The happy crowd knows this means the festivities have commenced, and we tuck into the passing plates laden with heaps of Joe's legendary tuna tartare topped with spoonfuls of Olestra. No wait, that's not right. Ozestra? I stop Bradley as he passes with a tray and ask him if I'd better take it slow and easy with the first courses. He nods, winks and puts his thumb aside his nose conspiratorially. I think he may have even called me "guv'nor," but his voice was drowned out by the crowd.

The door is flung wide and in strides Joe Dressner, with João not far behind. Introductions all around, hands are shaken, cheeks kissed, glasses filled. Dressner proclaims "Let the drunken festivization begin! Bring me bottle after bottle to taste and understand!" and we obediently begin to do so, starting ceremonially with a very special white to celebrate João's fortuitous presence in our fair city.

Chateau Morrisette 'Our Dog Blue' White Table Wine N.V. Virginia: Pale straw color. Light gardenia & honey hints on the nose, sweet-smelling and simple. Bit of sweetness in the mouth too, a bit like a simple, slightly underripe spätlese, sweet and lightly quaffable, not a particularly jagged little wine. There is no designation on the bottle of any kind of alcohol level, so Dressner immediately gets on his cellphone to try and track down the vigneron, but

can only reach a voice mail. I can only think that the alcohol level is something you you you oughta know. I learn later it's apparently mostly riesling. João is starting to look a little nervous.

Out of nowhere, Dressner grabs my arm in a viselike grip and thrusts a bottle at me.

"Try this!" he whispers conspiratorially. "It's bitter!" And with that he pours a glassful of Huet Vouvray Clos du Bourg Sec 1999. It's a pale wine, smelling lightly chalky and pearish, flecks of lemon-citrus tickle my nose. A sip, and it has lovely balance and cohesion, but it's a bit dilute in the middle, the yellow fruit lacks oomph and depth. And yes, it is indeed marginally bitter, markedly so in the midpalate. Still, even if it's a lesser effort for a great producer it's no slouch and I don't judge it as harshly as Mr. Louis does. Frankly, I could drink this most nights.

As I'm turning the bitter streak over in my mind I hear a whispering in my other ear: "Don't listen to him," the voice says "a flaw in a wine like this, it's like a mole on Cindy Crawford, it's a beauty mark that makes it human, you have to love it..."

I turn. The eyes that are piercing into mine can only be .sasha's, and he snatches away my glass of Huet and says "Now. Try this. Do you think a seven year old bottle of Bourgogne Blanc would be fresh, or would it be dead? Think, now..." And he presses another glass into my hand, full of what turns out to be Coche-Dury Bourgogne Blanc 1993. I feel his burning gaze on the back of my neck as I tentatively swirl and just as tentatively sniff. It smells bright and lively, buttery-pear lemon-vanilla swirl with toasty almond hints, nice and bright to smell, happily yellowfruity. Tastes much the same, pleasant, young, fresh. A soft, slightly round mouthfeel, but there's quite a strong spine deep under the creamy fruit right at the surface. Quite decent, and then some.

Here's a Domaine de Comtes Lafon Meursault-Charmes 1992: pale yellow; flinty-buttery nose, medium-bodied, bit limp in the mouth, some round, buttery apple-pear fruit turning earthy on the finish. This wine starts .sasha into a tailspin. He picks up his glass and paces back and forth disbelievingly, sniffing and swirling and saying "It's flat?!" to himself over and over again. I offer some lame quip about not knowing it was supposed to be sparkling, but his disillusionment runs deep and will not be assuaged.

"It's flat?!"

Pace, pace.

“It’s flat?!”

Pace, pace.

Well, yes, it is in fact a bit flat. But we must transcend, for there are more bottles coming and we can’t be living in the past now, can we?

We try to distract him with some red burgundy. Here, .sasha, look! Arnoux! Drouhin! Wow, neat, huh?

It seems to work. The pacing stops.

And just like that, we’re done with the whites. We begin with some reds just in time for our host to pass around samples of his famous tuna tartare. I make a point of trying to watch him prepare it, but it’s like trying to pick up playing the violin by watching Paganini. He grouses about having to use table water crackers instead of rice crackers (the preferred delivery platform), but we assure him that it’s okay, really. No, really. Seriously.

Somewhat puckishly and inspired by a few glasses of Virginia White Table Wine, I theatrically demand a proper large glass for truly giving the red wines the appreciation they deserve. The crowd again goes silent, but I see an amused twinkle in our host’s eyes.

“So you want a big glass, do you Mr. Coad?”

“Yes, sir, I do. The biggest that you have.”

He smiles like the proverbial cat with a canary, takes a key from a silver chain around his neck, and proceeds to disappear into the stemware room, returning moments later with what looks like a glass cassaba melon on a stem, which he places in front of me triumphantly.

“The Riedel Gargantua Grand Cru Burgundy Stem, manufactured specifically for a 50-year vertical of Romanée-Conti. You can pour an entire magnum into it without spilling a drop. I was lucky enough to buy three at Hardy Rodenstock’s yard sale. Enjoy!”

My mouth has gone a bit dry, but I decide to accept my role with aplomb, nodding appreciatively to my host and saying “Now what have we got for a trial run?”

He claps twice “Bradley! The Rioja!” and a bottle of Lopez de Heredia Viña Tondonia Gran Reserva 1981 materializes. My glass is soon 1/300th full, and I sniff questioningly for any trace of wine in the 12 cubic feet of air in the bowl of the glass. It’s there, all right, just difficult to pin down. This is a pale ruby colored wine, turning

towards amber at the rim. Muted hints of cherryfruit, crushed brick and earth, traces of sasha's leather bag and old coconut husks. A light, ethereal wine that whispers notions of earth and dried fruit in your ear. Not quite insubstantial, this is a pleasure to smell, but the damn terrarium-on-a-stick that I'm trying to drink out of makes it almost impossible to savor. Fun is fun, but this is wine here, and I sheepishly admit my folly to my amused host and plead for a normal-sized glass, which he happily and good-naturedly provides.

At this point an odd discussion breaks out about the specific fungus that is in the uni-scallop risotto, and its double life as a symbol of virility in the east. I know I would be thought a braggart if I jumped into this discussion, so I merely listen politely.

Next is a cult cabernet from the Loire, a Clos Rougeard Les Poyeaux Saumur-Champigny 1997. I savor the nose, mineral-spined deep red fruit limned with tobacco hints. Light to medium-bodied, the fruit is dark and strong, racy and nimble and stony, with a long cran-cherry sustain on the finish. Not as new-oaky as its big brother the 97 Bourg, this is a fairly friendly youngster even now--this needs time, but it doesn't need any time. It starts a discussion of the wines of Saumur-Champigny and Brian asks Dressner "Have you ever had a wine from the Frères Foucault?" to which Dressner mildly responds "That's what we're having right now," and our host quips "And we've got Marshall McLuhan right here to explain it to you." There are gentle winegeek chuckles all around, and we move on to the next offerings.

Here comes the Bordeaux, just in time to conjoin magically with the seared flesh of animals. Ecstasy, dear readers, simple ecstasy.

Château La Conseillante Pomerol 1982: A delicate, rich nose, pretty and lush and feminine, with hints of oregano and slightly darker graphite notes over sweet-smelling silky-velvety red fruit. Oh brother this is good; balanced impeccably, rich and silky to taste, nimble, beautifully sculpted, lightly tannic. This wine is delicate and beguiling, pretty and curvaceous. The feel of a favorite old silk scarf against your neck, light and soft but oh so deep and right. This wine touches off a chain of emotional reactions: I find it strikingly pretty, almost perfect in fact, but something stops it from touching me deeply. This wine is Catherine Deneuve in 'Belle du

Jour,' strikingly well put together and alluring, but perhaps a bit cold about the heart. Maybe .sasha was right, perhaps a wine, like Cindy Crawford, needs a mole to seem human, to be accessible. Is this too perfect? I don't know, I don't know. This is not, however, a wine to be ignored.

The next wine, the Château L'Arrosée St. Emilion 1986 is quite a different animal. If the Conseillante was a purebred afghan hound, this wine is a boxer-shepherd mix, barrel-chested and thickset, with ears that beg for scratching. I've always had a fondness for this house's wines, and this is no exception, exhibitizing a dark nose of coffee and muted cassis, hints of tar and graphite. A taste, and it's just like it smells, rough and rich and dense, coffee-accented red fruit, hints of tomato in a meaty, chewy mouthfeel, with some firm rough tannins. It will do better with some more time, but I find its roughness appealing. This wine hasn't the balance or breeding of the Conseillante, but when there is a choice between the two this is the one I have just one more glass of.

Now it's time for a mystery wine that I've brought specifically to horrify certain tender easily-horrified souls: Lava Cap Petite Sirah El Dorado 1996 is poured blind, and the shrieks and howls of dismay and horror are heard clear across town. "Trancendental!" enthuses Dressner, and he doesn't exactly mean in a good way. Poor Callahan has to actually be held down and have a leather bit put in his mouth so he doesn't bite his own tongue during the seizures. It's quite a spectacle, and I think I see João nervously looking for emergency exits. Actually, tasting it myself later, the wine isn't quite right (although even though if it was it would've gotten the same reaction): Deep dead purply-black; the tart blackberry-laced fruit has an oddly medicinal edge to it, a burnt-rubber quality that makes me think this wine is just a bit cooked. Nevertheless, mission accomplished, little feller.

Continuing in my chosen role as annoying guy who brings shockingly bad wines, I pull out my trump card: Jamaican Meat Wine! Much oohing and aahing as the bottle is passed around. The label reads: *Wincarnis Tonic Wine-- suitable alike for the robust, the invalid and the convalescent. In cases of debility and lowered vitality, WINCARNIS will be found a most efficient restorative. WINCARNIS is an entirely natural tonic and its effects are lasting. WINCARNIS is also an invaluable restorative during convalescence and it is unsur-*

passed as a general tonic. Strongly recommended throughout the world as being both nutritious and stimulating.”

Made from Choice Wine, Finest Extracts of Meat and Malt, and Glycerophosphoric Acid.

Take a wine-glassful three times each day.

Well, even I have to screw up my nerve to actually taste the stuff, but here goes nothing...

Wincarnis NV Tonic Wine, D. & G. Wines, Ltd., Kingston, Jamaica: it's sitting in my tasting glass—okay, color is almost normal, medium red-orange, sort of sherry-like; nose is... odd... sticky-sweet, nutty, beef-brothy, actually not as weird as I had expected, kind of the like a cheap California cooking sherry with a shot of rump roast in it. In the mouth, gaaack, okay, now it's definitely weird; sweet and tongue-coating nutty, malted-milk flavors, along with a distinctive White-Castle-hamburger-grease mouthfeel that just kind of lingers on the finish only long enough for me to find a toothbrush.

In a striking case of instant karma, one of the guests, gesticulating wildly, knocks a full glass of the stuff right into the middle of my previously Meat Wine-free lap, giving my white pants the look of an orange-yellow leopard skin. Not wanting to have dogs follow me home, I change quickly into some shorts that our gracious host was kind enough to provide. What can you say about a host who wines, feeds and clothes you?

Well, the time is creeping towards the witching hour when all good winos must scurry back under the rocks they prefer to call home before they fall into a motionless heap. João takes the opportunity to very graciously pretend he wasn't shocked and appalled by all the silly goings-on and we all drink a toast to both our guest of honor and our Iron Host, whose hospitality is such stuff as dreams are made on, then begin to disperse. Lisa scams half of Joe's Wodehouse collection, kisses, hugs and handshakes all around, then we scatter to the four winds that are whipping the streets of Manhattan with extra vigor on this blustery night.

When we get home, an hour later, I call my relatives and tell them I love them.

Drink Good for Cheap

Rule 1: Never buy a wine that has a TV commercial.

Rule 2: Stay away from the “Classic” wine producing regions.

You'll never stay on a budget if you buy Bordeaux, Burgundy or even Napa Cabernet, which used to be a lower-priced alternative to French wines. Even Australia, source of many bargains until recently, has been hit with the price-increase fever that has gripped the wine biz in the U.S.

Fortunately, for every region that succumbs to price fever, new faces and places crop up to prove themselves. There are tremendous values coming out of the South of France, from regions like Faugeres, Corbieres, Madiran, Costieres de Nîmes and the larger Languedoc area.

White wines from the Loire Valley, Vouvray, Sancerre, Savennières, although sometimes difficult to find, can be profound experiences for under \$15, although this region has its ‘stars’ like Huet and Baumard that have gotten big press and whose wines command twice to three times the price as their neighbors as a result. Avoid the stars if you're looking for bargains.

Portugal, South Africa, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina are all areas that are trying to make a mark on the U.S. market. Non-glorified grape varieties like petite sirah can produce juicy, rich wines that will make you happy for fewer bucks than the hot names like cabernet and merlot.

Rule 3: Do Your Homework

Subscribe to wine publications and research wines that are good values, troll the internet wine boards for recommendations: the notion of 'QPR' (Quality to Price Ratio) is an important one to most Winegeeks, and they are often happy to share some of their favorites.

Rule 4: Find an Ally

The people who work in wine shops, oddly enough, often do not often do so as a path to riches. They are sometimes people who follow wine and know a great deal about it; of course sometimes they are failed shoe salesmen or the owner's nephew. It's up to you to discern the difference and latch on to the good ones. Ask for recommendations, but be specific about what you like or what you're looking for, or what food you're serving the wine with.

Rule 5: Stop Worrying About Dates

Novice geeks sometimes tend to get caught up in the Dating Game—that is, they read something or see a chart that tells them that 1998 was a crappy year in Blancmange-Pampelmousse, and so they avoid all wines from that region no matter what. Here's a truism: Vintages don't matter that much in warm climate wine production areas, and even in places where it does, like Burgundy and Bordeaux, good producers can still make fine wines in a crappy year. A few years ago I picked up a lot of delicious '94 Bordeaux at bargain-basement prices because that year was followed by two more heralded years and retailers were trying to clear the shelves to make room for the stuff the vintage-chart readers were after, which was often half again as expensive as its very slightly older sibling. The same thing happened with 1999 Bordeaux, which were ignored after the first of many VINTAGE OF THE CENTURY proclamations was made about the 2000s.

Clash of the Ayatollahs

My ears are still ringing with the cries:

“You missed my whole point...”

“C’mon, let me finish...”

“Hang on a minute...”

“Can I PLEASE say something here...”

“Everything you’re saying is wrong...”

A little background: Lisa and I are sitting down for a long-anticipated evening of sparring with a few of the wine underworld’s most shy and retiring participants. Joining us upstairs at The Palm on Manhattan’s historic east side were Joseph L. Dressner (in the red trunks), Steve Plotnicki (in the blue trunks) and Mr. Jeff Connell, gentleman. Lisa was appointed referee by common consent as Joe and Steve agreed to go ten full rounds over a mound of rare steak and a lobster the size of a 1950s sci-fi movie villain.

Oh, and there were some wines, too, although they were a little lost in the scuffle.

For those who don’t know Steve, he’s a record producer of some kind, I’m not exactly sure where and who with, although someone thinks he had something to do with Run-DMC. Anyhoo, his big thing is being a champion of the big, swaggering style of new world wines that are often referred to as ‘cult wines.’ Made in miniscule quantities, sold only by mailing list, resold at huge markups on the auction market, driven by over-the-top praise from bedazzled wine critics, the wines are a media phenomenon if nothing else.

Naysayers point out that the hugely ripe, high-alcohol, robust oak treatment makes for wines that show best at tastings in tiny pours, wine concentrate, but fare poorly at the dinner table.

We assembled at a little round table which soon groaned under the weight of thirteen or so bottles, raising a few eyebrows among our fellow diners. Steve assures them that it's all right, that the five of us have been on the wagon for a few years and are just making up for lost time. Technically this is true, except for the part about having been on the wagon. The French couple behind us begins to mutter under their breath, despite the fact that we keep offering to give them a pour or two.

We began with a pour of Renardat-Fâche Cerdon du Bugey NV, a fizzy gamay with a shot of pousard (gamay clone #A732, not sure about the pousard #), which made for a delightful apertif: pale pink, lightly bubbly, lightly sweet, fairly low alcohol, with juicy strawberry-watermelon flavors and a nimble underlying minerality that gives some weight and intrigue to the taste without detracting from the fun. This wine makes me giggle like a schoolgirl. More so, I mean.

As the shrimp cocktails begin to flow like water, we try a Domaine de Roally Macon-Viré 1998, and it's got something going on; very bright, lushly tropical nose, lemon-pear cream and yellow apples, ripe and friendly. You get a hint of sweetness in the juicy-round midpalate, and it finishes with a pleasant lemon-fruity zing. Another friendly, accessible wine.

The table conversation is beginning to percolate, fueled by the first few glassfuls, but things are still relatively civil. There is much talk of whether some wines from California are actually wines, or perhaps some kind of unspecified clonal/enzymatic beverage concoction, and much debate about market forces and capitalism. So far, so good. The waiter puts this vast dismembered chitinous beast on our table, ties little bibs around our necks, and we set to rending and tearing it with vigor. Lisa's allotment is a claw the size of a catcher's mitt, and she is in seabug heaven, giving proper Fingering demonstrations when she needs to keep the combatants civil. Mr. Connell merely speaks very softly and carries a big glass.

A Raveneau Chablis Valmur 1989 comes around, and the heady flinty-chalky nose makes for an immediate pause in the action. "Radioactive," says Joe, which sounds about right to me.

Really strong, deep aromas of minerals & burnished-steel white flowers. Rich and powerful tasting, quite racy but simply packed with dense flavors, it overpowers the lobster with pure lean hard muscle, but I don't mind a bit. This is a very deep, strong wine, and it wins the Thunderbird Prize easily.

There is a Pinon Vouvray Cuvée Tradition 1998, but I don't get much more than a brief impression before I'm rushed onto the reds: lemon-rainwater, bright & shiny-crisp Vouvray, seems a bit lighter and perhaps a bit chalkier than the '97, which was a true QPR gem last year. Nicely balanced, elegant, but I go back to the creamier Roally to finish off the last chunks of bug flesh.

In the intervinous lull between the reds and whites Joe and Steve trace their ancestry back to the old neighborhood, discovering, among other things, that they both knew someone who used to play guitar in Steve's band. Small world! Joe establishes that he has seniority on Steve, and takes to calling him 'Junior' when he has to make a point. Things begin to spin out of control.

Now here's a Dervieux-Thaize Côte-Rôtie Cuvée Reserve 1978: Medium ruby, ambering at the rim of the glass. Smoky, rich bac-onberry nose, nice hints of well-done rump roast and eucalyptus. Great to smell, but faded on the palate, lean and tart, a bit over the hill, mostly acidity and earthy baked-yam tartness left.

A couple of Marsannays, first Joseph Roty Marsannay Les Ouzeloy 1995: Medium red, aromatically light, although with air it takes on more nasal weight, showing some nice dark earthy-smoky cherry-berry fruit. I keep waiting on this, as it keeps showing better as the night progresses. In the mouth it seems fairly hard and unyielding, good smoky fruit is there, but it's not raising its hand and volunteering for the mission of charming some steak into my gullet. The 1997 seems more accessible to me at this point, showing more clovey spiciness on the nose and more cran-cherry-berry fruit in the midpalate. Still, it too is tight and young, and some strong fine tannins shut down the party quickly.

By now, Steve is undergoing some pop-psychoanalysis, for Joe is loudly positing that he (Steve) needs pricey winery mailing list acceptance to make up for having missed the 60s. Steve protests "But I was at Woodstock!" and is told "No matter how many California mailing lists you get on, you'll always be an arriviste!"

Lisa overhears the French couple behind us calling us

‘Barbarians.’

Looking for more of a steak wine, we pause in the escalating mayhem to open a Château Sociando-Mallet Haut-Medoc 1979: Medium-dark garnet, almost no sign of age at all. Nice cassis-cedar-tobacco nose, but I’m a trifle surprised when I taste this wine, for it seems uncharacteristically soft and fleshy for Sociando. This is the first time I’ve had the ‘79, and it drinks very well now, surprise aside, although it still seems fairly youthful. There’s plenty of smoky, stony cassis fruit that turns more tobacco-earthly on the subtle, quiet finish. I’m partial to this house, and I like this wine. It helps me plow through the bovine flesh with swift exactitude.

I look up from my glass of Sociando to find the conversation has taken a turn towards the mercantile. There is a great debate going on about importing wines from Europe on a mailing-list basis, and the difficulty posed by the various restrictive interstate laws: Steve says the laws will fall within five years, Joe says no. They go back and forth, back and forth. Lisa tries to intervene and Steve (who learns fast) actually uses the Finger on her!

Bad craziness.

After we remove the fork from Steve’s forehead, a wager of \$148.50 is proposed and accepted, fistfuls of French francs are thrown at Lisa, who agrees to hold them until April 18th, 2005, when we will meet for adjudication and the awarding of the purse to the winner. This seems to pour oil on the waters, and we can taste some more wine in peace for a moment or two, although this abuse of their currency seems to be the last straw for our Gallic neighbors, who sweep out of the room in high dudgeon.

Quinta do Mouro Estremoz 1997: Another nice showing for this one, smoky choco-raspberry with nice dark tarry undertones. I was taken a bit to task for comparing this to a metaphorical Portuguese zin before, but to show that I never learn I’m going to do it again: dark raspberry-cherry fruit, silky mouthfeel, smooth, ripe and forward without going overboard and slobbering all over your face. Tasty.

What’s going on now? Steve is holding forth on Plotnicki’s First Law of Economics (“He who touches the money first, touches the money most...”), and Dressner is carrying on about the day he punched Pete Seeger.

I wave at Connell across the table. He waves back.

Lisa suddenly declares “Capitalism is the natural state of human endeavor.” That stops things long enough for us to open another bottle.

Chapoutier Hermitage Doux ‘Velours’ 1982: Medium brownish-gold. Verrrrry interesting aromas are emanating from my glass. Sweet nutty gold raisin, light molasses, caramel and gingery earth, yow, there’s a lot going on here all at once. Tastes nutty-brown, lightly sweet and earthy, with hints of marzipan flitting in and out of my field of taste. Layered and fascinating, a real beauty of a wine.

To give you an example of the kind of thing that went on all night, I am now going to quote verbatim from the record at this point in the evening.

“STEVE: The down side to democracy is that we often drink shitty wines because the MANY choose what is good instead of the FEW.

JOE: In Saudi Arabia, they like spicy toothpaste. Cumin, turmeric. Go figure.

STEVE: I’m talking about the consumer.

JOE: Fuck the consumer!

CHRIS: Can I quote you on that?

JOE: Absolutely! There is no such thing as ‘the consumer.’ Fuck the consumer, and fuck Steve, although anyone who brought this beautiful Hermitage to dinner can’t be all bad.

STEVE: Are you getting all this down?

CHRIS: (scribbling furiously) You bet.”

And so on, all in the friendliest fashion imaginable. I need more wine. Fortunately, there is a fresh bottle.

Château Pierre-Bise Coteaux du Layon Rochefort Les Rayelles 1996: Pale straw-gold. Every time I try the 97 I think I like it better for its lushness and exuberance, every time I try the 96 I think I like it better for its concentration and balance. Life is tough. Plenty of pineapple-apricot chenin fruit, not the botrytis of the 97, but whaddaya gonna do? Sharp and crisp, sweet and nimble, a delight, its youthful exuberance an interesting counterpoint to the profundity of the Hermitage.

Well, we’ve run out of wines and I must ring down the curtain on the evening now, lest I bore you with the details of the drunken ‘Who should support the art theaters?’ and ‘Wasn’t French culture

really the result of bad transportation?’ debates that kept us riveted to the sidewalk in front of the restaurant long after we had closed the joint.

You’ll just have to take it from me: it was quite an evening.

Critics and Pointyness

Okay, so you walk into a wine shop and you look around. Every expensive bottle has a little slip of paper under it called a 'shelf talker' that says something like "DOMAINE PAMPELMOUSSE 1999—97 POINTS!!!" and will cite an authority of some kind from some wine publication or other.

What's this all about? You don't see ratings on any other kind of food or beverage, do you? Can you imagine buying a six-pack of beer and seeing "OLD MILWAUKEE—94 POINTS!!! (National Brew Review)" or trying to weigh the choice of either an 88-point American Cheese for \$2.99 or a 95-point New York cheddar for \$4.99? Sounds pretty silly, doesn't it?

Well, yes. It does.

The whole system of scoring wines like grade school arithmetic tests apparently arose sometime in the late 1970s, with various people or publications making various claims of invention. Something about the 90-100 = 'A', 80-89 = 'B' formula caught the American wine public's imagination, and the rest was history. A winery's fortunes can be made or broken depending on whether the Awarders of Numbers grant scores in the 70s, 80s or 90s to their products. Retailers often express something like "if so-and-so gives a wine under 85 points, I can't sell it, over 90 and I can't keep it in stock." It is said that wineries all over the world are changing the way they make their wines in order to get closer to what they perceive are American critics' tastes for big, lush, fruit-forward wines.

I think every publication has the perfect right to garner publicity by dreaming up snazzy systems of 'scoring,' but here is the crux of the matter: These 'scores' aren't some kind of real, scientific measurements—they're simply the record of one man's (or one group's) specific tastes of one specific bottle at one specific point in time. It's gotten to the point that I've actually seen people tasting a wine that has gotten high 'scores,' not liking it at all, then wondering what was wrong with them or their taste. Well, here's my answer: nothing, nothing at all. Who said everyone had to like the same wines? I've had wines that have gotten huge, high 'scores' from every wine publication in sight, and found them undrinkable for one reason or another (usually too much damn oak). I've had wines that have 'scored' in the 70s (borderline failure) that have been amazing. This is because, and please highlight this in yellow, the experience of wine is subjective. Nobody can tell you what you will like. You have to go out and find out for yourself. Sorry to have to break that to you, believe me, I'd love it if there were a critic or critics out there whose tastes mirrored my own—it would make life much simpler, not to mention all the money I'd save on bad gambles. The problem is, there isn't, and besides, both my tastes and individual wines themselves are moving targets, changing all the time, so really the whole idea seems to me to be wrongheaded, akin to saying "'Hamlet' is a 98-pointer all the way, but 'Love's Labour's Lost' only gets an 88 because of hollowness in the middle and a short finish."

If you drink a nice crisp, citrusy sauvignon blanc with whitefish versus the same wine with meatloaf, is its 'score' adjusted accordingly? Because let me tell you, it ain't gonna taste the same...

That being said, of course, if one 'scoring' system speaks to you, by all means use it. Points, stars, clouds, puffs, sheep, any system that works for you is a blessing. Just be aware that there are some of us who will stare at you uncomprehendingly when you try to explain how many 'points' are contained in the bottle you're pouring from. For me, the only 'scoring' system that even begins to make any sense at all is the Prong System (see chapter xx).

In Jeopardy!

Several charter members of the New York chapter of the QSLDG gathered about ten days ago with the express purpose of sending Lisa and me off to the west coast with restorative anxiety-reducing hangovers. Now that all the hubbub has died down, I find the details of the evening returning as though in a dream...

[CUE DREAM MUSIC.]

I remember... I remember... Oleg and Inna were there, and .sasha... Kane... Andrew Munro Scott, acting as master of ceremonies...

[CROSS-FADE TO INTERIOR LA ROCHETTA, A PRIVATE ROOM.]

OLEG: ...us all in wishing our friends much luck in the West!

ALL: Hear, hear! [THEY DRINK.]

LISA: Let the games begin!

ANDREW: The category is Alsace for \$100.

CHRIS: I know this wine. It is a pretty, gleaming pale gold color, with a rich, lush mineral-floral nose, plenty of nice bright lychee with a touch of cheesiness that mostly blows off with time and air. Sweet, viscous and round, but decently crisp, with a long stony-flowery finish. What is the Deiss Gewürztraminer Altenberg de Bergheim VT 1992 ?

.SASHA: Mmm... minerals...

ANDREW: Correct! Moving on, same category for \$200...

CHRIS: Hmm... pale gold-tan, a bit of sulfury funk here, but nice aromas of earth and mandarin orange in a honeyed base, although it seems aromatically reticent after the extravagant Deiss. A rich, strong, tangy earthy-citrusy wine with a sharp spine of acidity, lightly but noticeably sweet. What is Zind-Humbrecht Pinot Gris Clos Jepsal 1996?

ANDREW: Correct! Next category: "Rocks that .sasha is carrying around" for \$100. If you please, .sasha. [.SASHA PASSES THE ROCK AROUND]

LISA: This rock smells like leather.

.SASHA: Well, it's been in my bag a while.

CHRIS: Um, what is a rock that .sasha has?

ANDREW: More specific, please...

CHRIS: What is a leather rock?

ANDREW: I'm sorry, the rock is slate.

.SASHA: German slate!

OLEG: Can I lick it?

ANDREW: Please do not lick the props. Next category, Loire wines for \$100.

CHRIS: This one is pale tan, waxy and tropical-floral on the nose. Pineapple, yellow flowers, chalk. Brightly acidic, tart, fresh, simple, clean and refreshing. What is Clos des Briords Muscadet 1998?

ANDREW: That's right, same category for \$200.

CHRIS: Light garnet, very pale--light candy-cherry notes with a gravelly undertone. Tastes thin, tart & sharp. Fine tannins swarm over the tight tart cherry flavors. Crisp as hell, but fairly painful and pucker-inducing. What is Edmond Vatan Sancerre Pinot Rouge Chavignol 1997?

LISA: Ick. This is simply terroirable.

BRAD: Aak! Army ants... devouring my tongue... why, God, why?!

ANDREW: That is correct. Mr. Kane, if you cannot behave yourself I'll have security escort you out. Next category: "Wines Kane Hates" for \$100.

CHRIS: Medium ruby color, ambering a hint at the rim... truffle-mushroomy nose, slight caramelized hint, a touch oxidized, leafy-tea notes with leathery red-orange fruit that is feathery-loose around the edges, touch of carrotty or pumpkin spiciness, crisp,

lean and earthy. What is Leroy Beaune-Sizies 1985?

ANDREW: Yes. Same category for \$200.

CHRIS: Medium-dark garnet. Lush, ripe, rich nose--clove, earth, cinnamon in a raspberry-redfruit base. Equally rich to taste, lush and forward, but beautifully balanced, crisp and full-flavored, silky and delicious in a fairly forward style. Truly delightful, layered, complex and long. What is Maurice Ecard Savigny-Les-Beaune Les Serpentieres Reserve 1993?

ANDREW: Correct.

LISA: This wine has a finish that won't die.

.SASHA: Like Rasputin or the 1870 Lafite, you can't kill it.

ANDREW: Next category: "How do you pronounce 'Oleg'?" for \$100.

CHRIS: Um... what is 'Oleg'?

ANDREW: I'm sorry. Anyone else?

LISA: What is 'Oleg'?

ANDREW: I'm sorry, not even close.

INNA: What is 'Oleg'?

ANDREW: Yes, that's right.

.SASHA: How about 'Oleg'?

ANDREW: That too is acceptable. Next category: 'Wine in gimmicky-shaped bottles' for \$100.

CHRIS: Medium garnet. Smells of cherries and leather with hints of violets. Tastes fairly nondescript, a bit thin and tinny but some crisp acidity and decent if lean cherry-berry fruit make it passable. What is Travaglini Gattinara 1994?

ANDREW: Yes.

BRAD: This is boring. Has everyone tried the La Roque?

ANDREW: Please don't interrupt, Mr. Kane. Next category, the 'Olovyanikov Uncertainty Principal' for \$500.

CHRIS: I have no idea.

ANDREW: Anyone?

OLEG: What is "One can only ever determine the speed or the location of any given woman at any given time, never both"?

ANDREW: Very good.

BRAD: Have you all tried the La Roque?

ANDREW: Next category, 'Wines that taste charred' for \$100.

CHRIS: Medium ruby-red. Plenty of creamy sweet vanilla,

coconutty, reminds me of Hawaii. Some decent muted red leathery-cherry-berry fruit on the nose. Crisp in the mouth, with nice zesty acidity, but a smoky burnt-stick taste clinging to the red fruit turns me off a bit. What is San Vicente Rioja 1991?

ANDREW: Correct.

KANE: This wine is not charred!

LISA: Wrong!

ANDREW: Security!

KANE: All right, I'll be quiet. Has everyone tried the La Roque?

.SASHA: Weren't we supposed to eat at some point?

ANDREW: Only contestants get to eat. Next category, 'Potent potables that Yaniger can explain to us' for \$100.

CHRIS: Medium translucent garnet. Interesting smoked-meat, raspberry & black pepper nose, with a hint of eucalyptus. Still young and fairly tight, but opens up a bit with air. There is a hint of greenness that bothers some people with the initials BK, but I find it marries pleasantly with the smoky baconberry flavors. Lean but flavorful, with nice balance, very tasty. What is Ogier Syrah La Rosine VdP de Rhodaniennes 1996?

LISA: Mmm... baconberry...

ANDREW: Yes, that is correct. Next category, 'What is the difference between a circumcision and a bris?' for \$100.

CHRIS: What the hell...?

.SASHA: I know, I know!

ANDREW: Go ahead, please.

.SASHA: What is '... a platter of salmon, a platter of white-fish'?

ANDREW: Correct. Next category, 'Scatological wines' for \$100.

CHRIS: Medium garnet. Plenty of nice funky, poop-leathery hints here, with muted redfruit aromas underneath. A bit hard in the mouth, with decent cran-smoky flavors and some stern tannins swooping in on the finish. Not complex, but seems to have a lot of stuffing. I'd give it a little time to loosen up a bit, though. What is Château La Roque Pic St. Loup Cuvée les Vieilles Vignes de Mourvedre 1998?

OLEG: Mmm... poop...

.SASHA: Vin de Pay Toilet...

LISA: Cuvée Outhouse...

ANDREW: That is correct. Final category now, 'Grapes you didn't know they grew in California' for \$1,000.

CHRIS: Medium amber-gold, smells of plastic apricot, candied pineapple and orange rind. Thick and very sweet, tangy and viscous, but with some crisp acidity in there running alongside a carload of vinylized fruit. Candied, rich and simple, but not unpleasant in small doses. What is **Joseph Phelps Eisrebe Scheurebe Napa Valley 1996**?

ANDREW: Yes, and congratulations! You are now prepared for your voyage to the mysterious land of La-La! I'm Andrew Munro Scott for the Quiz Show Lovers Discussion Group; thank you and goodnight!

[CUE THEME MUSIC. PAN OUT]

BRAD: Wait, did everyone try the La Roque?

[CUT TO COMMERCIAL.]

The Prong System

The Prong System of wine scoring was developed by Professor Emily Peynaud of Chico State University and Dr. Andrew Scott of Apex Technical School in the mid- to late-1960s and published in their landmark masterwork *The Prong of Wine* (Random House, 1969). The Prong System is singular among wine rating systems in that does not aspire to the false sense of linear objectivity that seems to so bedevil other popular rating systems (“puffs,” “stars,” “points,” “glasses,” “poodles,” “clouds” and so forth). Adherents believe that the Prong System alone can capture the true essence of a wine because it alone is utterly and rigorously subjective. In this sense it is the only system that can truly evaluate wine with complete accuracy, as all methods that strive for an unattainable ‘objectivity’ are doomed by definition to failure and irrelevancy.

Wines are rated (or “Pronged”) on a scale of one to eight Prongs, depending on the quality and character of the wine. It is, however, the makeup of the Prongs themselves that is the key to using and understanding the system, as they can be fashioned from any of the twenty-four categories (or 576 subcategories) of materials on the Chico State Prong Wheel. Furthermore, depending again on the quality and character of the wine, the Prongs may be adorned with any of the twelve categories (144 subcategories) of Dressing/Frippery/Coating (DFC) and can be set on a base fashioned from one of the eight categories (sixty-four subcategories) of Fundamental Substance (FS), or whatever else the reviewer sees fit

to use to illuminate the character of the wine.

The Prong System seems straightforward, and indeed is quite user-friendly, but also, in the right hands, offers the unlimited potential for accuracy in scoring that those of us who feel constrained by more linear systems seek.

To help clarify, here are some examples of classical school-styled Pronging:

Domaine Louis Latour Corton-Charlemagne 1990 is a big woody potion, the kind of wine that almost put me off non-Chablis chardonnay for good. Burnt firecracker paper on the nose (some wag says “gun flint,” but my flintlock is in for repairs after last week’s frenzied ‘Kill the Redcoats’ bash, so I can’t swear to that), green celery highlights along with the yellow pear/yellow apple fruit, not to mention a bottle of vanilla extract poured through a sieve of burnt toast. Big, weighty and glyceriney-textured, there’s good balance and enough acidity, but what seems like a fine core of fruit is pressed like a Salem witch under a fatal weight of wood. *Six and a half lemon-Jello Prongs set in gelatin molds, covered with powdered sugar and butter and placed on a balsam wood base, then rolled in sawdust and set on fire.*

Domaine de L’Arlot Nuits Saint George Clos de Forets St. George 1990: A beauty, a wonderful feast of smells--dark cherry limned with beet, gravelly earth, horehound and forest floor hints dance and play. With just a bit of air darker truffley-mushroomy tones emerge and fill out the initially light nose. Satiny and layered in the gob, there is enough development for complexity and warmth, enough youth for liveliness. Ripe and striking, a delightful wine that brings surprised smiles of pleasure to faces across the room, *One fine slim Prong in a dashing smoking jacket, with a pencil-thin moustache and a sly cocked eyebrow (think David Niven as a Prong), placed on a cherry wood base covered with the slipcover of a comfy old armchair.*

Huet Vouvray Petillant 1997: Ripe, robust and rich, more like a fizzy demisec minus the sugar. Why didn’t I buy more of this? What the hell was I thinking, it was like seventeen bucks on release. I think of the empty bottle of 1964 that has been sitting in my hallway for six months and know this will eventually be better. Stupid, stupid me. *Two flowering Prongs formed of sculpted sod seeded with wildflowers and set on quartz pedestals in a sunny meadow next to a bakery that specializes in brioche.*

Domaine Zind-Humbrecht Pinot Gris Clos Windsbuhl 2000:

Sweetly floral in my nose, plumeria-gardenia, hints of tangerine and lemon. Fat and friendly in the piehole, a low acid, slightly oily wine with a good deal of heft and what seems like a touch of sweetness as well. It's pretty good pinot gris in a blowsy sort of way, eager to please, obvious and flavorful. *What's not to like? Four and a half squat battered Prongs fried in peanut oil, then rolled in cinnamon and sugar and left on wax paper to cool.*

Ferraton Hermitage Cuvée Miaux 1985: The neck label with the cute picture of the Thomasina the kitty is missing, but the wine is nonetheless purring quietly and arching its back when stroked. Light aromatics, sweetly leathery and leafy, a damp glen in a misty eucalyptus forest. Muted blackberry-plum flavors in the piehole backed by a rigid spine of acidity, the delicate flavors are mugged by the well spiced dry-rub ribs and the remaining acid gives a feeling of brittle hardness. *Six and a half ceramic Prongs left outside over the winter then trundled around to craft fairs all over the eastern seaboard before finally being displayed on a lacquerware bookshelf next to a small collection of Hummel figurines, many of which are chipped. Pronged twice, with consistent Prongs.*

Tardieu-Laurent Gigondas 1999: After the balletic Ogier this has the air of a drunken lumberjack. Deep purple-black color, smells smoky and medicinal--Robitussin with a splash of Liquid Smoke. A sip, and it's a brawny purple mouthful, big fruit and big oak. The midpalate swings through my mouth on a vine lustily bellowing its jungle call, then slides clumsily down into astringent oak tannins. I guess there's a market for blockbuster Gigondas, but this does nothing for me. One wag dubs it "Shirazgondas," but that may be overstating the case. *Six and a half velveteen-covered Prongs with storebought mylar balloons that say HAPPY BIRTHDAY in large black and red letters tied to their points, each brushed down with glitter and barbeque sauce and baked in a 350-degree oven until the first sign of caremelization, then nailed to plywood squares and set adrift on Lake Waramaug.*

Leonildo Pieropan Vigneto La Rocca Soave Classico Superiore 1995. Soft, small nose, waxy-lemon hints, maybe a trace of nuttiness, not all that much going on. A sip, and it's puzzling—fairly low acidity with a nice weighty mouthfeel but lacking in flavor, rather neutral-tasting fruit spreads out soothingly on my tongue. Dressner complains loudly about reacidification, but I find it simply lifeless. *Four small Prongs sculpted from paraffin, chilled briefly in the walk-in freezer of an Arby's Restaurant, then placed on a formica base at right angles to one another and set in front of a television playing 'Jeffersons'*

reruns.

Clos Rougeard Saumur-Champigny 1998: Almost a caricature of cab francischianesque qualities; tobacco leaf, pine resin, cran-cherry fruit, all light and clear. It's very approachable and easygoing, a wine to guzzle in the short term while waiting for the coiled '96s and quickly-closing but monumental '97s to come back around. It's too pricy for the kind of wine that it is, but that's the way things are today with these cult cabs. Kane hates it, a further endorsement of its quality. *Four hollow glass Prongs filled with crushed ice, fruit punch and Mai Tai mix, carried across town and thrown into a hotel pool filled with Shriners.*

Druet Bourgeuil Vaumoreaux 1993: Hints of bell pepper and tobacco leaf flicker about in the dependably cran-cherried nose. A sip, and the ripe fruit has only faded marginally but the wine turns hard in the center and quite tannic on the finish. Dressner makes yet another sour face. "Dried out," he says, "Ick." Yixin, who is enjoying it, grumps that "It seems even International Wine Magnates can be wrong about their own wines." I'm in between, as the wine has finesse and balance but is giving away precious little now; it has its charms but it makes you come and find them instead of the other way around. Hold it awhile yet, it may just be a phase. *Two and a half large balsa wood Prongs infused with patchouli and placed on a small altar of some kind, perhaps made of pewter or lead, then crushed into a cube by an industrial press and used as a doorstop in a Days Inn in Bismarck, North Dakota.*

Gaston Chiquet Blanc de Blancs d'Ay Champagne Brut NV, and this seems to be a winner, happily bubbly and biscuity/bosc-pearish in the nostrils. Yeasty-toasty at first, in the middle the minerals and tart pear fruit comes to the fore and wave shyly. I actually enjoy this more when all the bubbles have effervesced out of the wine, as it has a stony Chabliseque air about it and the biscuity quality fades into the background. Quite nice, defying the odds of being a) fizzy and b) chardonnay. *Five crudely-carved granite Prongs rolled in a mix of breadcrumbs and white flour, then baked for fifteen minutes at 350 degrees, allowed to cool, dusted with talcum powder and placed on a small, smoothly polished cherrywood base.*

Château Guiraud Sauternes 1990: Extravagant nose, so botrytisytropical, rich over the top pineapple-apricot-vanilla-marmalade-cream-hay. Lush tasting, weighty and dense and stacked, with a firm corset of rigid structure to keep the pillowiness in check. Quite sweet,

quite crisp. BIG! Honeyed & vanilla-cream soda woody finish Nice, rich, dense. *Two bodacious Prongs straining the gold-lamé laces of a Merry Widow.*

Penfolds Cabernet Sauvignon-Shiraz South Australia Bin 389 1998: Medium-dark to dark garnet color. Plumskin and blackberry jam on the nose, smells more of shiraz than cab. Rather weighty mouthfeel, fat black earthy fruit with spiky acidity, finishing with gritty-sandy harsh tannins. Bit disjointed, bit medicinal--not up to past efforts, but not objectionable. *Six small gelatin Prongs arranged in the shape of a pentagram, the largest in the middle being on a small raised wooden dais or platform, while the entire arrangement rests somewhat haphazardly on a tarnished metal breakfast tray.*

Domaine Schoffit Gewürztraminer Alsace Cuvée Caroline 1997: Really boisterous sweet-smelling lychee nose just leaps right out of the glass and into my nasal passages, lychee syrup up the wazoo. A taste, and the sweetness in the nose is belied by a surprisingly dry wine, weighty and well oiled but with a certain elephantine balletic grace. All the usual gewürz goodies are accompanied by a light but clearly defined mineral streak that surfaces immediately after the first wave of fruit and lingers through the finish. Somewhat overdone, but memorable and fun. *Three colorfully decorated red plastic and papier-mâché Prongs with lit sparklers stuck in them, dusted lightly with confectioner's sugar and sprayed with Shalimar eau de toilette.*

Domaine de Chevalier Graves 1962: Pale straw-gold. Light buttery-flinty, lush, honeysuckle, sings with extravagant, complex--buttery-pineapple-vanilla aromas. Tangy, tangy-crisp, with a finish that goes on and on--young and rich. The wine evanesces on the tongue and fills the inside of my skull--tangy lemon-creamy hints--balance, integration, harmony, youth. I am put in mind of a dry Sauternes with no botrytis. I was poured this blind and got the wine, but was twenty+ years late on the vintage. Extraordinary, profound. *One whirring clockwork Prong made of shining silver and polished brass, ticking over relentlessly as the years pass, caring nothing for the works of man.*

Scott-Clark Cellars Chenin Blanc California 'Acorn' 2001. Smells of sour green apple laced with white honey and lemon hints. A sip brings a hit of lean yellow-citrus fruit, but then some startling puckery-tart acidity clamps down on my tongue. Lean and racy, but the feeling in the piehole is deceptively sturdy. A little weird. The winery newsletter claims that there's some residual sugar in this,

but you'd never know from tasting it. Stern, hard chenin, unlike any I've tasted from California. There's a lean, dominatrix side that reminds me of the youthful shrillness of some of Robert Denis's Azay-Le-Rideaus. Like them, this needs time. High-acid fans like Callahan and The Wine Buyer call this the best chenin ever to come out of California, but the sense of having my cheeks pierced with the steel-spring acidity makes me reserve judgment. This is half of my two-bottle allocation; the other one will sleep for a long long time. *One sharpened iron Prong, the handle wrapped with duct tape, stashed under the sink in the bathroom of an Italian restaurant.*

Descendientes de J. Palacios Bierzo 1999: Sweet-smelling dark purply-red fruit, smoky high-toast oak. Tastes fleshy and ripe, not bad but tiresomely generic. *Four linoleum Prongs set on faux-brick bases and dipped in Velveeta pasteurized processed cheese food product.*

Williams-Selyem Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Allen Vineyard 1997: Smells spicy, plum, pepper and toasty-dark wood. Frankly, it smells like shiraz. A sip, and it's got a nice rush of sweet matte purple fruit that blooms quickly and fades quickly, turning a little jarringly towards toasty spiced wood flavors on the finish. The fruit has a reduced quality but isn't terribly twisted out of shape, and I can enjoy this in a rough-hewn kind of way for at least two-thirds of the way through. Not as bad as the conventional wisdom would have it, if you don't mind a shirazzy style of pinot. *Seven and a half small spicecake Prongs, dabbed lightly with an unspecified industrial solvent then placed on bases carved from monkeypod wood and thrown into the muddy water off the Tallahatchee bridge.*

Château Cayrou Cahors 1988: Powdery blackberry and shoyu hints on the nose, smells light and quiet. A sip, and there's smooth dark fruit with that dark shoyu streak that turns towards licorice on the finish. Middleweight and focused, lean, balanced and decent. An unassuming wine that does its job without fanfare. *Two sturdy fired red-clay Prongs that, if inverted, can be used as planters.*

Pontchartrain Vineyards Norton/Cynthiana 'Rouge Militaire' Louisiana 2000: It's a medium-dark garnet color and smells somewhat tutti-fruttied with a cinnamon-pepper streak, Juicy Fruit™ and Big Red™ chewing gums mixed with dark one-note red fruit and laced with a dark licorice streak. Tastes candied and simple but pleasantly peppery and decent enough if your tastes run towards candied and simple wine with a splash of cinnamon. *Six Prongs carved from the compressed matter formed from putting three tons of unsold cotton*

candy into a garbage compactor; then rolled in breadcrumbs and microwaved on 'High' for forty seconds apiece.

Jean-Maurice Raffault Chinon Les Picasses 1997. A warm and smoothly red wine without a great deal of character. Ripe, lightly tobacco-earthly and on the rounded side, the focus that marks Olga's wines isn't here but the looseness isn't offputting, just not compelling in any way. A good café quaffer. *Four puffy-soft Prongs set on bases fashioned from colored glass ashtrays won at a carnival arcade, then sprayed down with an inexpensive men's cologne and left overnight under a heat lamp that hasn't heated up worth a damn since the summer before last.*

Chateau Pradeaux Bandol Cuvée Speciale La Rose Folle 1998: Smells sweetly smoky, dark raspberry, gravel and tar. A sip, and it's a muscular young thing, deceptively silky right up front, taut and intense in the middle and long and smoky-berried at the end. Here's another deep wine that's big enough to take on Joe's ribs and emerge triumphant, much more focused than the Ridge. Strong, impressive stuff in need of deep rest. *One dark obsidian Prong smeared with ram's blood and motor oil and affixed to the shield of an extra playing a Roman Legionnaire in the first scene of the movie 'Gladiator.'*

Edmunds St. John Syrah Durrell Vineyard 1994. Smells of blackberry, smoke, smoked meat, menthol, grilled plum. Grilled plum? Sure why not, adjectives are still free. This has quieted down a lot over the past few years and seems a little shy tonight. Muted, quiet syrah, not particularly expressive but layered and smooth, with enough acidity. Shutting down? Even reticent, it's honest wine with character. *Five and a half juicy Prongs carved from slabs of gyro meat, rubbed down with Vick's Vaporub and that weird green algae that chicks eat, then buried in Leo Sayer's backyard.*

I hope these examples have helped you, the reader, to understand why many of us find the Prong System the most flexible and accurate way to score the ever-changeable and supremely subjective product that dwells at the bottom of your wine glass.

The Jeopardy! Debacle

The five stages of realizing you've just been trounced on *Jeopardy!*:

Numbness: Everything seems to be going in slow motion. Does he really have that many points? Is that my hand down there flailing away in vain on that buzzer? Why am I so warm? Is it warm in here, or is it me? It's not just me, right? It's warm, isn't it?

Denial: I can't believe it... I can't believe it's over... just like that... all that memorization... they never even asked about a stupid world capital... no... I can't believe it... I can't believe it... he beat me by HOW MUCH? Oh... oh no... I know these... Where is Ouagadougou...? Who is George Spelvin...? What are the Islands of Langerhans...? I know this... I know it...

Anger: That fucking buzzer, that goddam fucking buzzer, what the fuck was I supposed to do with that fucking thing that just fucking wouldn't work, the goddam piece of shit trash junk goddam goddam goddam WHY DIDN'T THEY LET ME PRACTICE LONGER fuck fuck stupid damn stupid Tad lawyer from Atlanta stupid idiot stupid stupid stupid stupid.

Despair: I'm going to just fall to my knees for awhile right here in the parking garage, don't mind me... I'll just curl right up here in this pool of nice soft oil and grease, just lie here for a few days. No, no, go on back home, you'll have a much happier life without me, forever branded the *Jeopardy!* loser loser loser.

Drunkenness: Lisa and I shamble into the imaginatively named

2117 Sawtelle Restaurant at 2117 Sawtelle Street in the fabled City of Angels, me with the explicit intention of walking out with one-third fewer brain cells (by weight, not volume), her supporting my shattered frame as best she could, brave girl. We are met by some of the west coast's finest and geekiest, presided over by the urbane Bruce L., the man with the golden wow. We park ourselves down by Jack Weissberg and his scientifically-inclined wife Wendy and wave gamely down the table at Fred Corbalis, Blake Shane and Steve Anderson. I've never met any of these folks, but am gratified by their willingness to congregate to support a complete stranger in his darkest hour.

Everyone glances nervously at my red-rimmed eyes and rent clothing; I fight the urge to scream out obscenities in the form of a question and manage to get my trembling fingers wrapped around of a glass of Rochioli Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 1999, all the while trying to keep the pale, slightly tan wine from sloshing out of the glass. It smells quite bright and extravagant, good dose of litterbox, grapefruit, with a slatey undertow. There is some creaminess here, a bit of a buttery quality to the mouthfeel, but it turns tangy and leaner through the midpalate with the structure asserting itself as a hint of green grass emerges on the finish. Pleasant enough, but I find it a bit creamier than I like my sauvignons to be.

Next in line is a Clos St. Michel Châteauneuf-du-Pape (Blanc) 1996. It's pale gold and smells quite interesting, with perfumey gardenia notes mixing with earthier dried apple and dried apricot hints over a limestoney background. A sip, and it's not giving much, a bit tight, with a waxy-honey impression at first, moving into a fairly round middle and fading into a bitter tang on the finish. To recap for those who just tuned in: Smells great, less impressive to taste, then turns bitter. Odd, but it will kill the brain cells as well as anything else on the table, so I suck it down with extreme prejudice.

Here's a Domaine René Monnier Meursault-Charmes 1997, and it smells rather like a local chardonnay, quite vanilla-buttery, with pear juice tones and a flickering flintiness underneath it all. Tastes less overtly woody, lightly creamy, lemony hints, nice balance but fairly neutral, a bit wan but quite correct. It's nice enough but it really leaves me a bit cold.

I don't remember much about the conversation at this point,

except that there were a number of questions about many of the New York regulars and I spent a lot of time saying “No, no, he’s really very nice in person, no I mean it, stop laughing...”

I see a Trimbach Cuvée Freddy-E 1995 coming down the line, and of course it hasn’t budged an inch since I had it a few months ago. Light kerosene, honey and yellow appleskin on the nose, I take a mouthful, turn to Jack and say “Now THAT’S wine.” I’m not sure why I say that but I do nonetheless, with feeling. Big and tight, a bit hard and unyielding, it’s not terribly friendly now, but there’s great density and richness and concentration. Give me a straw. It’s hard and shiny around the lemon-mineral edges, and the finish turns back again with a limey gin & tonic flourish. If you don’t mind a rough ride it’ll take you along with a scowl, but you’ll have fun.

I do believe we have run the gamut of whites. I think I’m alone with Lisa in liking the Fred best. Perhaps early signs of an East/West schism?

Perhaps not, as the next wine elicits very diverse reactions that have no geographical basis: Kistler Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Kistler Vineyard 1997 is a fairly deep medium garnet color and smells quite pungently of candied cough syrup and plum, with tarry-smoky hints. Frankly, it’s like wine concentrate candy. The taste of the wine follows the nose, odd and candied, densely and peculiarly fruity, well balanced in terms of a firm acidic structure and turning smoky-oaky on the blunt finish, but just not my cup of tea at all. This wine elicits strong feelings, as the table divides about fifty-fifty into “wine of the night so far” and “weirdass freak.” I think it’s clear on which side of the fence I stand (for those of you scoring at home, it was not my wine of the night...).

Scratching my head over that last one, I assay a Martinelli Pinot Noir Reserve Russian River Valley 1997, and there’s much more pinot character evident here—clovey plum-cherry hints, smoky and healthily oaked as well but the very ripe fruit is at least not inflated beyond recognition. Fairly quiet nose, some astringent wood tannins on the finish, a bit simple but not bad, not bad at all.

Crikey, it’s a Monte Bello mini-vertical, beginning with the Ridge Monte Bello California 1997 and descending in reverse-chronological order to the Ridge Monte Bello California 1995.

RMBC 1997: Plenty of stuff going on here, I swirl a bit and

my glass happily gives up tobacco, cedar and black olive hints in a medium-dark cassis base. I'm a bit surprised at how readily this youngster yields up its nasal delights, but I'll take it for \$500, Alex. Tastes smooth, silky, medium-weight and, although a bit tight, still friendly and full of flavor, at least until some fine tannins swoop in and strangle the finish. Quite delicious, peculiarly friendly, roundly acclaimed, and the quick winner of the Thunderbird Prize.

RMBC 1995: This wine smells darker than its younger sibling, deeper and quieter, not as effusive, smoke and dark pipe tobacco. I taste, and it's a bit rough, the crisp acidity pacing the tart red and black fruit and giving the midpalate a hard feel. Seems denser than the '97, more compact, and the tannins are not so fine and give the finish a bit of grit. Nice balance, more focused than its younger sibling, racier. It's tight at first, so I put a glass aside and throughout the night it seems to deepen and relax, although just perceptibly, showing touches of green olive and cedar. This needs much time, but I think it may prove the more interesting fluid down the road a ways.

I am very fond of both of these wines and would happily sip them all night, but other victims are approaching, and I sigh and move on, leaving the last of the '95 for the chef, who has appeared, glass in hand, to receive his compliments. This, I guess, is an LA thing, as I've never seen the chef emerge in New York. I figure they've usually got food to cook and serve and stuff like that.

Here's the inky-dark D'Arenberg Shiraz McLaren Vale 'The Dead Arm' 1996, and a quick sniff puts the balance and finesse of the Monte Bellos right out of mind, as this is an unreconstructed bigass hootie of a wine, redolent of spicy creamy-coconut and vanilla-laced plum and blackberry. Some people claim to detect gobs, but nothing is confirmed. Oddly enough, we had just had the 95 a few days before, and this is bigger and denser but also more monolithic and unyielding. Tastes slightly candied at first, plenty of generously-oaked dense red and black fruit with plummy-toasty overtones, tangy and crisp without any spiky acidity, actually balanced rather well for all of its boisterousness. After an hour in the glass the candied aspect is gone, the wine has turned matte and spread, a rough beast slouching towards earthiness. It's a big, silly wine that goes happily over the top, and I like it. Consensus score: Seven and a half sand-covered wax candle prongs in rainbow hues,

hung up with macramé prongholders and slightly soft from the warm western air.

Another shiraz, the Mount Horrocks Shiraz Clare Valley 1996. It's not as big or as dark as the Dead Arm, which is fine. Hints of eucalyptus in the plum-cassis nose, hints of earthiness running darkly under the fruit, mingling with dark toast. Decent balance, not terribly giving but not unpleasant, finishes a bit rough, turning towards a licorice quality. After some time in the glass the fruit seems to be moving towards more redness than blackness, turning towards a cranberry-tinged plumminess. Seems like a pretty decent, but somewhat generic shiraz. Three and a half prongs fashioned entirely from scraps of gray and green felt, bundled and bound with twine.

Hey, here's a zin to tickle this zinfan's fancy, the Vigil Zinfandel Beatty Ranch Howell Mountain Napa Valley 1997. What say you, zin? Zin smells velvety and lush, lots of good ol' black cherry-raspberry fruit creeps up my noseholes and mingles there with dark choco-smoky notes. Tastes lush and smooth, a bit on the soft, creamy side and without a great many layers of flavor, but fun and friendly, a very decent comfort zin with no rough edges at all.

The conversation around the table is ascending the spiral staircase of topics into the rarefied air of deep thoughts. It is 11:20 when the phrase "liberal theology" makes its first appearance. I haven't much of a clue, but Lisa and Steve were suddenly *mano-a-mano*, attempting to hammer out several of the big issues at once:

Can science solve moral issues?

Is the notion of "God" inconsistent with evolutionary biology?

At the mention of biology, Wendy steps in and holds forth about science and its place in society, and from there the talk careens wildly across the cratered landscape of science vs. art and biology vs. religion, losing a hubcap here and there but always just avoiding ending up crumpled in a ditch. I keep thinking that Lisa is going to do something quite savage to poor unknowing Steve, but happily there is no blood spilled. Yet.

Heavens, we're in Los Angeles, can't we talk about breast implants or Leo DiCaprio or something?

Anyone know any details about Heidi Fleiss's new line of lingerie?

No...?

I reach for a passing sweetie, a Tamburlaine Hunter Valley Old Muscat Liqueur NV, just as someone declares loudly “Soul is a metaphor that makes you feel better about your impending death,” and I immediately take a big slug of that sweet, sweet elixir of life. Actually, it’s quite good, amber-brown color, very complex happy nose with layers of caramel, raisin, orange rind, brown sugar—I like these sweet muscats and this is a very nice specimen, more layered and beguiling than most, especially commendable for its balance, avoiding any hint of cloying or goopiness, a crisp, medium-rich sweetie with a lot of character.

They’re still going at it across the table, so I snatch a pour of Elderton Golden Semillon South Eastern Australia 1997. It’s a medium amber-orange color, sweet-smelling and flecked with apricot and orangey notes. Crisp and tangy apricot-based flavors and an interesting nutmeggy spiciness swirl around in a very glossy mouthfeel—this wine tastes shiny, almost laminated. Clean, tangy, straightforward and decent, but I go back to the Tamburlaine and sit to watch the fireworks, as the subject has progressed, as I suppose it was bound to, to the ethical ramifications of the death penalty and the morality of state-sanctioned killing. Lisa has climbed unsteadily up onto her chair and is announcing “The same people who say government is a failure also say that the government should decide to kill people!” and we have to wrestle her down and make her and Steve kiss and make up before we stagger off into the night, the two combatants bloodied but unbowed.

Fortunately we don’t stagger too far down the dark streets before we realize that the nearest subway station is in fact over two thousand miles away and someone perforce must engage in a display of that quaint local custom, driving. Fortunately, Wendy is a responsible desingated driver, and we use our patented Eastern Wino Mind Control Methods to compel her and Jack to motor us up to my brother’s place into the hills above Bel Air, where we listen to the coyotes, raid the refrigerator and polish off the few remaining survivors of the evening’s festivizations, the memory of the quiz show horror mercifully beginning to fade.

Waiting for Callahan: A Tragicomedy in One Act

A note of explanation: An experiment in expanding the format of the tasting note to something stylistically offbeat, *Waiting for Callahan* had its genesis in a rather surreal evening spent in a BYO vegetarian restaurant at what was supposed to be a high-profile meeting among celebrated geeks from across the U.S. Stuart Yaniger, who at the time was working on manufacturing a cork replacement called 'neocork,' and who is the proud father of the *Three Stooges System* of rating wine, had flown in from California, and with him had come Jason Brandt Lewis, who's been involved in and writing about the California wine scene for decades. On the New York side was Brad Kane, Sasha Katsman (a local wino who likes the good stuff—we like to bust his chops about his propensity to always declare that the '21 or '27 version of whatever he was drinking was much better. Picture a sleeper, more cheerful version of Vincent van Gogh), and Jeff Connell, who is a rather courtly, soft-spoken gentleman who was biding his time at his day job until he could flee the city to make wine in his native Canada. Plus, for some reason, there was Lisa and me. And of course, everyone wanted to meet the storied Robert Callahan, who had created a reputation as a whipsmartass wine-underworld gadfly who had forgotten more about wine than many of us would ever know, and was happy to remind you of it.

We met at Zen Palate, were placed in what seemed like an unused back room, and through a series of miscommunications the staff was unaware of our presence for a good long time. And Callahan just wasn't showing up....

Waiting for Callahan: A Tragicomedy in One Act

[Scene: Zen Palate, a spare and ominous restaurant in darkest Manhattan. A lone tree, devoid of leaves, stands near a black table.]

Enter seven figures, alike yet different: JASON Brandt Lewis, in jeans and glasses, cheerful and garrulous; BRAD Kane, hoping the conversation stays off books with long titles; CHRIS Coad, loud shirt, fine figure of a man; LISA Allen, sharp as a tack, full of piss and vinegar; STUART Yaniger, bearded, rational and merry; JEFF Connell, soft-spoken and pleasantly cryptic; and .SASHA, a poor starving soul.]

STUART: I have travelled many miles with the wine Callahan has requested. You who live in this area, where is Callahan?

LISA: Callahan is coming. He said he would be here. Do not worry or fret. Callahan will come.

JASON: I too have come from far away in hopes of seeing Callahan. Will he really arrive soon?

JEFF: If Callahan said he is coming, he will come.

[Enter a WAITER.]

JEFF: Can we get some kind of a bucket? To dump our glasses? To spit into?

[The WAITER stares blankly at the assembled figures, then exits.]

JEFF: I should not have said 'spit.'

.SASHA: Why won't he take our order? I am hungry.

BRAD: This menu is weird. Will they give me a plain plate of pasta? With marinara sauce?

LISA: It will do us no good to order before Callahan arrives. He would be angry. He would come, see that we have ordered, grow angry and take away all the wine.

BRAD: Screw Callahan! He always says to me "You're wrong!" Why should we wait for him? I say we open the wine and drink it all now, before he gets here!

[A silence falls over the group.]

.SASHA: I am hungry.

[More silence.]

BRAD: You are all cowards! I will open the wine, and we will drink it until Callahan comes!

LISA: Yes! Callahan doesn't scare me! Let us drink!

[They open a bottle of wine, a **Wittman Westhofener Morstein Riesling Spätlese 1997**. They taste it.]

CHRIS: This is a tasty wine, with a racy and reserved nose, light, spritzy honey and stone and gasoliney notes, along with some citrus, it is classy and lightly tangy in the mouth, wonderfully balanced between light sweetness and not-quite sharp acidity. A velvety young riesling. That's what I think.

JEFF: If only we had some of this wine when, so long ago, we searched for elegance...

BRAD: This wine smells sulfury.

STUART: It's a 1997, what do you expect?

LISA: I smell no sulfur. You are wrong!

BRAD: Harridan! You are the female Callahan!

LISA: Wrong, wrong, wrong!

JASON: Another wine!

[They open a wine, a **Clos du Tue-Boeuf Pinot Gris Vin de Pays D'Oc Demi-Sec 1998**. They taste it.]

CHRIS: This wine has a very light nose, light stones and honey-plumeria. It is very limp in the mouth, low acid and soft, and has an odd note that I can't place...

.SASHA: I like this wine. The '27 was better, but I could drink a whole bottle of this.

BRAD: (Spitting wine out) Ugh! Ugh! You like this?!

STUART: That note that you can't identify I call 'puke in the gutter.' But in a good way.

JEFF: Perhaps you will all come to understand this wine when your tastes have matured.

STUART: I understand this wine already. This wine is a Shemp.

LISA: Callahan will understand this wine. When he arrives.

JASON: Another wine!

[The WAITER enters, and takes everyone's order except .SASHA's. They open a **Domaine Zind-Humbrecht Gewürztraminer Heimbουργ 1992**. They taste.]

CHRIS: This wine has a delicate, softly floral nose, light lychee & honey, very beguiling, but when you sip it it's very fat and thick--overextracted and a bit oily, although it finishes with a nice sharp tang that leaves you wanting more. It's a little confusing to me.

STUART: Callahan will explain it to you.

LISA: [Close to tears] Don't you see? There is no Callahan!

JEFF: I have seen Callahan. He will come soon, and he will explain this wine to us.

JASON: Another wine!

[They open a **Cuilleron St. Joseph (White) 1997**. They taste.]

BRAD: This is a killer wine!

CHRIS: This wine is a pale straw-gold color, with a minerally nose, bright and mutedly yellowfruity. It is rich, tangy and slightly buttered-toast oaky. The fruit is charmingly dense and flavorful, with some crisp acidity to balance out the medium-weight mouthfeel. The oak is only very slightly distracting; this is very appealing.

BRAD: Like I said, a killer wine!

STUART: Wait! I hear footsteps! Is he coming now?

LISA: Yes, I see him! Hold me!

[The WAITER enters. He brings food for everyone except .SASHA.]

JASON: I'm sorry, .sasha, but I'm going to eat now. It will do me no good to be weak with hunger when Callahan arrives.

.SASHA: Yes. Go ahead without me.

JEFF: Let us open this now. [He opens the **Desvignes Morgon Javernieres 1997**. They taste.]

CHRIS: Since I suspect you're all poised to hear what I think of this wine, let me say that it is a richly-colored Beaujolais with a light earthy-plum nose and some tangy rich dark berry fruit, a crisp medium-bodied wine with a shadow of tannins. Serious Beaujolais.

.SASHA: I don't know what to think of this wine. I hated it at first, but now I love it.

BRAD: Either way, you're getting wayyyy too excited about gamay.

.SASHA: I can't help it. I am dizzy with hunger.

STUART: This food is delicious!

LISA: O man of many closures, what is in your mysterious unlabeled bottle?

STUART: Ah, that is what I have brought three thousand miles to lay at the feet of Callahan. We must not taste of it until he is here.

JASON: I too have come three thousand miles! Am I not as worthy of this treat as Callahan?

BRAD: Yeah, screw Callahan! Open it up!

JEFF: I have lost faith that Callahan will ever arrive. We must prepare ourselves to go on without him. Open the wine.

STUART: Well, okey-dokey, then. [He opens the **Ogier Côte-Rôtie 'La Belle Hélène' 1997** Barrel Sample. They pause reverentially, then taste.]

CHRIS: This wine is a deep, impenetrable purply-red, with lovely

scents of menthol, smoked meats, and a core of black raspberry and blackberry fruit that is dense, but not frighteningly tight. It is layered, rich and roughish, but it goes down smoothly and quickly. Hey! Don't take it all!

BRAD: Sorry.

JASON: This wine is the winner.

STUART: Yes, it wins the Thunderbird Prize; it is the first empty bottle. Let us observe a moment of quiet respect.

[They bow their heads.]

CHRIS: All that is left is this **Zenato Amarone Classico 1988**, which is a nice medium-dark color, has some velvety cherry-raspberry-raisiny-brown sugar aromas, but tastes a bit monolithic and simple, very little complexity here.

STUART: This Amarone tastes overripe.

LISA: Perhaps they used late-harvest raisins.

JEFF: Is .sasha all right? He seems to have passed out.

BRAD: He had a long drive. But we must move on to the dessert wines now—.sasha want a sweetie?

.SASHA: Aack.

[They open a **Kurt Darting Muskateller Eiswein 1991**. They taste.]

CHRIS: What a nice gold-amber color, and hints of orange rind and honey-apricot on the nose. A slightly unctuous wine, very thick, viscous and tangy, with just barely enough acidity, and a long, tangy finish.

BRAD: This wine has a ton of acidity.

LISA: This wine has a tiny bit of acidity.

BRAD: Plenty of acidity!

LISA: Wrong, wrong, wrong!

BRAD: Queen of the Harpies! Queen of the Harpies!

JASON: What's the matter with you New Yorkers, anyway? Another wine!

[They open the **Château Bouscasse Vendemiaire Octobre 1995**. They taste.]

CHRIS: This wine, pale straw in color, has a light, tight nose; soft pineapple-flinty-nectariney notes drift around the glass. Tastes a bit thin, too, yellowfruity and not terribly sweet. Thin, light and crisp.

BRAD: Here, have mine. [Pours his wine into CHRIS's glass.]

JEFF: .Sasha is dead.

.SASHA: I am dead.

JASON: Another wine!

STUART: There is no more wine.

JASON: It's Sunday... we cannot buy any more... damn you New Yorkers and your blue laws!

LISA: We should go.

JEFF: Yes.

STUART: Well, shall we go?

JASON: Yes, let's go.

[They do not move.]

LIGHTS OUT

The Coefficient of WRONGness

I am fortunate enough to have a wonderful circle of wine lovers to spend my time tasting with, with an incredibly varied set of likes and dislikes, all with clear preferences and biases, all very experienced and dedicated tasters, some professionals, some amateurs in the best sense of the word. Every time we sit down for a tasting you can guarantee that we will agree on practically nothing, as we all defend our own particular tastes and tell the others how WRONG they are about their own favorites. As a matter of fact, we have a taster who has somehow acquired the colorful nickname ‘Always Wrong™’ in honor of his iconoclastic opinions, yet they are consistent and, most importantly, they are his, and his alone. We know the kinds of wine he likes, and they are often not something the rest of us would cross the street for. As a matter of fact, I can be sure that if he says a dessert wine has ‘plenty of acidity’ that it will seem fat and flabby to me. Question: Which of us is WRONG? Answer: He is! (But only because it’s my book—in his book I would be WRONG, incomprehensible as that may seem to the discriminating reader.)

The wine merchant Kermit Lynch has a wonderful quote in his “Adventures on the Wine Route,” where he describes tasting with a friend of his, another wine professional: “Every time we taste together when I think a wine is tannic, he says it lacks tannins, every time I say it’s a huge fruity wine, he says the wine is fruitless and thin... we agree on nothing, we discuss, define, query [get

proper quote].” And both of these men are serious wine professionals. (He also goes on to note that his favorite wine one year ‘scored’ an appallingly low 73 points— “...so much for my tastes,” he adds wryly.) The biggest problem that I see in the way people in this country consume wine is that there has emerged a separate class of high priests between the consumers and their rightful drink, and a feeling that these who hold the key to the heavenly mysteries must read the entrails and inform the less-discriminating palates what is worthy and what is not. This is mere snobbery, and has the effect of frightening people away from non-approved wines.

To sum up: Listen to ME—not THEM.

No, that’s not right either. Listen to YOU.

That’s it.

Another oenophany: my wife had picked up a few bottles of Bordeaux (Château Brane-Cantenac, to be specific) from the 1982 vintage for what seemed like an absurdly low price for a wine from that much-empointified vintage. It became apparent on talking to the salesman that this was because this wine had been excoriated by one of the pointy guys and given a ‘score’ of 75, a virtual mark of death for sales. Fortunately for us, the wine was beautiful and delicious, on the light side and with a good dose of earthiness, a real treat. But no one would buy it because it was carved in stone forever as a ‘75.’ It was very much as if it had become a bad wine simply by the fact that there was this number hung around its neck a decade or so ago.

I’m not trying to say that these publications have no merit—indeed, they can be very valuable and full of useful information and great tips. I subscribe to and read them myself. But they are only a piece of the puzzle. Talk to a friendly local retailer. Get on the internet and see what the geeks on the wine boards are saying (see Chapter Thirteen). Best of all, get together with like-minded friends and pop some damn corks! Taste, taste, and taste some more—there is no substitute.

Of course, there are many Winegeeks who swear by their little scorecards. More power to ‘em, I say. Let them snap up all the critically numerically-acclaimed (read: overpriced) stuff and keep feeding the numbers industry while I do an end run and buy the wines that please MY palate for cheap.

A Winegeek’s Prayer: O Lord, let the Mighty Pointy Men give

my favorite winery across-the-board 75s this year. Amen.

Wine and Tragedy

I stood in the doorway of the 8 World Trade staring north through the glass doors at the torrential rain. I had wanted to walk the few blocks up to Chambers Street Wines to pick up a couple of bottles that Rudolph Erasmus and Margie Barker (whom I jokingly refer to as my ‘South African Fan Club’) had left there as a gift for me on their recent swing through town. It was pouring, just coming down in buckets, and I wasn’t going out in that now—I’d come back tomorrow and take care of it. I turned back and walked instead across the plaza to the 1 train Cortlandt Street station.

September 10th, 2001 was a day of downpours. The next day the weather was breathtakingly beautiful, one of those rare perfect Fall days in the city.

When we decided tentatively to go ahead with the double birthday party that had been scheduled for September 15th it wasn’t long before our doubts about the appropriateness of the gathering vanished into thin air. Sitting and talking with friends and acquaintances for a few hours, drinking some good wine and being together was the first time many of us had felt anything but crushed since the attacks.

One older woman, a relative of a friend, kept asking me questions about the winegeek community, trying to understand who we all were and how we knew each other. I tried to explain the strange characters we had met, the friends we’d made, the people from all over the world that we’d never have met in any other context, the

almost universal generosity and joy in sharing that is the hallmark of wine lovers everywhere. She took a look around the room and said <i>“That must be a nice thing to have at a time like this...”

She was right.

We had thought it was going to be a grand cru birthday party for Dressner and me. It had been in the works for a month, and after Tuesday’s catastrophe we faced a stark choice: cancel because the idea of getting together and drinking wine in the shadow of horror seemed inconceivable, or proceed because getting together and drinking wine in the shadow of horror seemed necessary. Yet “go about your business, go back to your lives” was what Mr. Guiliani implored us to do. I guess sometimes pretending to have courage will get you through until you really do have courage, or, in this case, pretending life is normal might just suffice until life is once again normal.

So it was that thirty or so winegeeks, semi-winegeeks and non-winegeeks gathered at Manhattan’s historic La Rocchetta for a night of human contact. Wine and friends and family sitting and laughing together, talking about Tuesday, talking about anything but Tuesday, trying to somehow digest Tuesday. Together.

When Lisa and I arrive early for perhaps the first time in our history we find Dressner already there, pacing nervously, fretting about the propriety of the evening. “Will people be able to get here?” he asks, “Or would they even want to? Should we just all go home right now?”

Lisa takes matters firmly in hand: “Shut up and get some ice buckets.” Relieved of the necessity to think, he does just that, and we all join in setting up the room.

This being his 50th birthday we’ve all decided it would be best to say it’s his 60th, so he has lined up a number of bottles from the 1941 vintage, many of them in suspiciously good condition. Upon closer examination, the labels do indeed clearly say “1941,” albeit on a small white sticker with the same typeface on every bottle. “Those were difficult times,” Dressner explains quietly, “and most French producers had to share the same font for their vintage stickers. And nothing frilly either, only something as basic as Stempel Garamond or perhaps Cochin for the wealthier Châteaux.”

I don’t know why Joe wants to kick off the festivities with a Vin Jaune, but he does. Vin Jaune is a freaky-geeky wine from the Jura

region of France—imagine dry sherry soaked in dirty sweat socks, that'll give you an idea. Yes, I know, it's an "acquired taste." I just don't think I'll acquire it in this lifetime. Nevertheless, some of the geeks love it, and there's plenty of other stuff for me to drink—taut, bracing Muscadets, one of Joe's Buster wines (he has a line of wines named Cuvée Buster after his dog), the usual assortment of Loires and Alsatians.

More geeks are arriving—Christian the Newbie is here, he's lost a friend in the disaster and is an angry man, partying with a slightly glassy-eyed intensity. Here's the rest of the Dressner clan—Denyse, Malmoëlleux and the Chipster. I see Squire Connell chatting with Manuel Camblor and Josie, and there's Alice Feiring, the irrepressible Bradley Kane, Jayson and Laura Cohen, more luminaries from the soft white underbelly of the wine trade: Kevin McKenna, Sue Ng, David Lillie, Lovevibe, Mona Moore, other people whose names I am too addled to recall at the moment, the place just keeps filling up. One thing I notice is that many (including me) have the air of being relieved to be doing something small and ordinary, and doing it in good company.

Jay Miller beckons me over to get the first shot at a couple of rare beauties, starting with a Huet Vouvray Le Haut-Lieu Demisec 1959. Oh man, there's nothing like nicely aged Vouvray. There is a trace of funk at first that blows off fairly soon, leaving a quiet, somewhat reticent nose with all the usual goodies: baked lemons, honey, pollen, wax and a chalky core. A sip, and here's a warm, gentle upfront wash of layered flavors couched with light sweetness, so gentle that the acidity kicking in on the midpalate is a bit of a shock, but an invigorating one. The wine is very pretty, but it seems tentative and not quite cohesive at the moment. Perhaps it needs more air to come around.

Jay shows us his World Trade Center bathroom key. "I worked there until this past February," he says. Heads are shaken slowly back and forth, but nothing is said.

Next is the Domaine des Douveliers (Claude Pinon) Vouvray 1959. The same medium gold color as the Huet, perhaps a trace more amber. The aromatics have more of an orange-rind quality, tea, honey and a rich vein of chalkiness. Tastes more robust than the Huet, larger and more weighty in the piehole. There is a touch more sweetness (although there is no sweetness designation on

the bottle—is this a moëlleux?), and the general impression is of a brawnier, more expressive wine that might not be as balanced or delicate but has its act together better on this night.

I am knocked out of the way by Kane's dive for the Vouvray, but out of the corner of my eye I see the Doghead himself, Robert Callahan, arriving with wife Carolyn. I turn to Christian the Newbie just in time to catch him frowning as he mouths the obligatory words: "I thought he was older..."

We know, we know.

Callahan is agitated, waving his arms and yelling "Fuck 'em! Fuck 'em all!" by way of a greeting as he comes through the door. He takes a gander at the blizzard of bottles that are beginning to appear from every corner of the room and announces to no one in particular "I feel hung over just *looking* at all this wine."

We've all been milling about doing a strange random-banging-into-each-other version of socializing for at least an hour and a half now, and the waitstaff is beginning to get edgy. Dressner takes things in hand, yelling "Sit down, sit down! Stand clear of the closing doors! Sit down!"

So we do. I am left in a little elevated cul-de-sac behind Callahan and out of the main flow of the action, so I make an attempt to goad my notoriously slow palate into greater speed. Easily a half-dozen bottles have flowed past and off into the thirsty crowd to return no more, so I grab the few whites that are in reach and carry on.

Pierre Frick Gewürztraminer Rot-Murlé Première Cuvée 1941: Bright and crisp in the nostrils, white flowers and white peach, stones and lychee. Tastes merrily crisp, a leaner style of gewürz that has a strong spine of acidity and little oiliness. Not exuberant, a racy and coiled wine that has held up marvellously well. In fact, if tasted blind I would have guessed this was a 1999.

Manuel approaches with one last white, an Albert Pic Chablis Valmur 1989. There's an odd cabbagey funk at first that blows off soon enough, after which a flinty nose with flecks of butteriness emerges. Cool and somewhat neutral at first, the flavors take their time in blooming, only coming out really strongly on the finish, which carries on tangily for two minutes, twenty-one and six-tenths seconds (02:21.60).

From out of the corner of my ear I start to hear a low rumbling

chant beginning. It is the geeks, calling for what they want the most. What do they want? They want this week's obscure grape du jour, from Switzerland of all places: CORNALIN! "Corrrrr-naaaaa-lahhhhn, Corrrrr-naaaaa-lahhhhn, Corrrrr-naaaaa-lahhhhn" they cry, and the cry does not go unanswered.

La Chaille Cornalin Valais "Fully" 1998: Smells of candied strawberry-raspberry fruit with some dark shoe-polish undercurrents. Tastes light, decent and slightly jammy, not much concentration or complexity, just bright fruitiness and a light tarriness on the finish. Cornalin Nouveau?

A Franz-Joseph Mathier Cornalin de Salquenen Valais Mareotis 1999 is next, and it's got more guts. Deeper strawberry-raspberry aromas underlaid with dark earth, crisp in the cakehole, nice balance, more heft and weight. Drops off entirely on the finish but is quite pleasant nonetheless.

"THIS" announces Dressner, looming suddenly over me, "Is the GOOD ONE." He ceremoniously plops the final bottle of cornalin in front of me. I peer at the label, dump the remains of my glass and pour a rinse from the GOOD ONE, but by the time I'm ready for an actual pour Dressner has re-lifted the bottle and moved on to his next victim. No GOOD ONE for me.

An arm with a bottle appears, and I'm being poured a glass of Chinon, Loire Valley cabernet franc, supple and expressive. I look up, and attached to the arm is David Lillie. He and a partner have, only a few months ago, sunk their life savings into opening their dream wine shop downtown, a few blocks north of what is now Ground Zero. Today he's here pouring us Chinon and smiling. We're here, after all, aren't we?

Kane waltzes by, having thoughtfully saved me the last pour of a bottle of Domaine de Bellivière Les Giroflées Coteaux du Loir 1999. It's a pale salmon colored wine, with a beguiling and puzzling nose—ginger candy with traces of cinnamon... red earth... I don't know, this wine escapes me. Tastes smooth and feathery, with a slightly limpid feel at first that is buoyed by snappy acidity and tangy fruit. Strange, and I am forced to give up on it as I have consumed my ounce or two before I can parse it any further.

Now approaches a brace of Châteauneufi, first a Vieux Donjon Châteauneuf-du-Pape 1999: Black olives, red raspberry and saddle leather on the nose, smooth and easygoing in the gob. The fleshy

red fruit spreads out gracefully on my tongue in warm layers of flavors. There's a certain meaty softness and lack of structure to the wine, it has Kaneish tendencies, but it's well put together and very friendly at the moment.

Next is an Eric Texier Châteauneuf-du-Pape Vieilles Vignes 1941: Quiet but amazingly youthful nose, light red berry-cassis fruit, opens up marginally with air but remains undemonstrative. At first the wine seems monolithically one-note red, tangy and tight, but soon some warm earthy tones flash on the finish and hint at future development before they are smothered in fine stern tannins. Way too young, has many of the same qualities that gave me pause in the 1999 version—give it another sixty years.

Someone shouts “Look out—a Parker wine!” about some woody Spanish thing that is making the rounds. Christian tastes it and is troubled: “I like the Parker wine,” he says. “Does that make me a bad person?”

I put my hand on his shoulder in a brotherly gesture of compassion: “Today,” I say, “we’re all just winegeeks.”

And as if to prove it here's a Taurasi Terradora 1996: Plenty of smoky oak here, along with dark tangy red fruit, ripe berries and cassis. Big upfront smoky-fruity rush, hollow in the midpalate, finishes with rough tannins. Ripe, oaky, undistinguished.

I pick up a bottle of Clos de Roilette Fleurie 1993, but it is spent, drained already. I glance around, and I see much animated conversation, but some have slipped quietly into the thousand-yard stare that has been the face of the city this week everywhere you go. If you ask someone “How are you doing?” the most common response is “Um... you know... like everybody else.”

But there's wine here now, and friends.

I hear Lisa explaining to Carolyn that her first words to Robert were “You don't scare me, Callahan!” and then she begins to reopen their age-old feud about Burgundy (as an appellation) being as easy to understand as Bordeaux. Callahan protests plaintively “Oh, don't listen to me... I'm just a dope... I don't mean any harm...” and the combatants are reconciled. Carolyn mentions the monster SUV they've rented while they wait to see if their car (parked downtown) is still a car or just a heap of metal. “It's funny the perspective this gives you” she says, “I could see fretting about the car before this. But now it's just a car, it doesn't matter at all...” I nod, knowing

what she means.

A Château Trotanoy Pomerol 1997 comes around, smelling of bright red gravelly fruit, cedar, touches of oregano. Tastes meaty and structured, a firm, assertive young wine with a bit of an attitude that turns towards silkiness, then firms back up again on the finish in a flurry of glassy tannins. Nice, young. Manuel makes a face.

Another oldster, a Domaine Sylvie Esmonin Gevrey-Chambertin Clos St. Jacques Première Cuvée 1941 hits my glass, and hits it in style, smelling airy and limestony-minerally over a sour cherry base, zingy in the nostrils, a bright and penetrating nose, whiplike. Tastes sharp, racy and stonily cherried, cranberry traces arise in the midpalate, fruit is hung on a spine like a steel spring, whee, coiled and crisp. Intense, lithe, impressive.

Good heavens, it's Loire shaman and new father Don Rice coming through the door! We offer our congratulations on his and Melissa's recent joyous arrival and he attempts to make a quick exit, but when he hears there are open bottles of "59 Vouvray on the premises he suddenly remembers that he needs to be here for awhile. Shockingly, just about now Mr. Connell is caught drinking water, slapped silly, and forced to go back to vino like a good lad.

Kane bounces over: "Wanna try some crap?" he asks eagerly. I quickly take him up on his offer by sampling some horrible cooked Gigondas. Tarry, stewed odors. Madereized, cooked, crap. Kane is right!

Now is the toasting time of night: Andrew claims to have a speech to make, then reneges, but finally manages to mumble something brief and wacky. He is greeted with tumultuous applause.

There are several tributes to Joe, and I start to sense a theme brewing when Kane begins his little speech with "I've known Joe for XXX years..." It's up to young Master Dressner to trump with "If I remember correctly, I've known Joe for fifteen years now..." and proceed to note that this was the first time he'd seen Kevin talking and acting like a "Frat Boy," a charge that is not refuted.

Joe's father Sam stands: "I've known Joe for over seventy years now..." he begins, and carries on from there. As I said, I understand a few things about Joe better now.

When my turn arrives I clarify that I've known Joe since last

week when he answered an ad in the *Village Voice* about filling out my birthday party, then offer some ruminations on how I should've padded the room by inviting my parents and kids too, and finally close with an indictment of the ITB types in attendance and a toast to the pure, amateur winegeeks. I don't know what any of it meant. I was just talking. We're all just talking until we can think of something to say.

Last reds now, a Tollot-Beaut Corton-Bressandes 1997, which smells earthy and spicy, cloves and horehound over light cherried hints. Light and somewhat dilute, turning towards bitterness on the finish.

A Château du Mansenoble Corbières 1995 is distinguished by its weighty, California-style bottle. Silky-smooth and ripe, plum-berry and smoky hints on the nose, plum-berry and smoky hints on the tongue. Nice enough, but rather generic.

Callahan is showing signs of either post-traumatic stress syndrome or advanced drunkenness or perhaps both, banging on the table and chanting "I want my dessert! I want my dessert!" in a childish singsong. Lisa does the only thing possible, which is pour hot coffee on his head and shoulders. It does the trick; he shuts up.

I spy a bottle of Ravenswood Zinfandel Teldeschi 1997 and make a halfhearted move towards it, but someone yells "This tastes like snake saliva!" and I can't bring myself to investigate further. Frankly I'm exhausted. The festivities may have reached a slightly manic level.

I take a moment to breathe, and open the bottle of dessert wine that made the trek across oceans and continents, a gift from friends across the world. The Klein Constantia Vin de Constance 1996 is brightly acidic, it's tangy, almost puckery-tart, with baked apple flavors and spicy cinnamon notes. Quite sweet, it approaches the viscous but is reined in by the strong acidic spine. Nice. Glasses are raised to our South African friends.

I've had better bottles of Lustau Pedro Ximenez Solera San Emilio; this one smells and tastes like slightly stale box of raisins.

Winegeeks have a fixation with celebrating birthdays and anniversaries with appropriately-dated bottles (witness Dressner's numerous 1941s), so here's another wine that came to New York through many friendly hands, a Romariz Colheita Port 1963.

Tawny and rich, vibrantly walnutty and butterscotchy aromatics. Quite sweet and intensely nuttily flavorful, not terribly layered or complex but a nice dense mouthful of tawny port.

Dressner, brooking no argument, picks up the tab for the evening and mutters that we might want to add the cost of dinner to any donations to the Red Cross or the Police and Firemen's Relief Fund.

Finally Lisa offers up a toast: "To the future of the City of New York, the greatest city on earth" and we drink, knowing well that the spirit of the city is not broken, but carries on around us even now in our absurd little rituals.

Drinking and Driving with François Pinon

So here I am, rolling around half drunk in the backseat of a classic Citroen roadster which is zipping along the course of the muddy Loire, while Lisa sits in front desperately trying to make sense of the French term for 'front-wheel drive' and our host keeps chirping the English words 'built to last' ("Bee-hlt tou lahst... beehlt tou lahsst...").

How did I get here?

Must think...

back...

to the...

beginning...

[CROSSFADE: A Street in Tours]

So we're doing the usual tourist thing in Tours, pillaging the local wineshops of their old bottles of Huet and spending long afternoons eating very large lunches, when we remember that the magnanimous impresario Joe Dressner has set us up with a mid-morning meeting with François Pinon in Vouvray. Having no car and no real inclination to drive one, we pile into a cab and say "Take us to Pinon, my good man!" and off we go, careening along the two-lane highway beside the lazy Loire towards the Hamlet (yes, officially certified Hamlet) of Vernou-Sûr-Brenne.

Naturally, we hit the wrong Pinon. Wouldn't you know it, there are two vigneronns named Pinon in the immediate vicinity,

and we've ended up at Michel's place, not François's. A few U-turns and some begging of directions from pedestrians later, we pull up a stony street to what looks like a ranch-style house atop a low rocky hill. Fortunately we've built some being-lost time into our schedule, and we're only five minutes or so past our appointed hour of ten-thirty. Mme. Pinon emerges warily to greet us, relaxes somewhat when we can at least make ourselves understood in our rudimentary French. We introduce ourselves as "Les amis de Joe Dressner," crossing our fingers that the response to that declaration won't be slammed doors, brandished shotguns and/or outraged villagers with torches. With Dressner you never know.

But no, everyone is perfectly happy to see us. M. Pinon sees the taxi and insists we send it away—he can give us a ride back, as he has appointments in town this afternoon. We gratefully accept.

Pinon has the air of the professional about him—he's friendly and laughs often but there is a precision and a reserve to his mien that, combined with a general tweedyness, suggests a scientist or professor of literature. He launches energetically into a fast-paced striding tour of the grounds, starting with the press and the two 5,000-liter tanks in the floor for catching the juice and letting it settle and clarify (I'm sure these have a name, but my French is limited and I don't catch it). Then the two 5,000 and one 10,000-liter fermentation tanks. From there it's a quick detour over to the field to hash out some issues with the guy riding the tractor. We meander around while this discussion goes on, gaping awestruck at the coop full of turkey-sized pigeons, wondering if their punier scabrous New York cousins would make gods of such colossi or just gang up on them and devour them for lunch.

After whatever tractor-related crisis that had arisen has been resolved, we bustle back to the dark cool caves and tasting room carved out of the chalky hills—he points out the parts that date back to the 1700s and the expansions he dug himself. A brief moment to savor the easygoing troglodytic lifestyle, then we sit down to talk and taste.

We start with the fizzies, the first off being the Pinon Vouvray Petillant NV (non-vintage, as in not all from one specific year). The wine smells of fresh-cut apples with a trace of breadiness, bright and pippin-crisp, a friendly easygoing glass of fizz, straightforward and lightly bubbly, turning lemony on the finish. Decent, fruity,

quite gulpable.

Next is the vintage stuff, this one being a Pinon Vouvray Petillant 1996. Deeper and richer than the non-vintage bubbly, less apple fresh-fruity, toastier and more complex. There's zippy acidity here, but it's clothed in velvety baked-bread-accented pear/apple fruit. Lightly frothy, quite complex and very nice indeed. He mentions that up to 70% of his production in any year can go into the sparklers, which aren't exported very much. I tell him I've never seen one in the States. He is not shocked to hear this.

As we taste the bubbles I broach the subject of biodynamic, the quasi-mystical system of organic farming that has achieved a sort of cult status among many dedicated small-production vigneron. No, he says, he's fully organic but not biodynamic yet, although every year he moves a little more in that direction. I say that to me, an average ignoramus, it seems like there's an odd streak of mysticism involved, what with the whole burying-the-horn-at-midnight and related rituals. He nods, then thinks about it a little more and shakes his head: no, the element of mysticism is only there on paper; in the fields it is all good practical work. "You think it sounds a little crazy, but then you taste the wines. I don't know why it works," he says, "But it works. It works." He's becoming enthused by the subject; he goes out and returns with what must be the official biodynamic calendar (it seems to be panagricultural, not just about grapes), shows us the periods (marked in white) where you're not allowed to touch the soil. "Every year a little more of this..." he says thoughtfully, "Perhaps someday, the whole thing."

Next up are the two cuvées of the demisec Cuvée Tradition, one with a little new oak for the domestic market, one without for export. First is the Pinon Vouvray Cuvée Tradition 2000 (Domestic): There is a light charcoal-smokiness to the usual minerality underlying the white and yellow fruit. It's interesting, but it takes some of the youthful flash out of the wine, the fruit has a muted quality that gives it more fullness and dignity than its unoaked sibling. It's quite tasty, but I do prefer the Pinon Vouvray Cuvée Tradition (Demisec) 2000 (Export). More freshness here, the fruit hasn't been subdued, apples and pear and white honey drizzled over rocks. Light touch of sweetness, the usual balance and harmony that carries through from the initial surge of friendly young fruit right up to the chalky accents on the finish. Very nice, I like this more than I've liked any

Tradition since the wonderful 1997.

Pinon says he too likes the export cuvée better. I ask how 2000 was in general and he says it was a fine year. 1999 and 2001, more difficult. I ask if generally the French prefer a little more wood in their chenin than foreign devils do; he considers for a moment, then says no, not really.

He pours us last year's Cuvée Tradition, the '99. This one isn't as lively as either of the first two, a little flatter and more diffuse, seems older than it ought, the quartziness muted, the lemon-apple fruit quiet and seemingly a touch oxidized. I mention that and he nods, says "You're tasting the year," as in a difficult one. Even in an off year the wine has the usual fine balance and the sense of completeness that I find in all these wines; it's just that there isn't as much substance.

Lisa has been fretting since we first arrived here about encountering her nemesis, a TCA-tainted bottle. She asks Pinon how to say 'corked' in French, which turns out to be pretty much the way you'd think. (On a side note, we didn't have one single corked bottle during our eight days in France, a small miracle for which we're very thankful).

Pinon Vouvray 1er Trie 1996: I love the bright stony nose on this wine—chalk and lemon and white peach, a trace of honey-suckle, vivid and shiny-smelling. More intensity in the piehole, razor's-edge balance, light to medium sweetness backed by happy acidity and a tight swirl of crystalline flavors that rush right up at you and don't fade an iota through the tangy rainwatery finish. Oh so tasty. A couple of years ago we turned a nongeek into a protogeek with this wine, and it's in fine form today. I ask him if it's a moëlleux wine, "marrowy" medium-sweet Vouvray. He nods, says "Yes, traditional moëlleux, medium-sweet, not so much sugar as you see people make these days. More sugar, more money." He chuckles at this last observation.

I'm desperately searching for something trenchant to say; all I can come up with is that this wine isn't very botrytised (had its flavors influenced by the desirable 'noble rot'). Yes, you need more sun for botrytis than you got in '96, he says. Then he jumps up and strides off, returning with a 500-ml bottle and plunking it down mid-table. "There's the botrytis from that year," he says with a flourish. "Very small production, less than 1% of the total."

So this is the Cuvée Botrytisée 1996. Wow. Takes the intensity up a notch. This is wild stuff, startlingly concentrated and coiled. In the same mold as the 1er Trie, but larger and dusted throughout with spicy-hay botrytical notes. A sip, and the flavors are nervy, tense and stony, white peach and rock dust, all hung on a spring-steel spine. Quite sweet and yes, there is botrytis here—not the overflow of the stuff that’s evident in the 1997 Botrytisée, just enough to add seasoning to an already complex and balanced wine. Truly breathtaking young Vouvray that will outlive everyone reading this. “Almost no sulphur,” he adds as an afterthought, “Just a tiny, tiny bit. You have a winery in California whose bottles say ‘minimal process,’ that is what I try to do as well.”

I mention how I thought the 1997 moëlleux was one of the all-time great bargain buys and he gets misty about that vintage. “Incredible! One solid month of sunshine! Perhaps that’s normal in California, but not here... the greatest year any of us had seen... more sugar, more acidity, more botrytis, more everything, more more more,” he smiles a little sheepishly. “We thought it was always going to be like that, but since then...” he shrugs again.

He leaves again while we enjoy the Botrytisée and is gone for an especially long time, finally returning with a dusty bottle with a chalk question mark drawn on it. He pulls the cork and pours out a gold-amber wine, gives it a sniff, then pours us each a glassful and toasts “To the rest of your trip in France.”

We all sit smelling the wine for awhile, taking in the heart-breakingly complex aromas of mature Vouvray—leather and honey and apricots, truffles and tea. Beautiful. Smiles start breaking out, small chuckles. We catch each others’ eyes and smile and shake our heads in wondrous appreciation. “What do you think of it?” he asks. “Pas mal,” I say. This amuses him, which is good. I sip at it; there’s a leathery-honeyed taste up front, along with light sweetness, then the midpalate turns towards a duet of truffles underneath, dried apricots, quince and lemon tea above. Truly striking mature chenin. I ask if it’s moëlleux or a demisec, as tastewise it seems to fall somewhere in between. “It’s Vouvray” is the answer. “On paper it’s moëlleux, but they tended to just throw it all together back then.”

He doesn’t ask, but I’m ready to guess it’s the ‘49. Turns out to be the Domaine des Douveliers (Claude Pinon) Vouvray Moëlleux 1953. The wine is wearing its age very well but it hasn’t the uncanny

freshness that the '59 had a few months ago. I ask him about the name 'Domaine des Douveliers,' and he shrugs "My father. I don't use it."

He swirls the '53 around his mouth, considers it thoughtfully and mutters "Superbe" under his breath. I agree with this appraisal. So does Lisa. Nobody spits.

We've been chatting awhile now and he has appointments to keep, so he packs us off with a bottle of the '96 sparkler and the '96 Botrytisée, cheerily waves off our attempt at payment ("Sorry, cash register's broken..."), and asks that we be careful with the '96 sweetie. "Remember, only a tiny bit of sulfur, only a tiny bit..." Lisa, whose French is better than mine, is perplexed by this, unsure of what he's getting at. "Refermenting?" I ask. Perhaps he's worried that the bottle will burst on the plane or if we store it somewhere warm. "Yes, re-fermenting," he says, relieved, "It's fragile."

We follow him out to his car like baby ducks, but as he's putting the key in the door he stops and thinks a minute. "Shall we take this... or the other?"

"The other? You mean the tractor?" Lisa asks, only half joking.

"Not the tractor, the Track-sseeee-yawwhhn!" he says, eyes lighting up.

I have no clue what this means, thinking perhaps he's correcting Lisa's French, and I have a vision of us rumbling into town perched precariously on the top of his tractor, but he walks us around the corner and towards a beautiful old roadster tucked away next to a wall. Voilà Le Traction! We pile in, her in the front me in the back, he starts up the engine with a throaty purr and we're off, me rolling around the backseat on every curve.

From here the tale of the Traction Avant begins: the first front-wheel drive car (at least the first one in France), this one is a 1950, just a few years older than the wine we lingered over. "And it's holding up just as well!" says Lisa. "Built to last," I say in English because I can't think how to say that in French, and he is puzzled until Lisa comes up with a French approximation. He seems to enjoy the sound of the English phrase and rolls it around his mouth a few times: "Oui, bee-hlt tou lahst, beehlt tou lahhhst..." and I wonder if we've got a new slogan here.

After a leisurely, dreamlike drive along the Loire from Brenne to Vouvray he drops us off, gives a last wave and disappears in a

cloud of dust, leaving two grateful and slightly tipsy tourists unable to stop grinning foolishly for the rest of the day.

The Geek Curve

There is a certain progression in the career of a Winegeek that is known in geek circles as the ‘Geek Curve’ or ‘Geek Development Curve,’ (GDC) not by any means universally applicable, but common enough to be a well-noted and described phenomenon.

Basically, it runs something like this: new geeks are usually suckers for big, heavily oaked, upfront-fruity New World wines that really go *BLAMMO* on the palate—monster Aussie shirazes, great dense zins, colossal cabernets, butterbomb chardonnays and so on. Gradually, after the early-stage geek has had a good number of these kinds of wines, she realizes that the flavors that oak imparts aren’t as varied or interesting as the flavors from the grapes themselves, and that there’s something a little bit tiring about having your palate consistently bludgeoned night after night. Generally, as someone makes the transition from a once-a-month winedrinker to someone who has wine with most meals, it becomes clear that huge cocktail party dense apertif-style wines don’t so much marry well with foods as overwhelm them and beat them into submission, so the transitional geek starts craving a bit more finesse and balance and you start hearing words like ‘overoaked’ and ‘wine candy’ coming from their geeky mouths.

Now, there are many points along this curve to stop or pause for awhile. Geeks who follow it onwards to its relentless logical conclusion become what we call ‘leaf chewers’ or ‘cud winos,’ who enjoy only wines that smack of earthiness and twigs and leaves and

mud and such and have little or no overt fruitiness. Some people find perfect happiness forever in the *blammo* phase, and I cast no aspersions on them. When I was a wee proto-geek I was sure that huge oaky beasts were the wine gods' gift to us all, and was amazed and incredulous when geeks on different places along the GDC hinted that I might not always feel this way. Rubbish, I thought, I just have different tastes than these people, and I proceeded to fill my cellar with all kinds of huge blowy wines. Unfortunately, in my case those smug little know-it-alls were right, and I eventually began to look a bit ruefully at the wines that I had been enamored of only a short time ago that now mostly inspired thoughts of 'yow, what was I thinking?' I still love a monster zin, though, so I must keep my proletarian status a little longer and not yet ready myself to ascend to vinous nirvana.

The issue of blind tastings, or tastings in general, is one that comes up often in this 'size vs. balance' debate. Tastings in general, where you receive a small pour of each wine, favor the wine that can make the biggest impression right away, the 'blow-you-away' style of big oak and big extraction, thus often in tastings the most colossal wine 'wins' and gets the lion's share of attention, especially with geeks who are on the front end of the GDC (not that there's anything wrong with that). But the bottle that made such an impression when you had an ounce-and-a-half of it after twelve other wines may seem like a face-eating freakazoid when you get it home and try to drink a couple glasses' worth with a plate of spaghetti.

I'm just sayin'!

SFJoe II

“I don’t like sweet wines.”

It seems that if the average American (that mythical beast) knows ONE thing about wine, then that is the one thing they know: the notion of sweet wines seems to conjure up creepy visions of Boone’s Farm or Annie Greensprings; cloying, cheap, icky stuff best left to other people’s kids to drink out of jugs at picnics when they can’t come up with the scratch for a six of Pabst Blue Ribbon, while wearing tattered fringe vests. Or something like that.

Ask a wine geek, however, and you’ll get a different story. In fact, when Wine Spectator Magazine recently chose ten ‘Wines of the Century’ only one of them was a white wine, and it was, you guessed it, a sweetie, the 1921 Château D’Yquem, one of the finest and priciest examples of French Sauternes dessert wine. Down through the years Château D’Yquem has become known as the preferred sweet wine of millionaires, a nickname that is well earned. Each vintage depends on the vagaries of a friendly little fungus called Botrytis Cinerea (otherwise known as ‘noble rot’) shriveling up the grapes, concentrating the sugars by removing the moisture and interacting chemically with the fruit in beguiling ways. Each botrytis-affected grape is then painstakingly picked by hand and the resulting golden-amber liquid sells for hundreds of dollars a bottle new, thousands or even tens of thousands if you go back far enough, for this wine is as close to immortal as a wine can get, having been known to last up to two hundred years if stored properly.

Of course, between Boone’s Farm on the one end and Château

D'Yquem on the other there is a vast range of choices, from the eiswein of Germany to the sweet pink muscat of the Tsars, the 'stickies' of Australia and the Tokay of Hungary. What you probably won't want to do is try and drink one of these wines as if it were a dry table wine. The French love to sip their Sauternes as an aperitif, especially with foie gras, but here in the states sweeties are usually served after the meal, either with dessert or AS dessert.

I still vividly remember the first time I tasted a great dessert wine. My wife and I had gone to our favorite special-occasion restaurant, Café des Artistes in Manhattan, and I had unwisely (but in the spirit of adventure) chosen the quail, which was a little gamy for my taste. What unexpectedly saved the meal for me was the dessert: a fruit tart served with a small, potent glass of golden liquid, sweet but vibrantly crisp and smooth at the same time, delightfully complementing and amplifying the flavors of the berries while at the same time cutting through the fat of the custard like a knife, cleansing my palate and leaving it wanting more. She and I passed it slowly back and forth, slowly savoring the complexity, the very pleasing, somewhat paradoxical integration of tropical sweetness and zingy acidity. Another Oenopiphany.

Since then I have opened my door to sweeties from all around the world, some that are thrilling, some that are as goeey and simple as a glass of maple syrup; fortunately more of the former than the latter.

Why Won't They Leave Me Alone? or, Let Sleeping Cats Lie

[Author's Note: Normally at winegeek events I do my best to ignore any people near at hand, as they tend to distract me from my already glacially slow notetaking processes, but at this event they seemed to want to talk to me more than usual and the issue became a little more problematic. Due to this enforced social interaction the notes are shorter and sketchier, names and dates are incorrect or missing, Jay Miller is consistently referred to as "Brian," and the tilde is sometimes misplaced or entirely left off João Roseira's name.]

Birthdays hold a special place in the winegeek celebratory pantheon: apart from the usual practice of geeks taking the opportunity to open up the good stuff, there is also a custom of opening up wines from your birthyear, something that gets trickier as you get older, and often just depends on a roll of the dice. For instance, I was born in 1963, which was generally a pretty lousy vintage in most parts of the world--the red Bordeaux and Burgundy that are the usual wines to age for that long have all been long since drunk up or poured out or died in the bottle. However, 1963 was a renowned year in Portugal, and since Port is one of the longest-lived wines I'm pretty much assured a chance at grabbing a birthyear wine as long as I'm here (they'll outlive me).

This game of vintage roulette tends to favor some winegeeks over others: I'm one of the fairly lucky ones, as is any geek born in 1959 or 1961 (legendary Bordeaux vintages), ___ or ___

(Burgundy) or 1990 (pretty much everywhere). Poor Camblor, born in 1968, is not so lucky--that year was pretty much a disaster everywhere except for parts of Spain, so a few Riojas are all he'll be able to scare up.

So here I am in the back garden of Sweet Melissa's Patisserie in the scenic Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn. I'm not sure why I'm here, but Lisa has lured me with promises of free wine and bottomless crullers. Sweet Melissa, our hostess, is an old war buddy of Lisa's from their model/waitress days--now she and her husband Angry Wade own a respectively eponymous patisserie (hers) and bar (his) here in the newly trendy neighborhood of Cobble Hill. Why Wade would be angry when he's married to Sweet Melissa I have no clue--Melissa is in fact pretty damn sweet--but there you are.

At any rate, I soon suspect that there's going to be either a jeebus or a party of some kind happening soon. It's a strikingly beautiful early fall day, and as the sun goes down the mosquitoes sharpen their knives and descend, but as it gets dark they go elsewhere, perhaps to eat the unworthy.

It's my birthday and, as usual, I'm unsettled and antsy. As I sit and ponder what fate awaits me, I suck idly on a glass of Francois Pinon Vouvray Tradition (Demisec) 2000. An old security blanket, this bottle isn't terribly different than the last ten, perhaps a trace more honeyed. It's still unassumingly fresh and bright-tasting, supple chalky yellow-apple fruit edged with a soupçon of sweetness. As usual, harmony and balance are the salient features. Reassuring, festive and smile-inducing. Four and a half gingham Prongs with tinsel wrapped around their bases and lit sparklers affixed to their tips with twist-ties.

Suddenly here's Robert 'Lord of the Dance' Callahan coming down the walkway, dressed in a smashingly vibrant aloha shirt, shorts and hiking boots, along with a fetchingly shaggy new hairdo. "Today I went to a tasting at Le Cirque dressed like this" he announces proudly. "They gave me some funny looks!" Actually, he looks like he could be related to me, perhaps an eccentric cousin.

More people follow, swatting at the little bloodsuckers as they come. Here's the reclusive Andrew Munro Scott and his equally reclusive main squeeze Jennifer Munro Munro, neither of whom has a new hairdo. Lou Dressner and his wife Louise Denyse follow,

both looking like they're letting theirs grow out a little. João Roseira of Quinta do Infantado has a new and very flattering close-cropped look, but I've never met Fredrik Filliatreau of Domaine Filliatreau before, so I can't tell if his crewcut is an old reliable or a new experiment. Either way though, it's simply faboo.

I spot a big bottle and grab it, but people keep coming up to me and chatting, handing me things, chatting some more. Why won't they leave me alone with my big bottle? I retreat to the far corner and open it. I'm always tetchy about uncorking magna, even more so about larger bottles. I still remember the sick feeling in my stomach when I realized that the Salmachadnezarboam of fizz that some friends were pouring at their wedding was horribly tainted, all twenty gallons of it ruined by one extremely large but rotten cork. (Happily, there were no other geeks present, so Lisa and I just kept our traps shut and no one was the wiser.) So I cross my fingers and mutter pleasedontbecorkedpleasedontbecorkedplease-dontbecorked...

Phew. Trimbach Riesling Alsace Cuvée Frederic Emile 1993 (Magnum): Light kerosene notes, lemon-ginger and hay and yellow flowers in my nose. Tastes tight but fairly weighty; there's heft here, but the wine comes across as rather stark. Big and stark. Give it time.

More and more people keep arriving, Jayson and Laura Cohen, Laura sporting something like a wedge, Manuel and Josie--he short and neat, she saucy and composed--Kay Bixler sporting a sort of nouveau shag look, Tony, Posie and Campbell Fletcher, there are too many hairstyles to keep track of! For the love of god, can somebody slow down the flow of heads?!

And what's worse, everyone seems to want to try and distract me from my notetaking duty. No, wait... not duty, what's the word I mean? Ah yes, compulsion. My notetaking compulsion. That's what I meant to say.

I tease Brian Miller for being even minutes late, his reputation for punctuality previously untarnished. He grimaces. "That's what I get for working in Jersey City." Too true, Bri, too true.

Here's Sweet Melissa's own SFJoe, also cheerily dressed in alo-hawear and with a saucy flipped back Clark Kent-nouveau kind of look, classic but sassy. I'm enjoying the trend towards island garb--let's open some bubbly and festivate!

First to fizz is a Laurent-Perrier Champagne Grand Siecle 'La Cuvée' Brut NV. Smells lightly flinty-toasty, with lemon and tart green apple hints, traces of coral chips in the mix as well. A sip, and it's a light, lean style of Champagne that flashes lemony-tart at first, then eases off and turns towards minerality. A pretty little gamine of a bubbly, flirty and cheerful.

The champendulum swings to the other extreme with a Jacques Selosse Champagne Blanc de Blancs 'Substance' NV. Boisterously ripe chardonnay smellies here, pear-apple fruit laced with toast and bakery aromas, roast cashews and vanilla. Big and weighty in the piehole, almost like a sparkling California chardonnay. Lustily fizzy, solid chewy-creamy yellow middle and long toasty finish. A husky, overpoweringly flavorful mouthful of bubbly that nevertheless somehow manages to seem balanced. Substantial indeed, an almost tiringly impressive wine that comes at you on its own terms and wins you over to its worldview by sheer force.

Last to sparkle is a Foreau/Clos Naudin Vouvray Petillant Brut Reserve 1995. After the elegant Laurent-Perrier and the brawny Selosse this is yet another variation on a theme--nervy, taut and whiplike bubbly. There's the requisite chalk and rocks, light flecks of lemon zest, hint of frothy yeastiness. Lots of depth, but it's very tight, rather hard, needs a lot of time.

Normally I'm not a big bubblehead, but these are three impressive wines. Someone (is it Tony Fletcher?) is trying to talk to me about them, but I disable him with a quick Glaswegian Kiss. No time to chat--must move on to whites before the inevitable tsunami of reds begins.

Here's something that's sort of white, a Tedeschi Vineyards Maui Blanc Pineapple Wine NV. Smells like pineapple in a marble cup. Tastes like pineapple, although in a pleasantly restrained fashion, not like fresh juice. Medium-light mouthfeel with easygoing acidity, silkily quiet and surprisingly dignified. Oddly, this has benefited from a couple of years in bottle and really isn't bad. Brought as a whimsical nod to my origins, it acquits itself better than expected, and the bottle empties quickly.

I hear a commotion at the other end of the garden and, upon investigation, find SFJoe waving a bottle in the air like a carnival barker, promising to show one show all a wine that will horrify universally. The visiting winemakers gather around wide-eyed, and

he pours from a bottle of Flowers Chardonnay Sonoma County Porter Bass Vineyard 1998. We all take a good sniff. Then another. Unfortunately for SFJoe, it's not too bad. There's oak, yes, but it's rather restrained, a warm glow of charred vanilla suffusing the subtly tropical yellow fruit beneath an unusual light mintiness, a high-toned green streak. It does taste substantially woodier than it smells, with strong butterscotch flavors warring with what seems like some pleasingly ponderous yellow pineapple-pear fruit.

There are sufficient cries of "GAAACK" and "WHAAOOGGH" to keep SFJoe from feeling foolish, but I can see he's not pleased with the rather mundane level of unpleasantness here. After all, the 1997 version of this wine swept the 'Ghastly New World Wine' categories at the Loirenatics tasting two years ago, so there's a clear track record of beastliness. Still, this bottle is merely generic fat and woody California chardonnay, nothing stomach-turning. Wine will surprise us, won't it?

I turn away from the Flowers to find Manuel standing over a bottle of La Chablisienne Chablis Blanchots 1997 with a pained expression, asking himself "Where did I get this? Where did it come from? Why god, WHY?" I can't offer an answer, but here is certainly proof that the French can make an ugly overoaked mess out of chardonnay just as handily as Americans can. Rather fat for a Chablis, there seems to be some decent minerally fruit buried somewhere under the carpentry. Sawdust, vanilla and toast, that's all she wrote. Chablis that thinks it's Napa chardonnay?

The antidote comes along quickly, in the form of a Boyer-Martenot Meursault Les Tillets 2000. Crisp, stony nose, rocks and more rocks with traces of lemon and green apple. Tastes like it smells, tart, crisp and minerally, a bright, lean wine that finishes with a touch of lime amidst a flurry of chalk. Quite bracing, I like it very much. Meursault that thinks it's Chablis?

Callahan has for some reason either been appointed or taken upon himself the role of roving photographer. He is wrestling with a disposable camera, clicking away in the dark with no flash going off. Lisa is trying to show him the proper dial when I posit that "The spirit is willing, but the flash is weak." She looks at me, shocked horrified appalled pained. "I can't believe that you said that" she snaps accusingly. I apologize profusely, promise it won't happen again.

Momentarily cowed, I sneak a pour off a magnum of Jean-Maurice Raffault Chinon Les Picasses 1997. A warm and smoothly red wine without a great deal of character. Ripe, lightly tobacco-earthly and on the rounded side, the focus that marks Olga's wines isn't here but the looseness isn't offputting, just not compelling in any way. A good café quaffer. Four puffy-soft Prongs set on bases fashioned from colored glass ashtrays won at a carnival arcade, then sprayed down with an inexpensive men's cologne and left overnight under a heat lamp that hasn't heated up worth a damn since the summer before last.

Elaine Brier, the Queen of Cabaret, arrives unexpectedly. Turns out she had misread 'cabernet' as 'cabaret' on the invitation, but it's a happy mischance and she is relieved she won't be called upon to perform. Her 'do is covered by one of her trademark hats, so I can't comment at this time.

Against all odds, here's a Loire red that Callahan claims never to have tasted, a Domaine des Chesnaies Bourgueil Cuvée Prestige 1969. Medium ruby color, only browning slightly at the rim. Smells delightfully layered and complex, hints of mushroom and forest floor, bits of tree bark and gravel, all in a cherried brick-dust base of muted but vibrant red fruit. A sip, and it's medium-light-bodied, lean and racy but not faded. The subtle red-earthly fruit comes at you quietly, slowly spreads and feathers out in the middle, then refocuses as it heads into a sinuous finish with just a hint of light glassy tannins. Quite languid, one of the slowest wines I can remember tasting. Kay Bixler coos "It's totally alive, dude!" and pronounces it "a wine frozen in time." From another direction Jayson Cohen sidles up to me, a puzzled expression on his face, and says "It's neither old nor young... neither advancing nor declining." I mention Kay's diagnosis and he looks relieved. Brian says it's the first wine that he's tasted and simply smiled and smiled at.

Here's a younger sibling, a Domaine des Chesnaies Bourgueil Cuvée Prestige 1976. The ripeness of the vintage shows in this, which is more robust than the '69. The nose is richer but simpler, the combination of more dominant redfruit smells underlied by a dark streak of crushed lava (rough a'a rather than smooth pahoe-hoe) gives you almost purple-toned aromatics. Smells more sweetly fruited, less tree-barky and foresty. Tastes smooth and ripe and balanced, a wine with a nimble core of dark fruit in a mediumweight

frame. Supple, young and strong: give it another ten years. No, really. Two and a half dark ebony Prongs without adornment except for small and intricate Celtic patterns carved around their tips.

A murmur passes through the crowd: Rudy Giuliani has finally abandoned his comb-over, and there is much rejoicing.

There's a discussion of terroir going on with Fredrick Filliatreau of Domaine Filliatreau in Saumur-Champigny, and a bottle of Pontchartrain Vineyards Norton/Cynthiana 'Rouge Militaire' Louisiana 2000 is brought out as an example of a uniquely American wine. It's a medium-dark garnet color and smells somewhat tutti-fruttied with a cinnamon-pepper streak, Juicy Fruit and Big Red chewing gums mixed with dark one-note red fruit and laced with a dark licorice streak. Tastes candied and simple but pleasantly peppery and decent enough if your tastes run towards candied and simple wine with a splash of cinnamon. Frederick seems impressed. "Thees terroir.." he asks, "Ees it perhaps... a... swamp?" Six Prongs carved from the compressed matter formed from putting three tons of unsold cotton candy into a garbage compactor, then rolled in breadcrumbs and microwaved on 'High' for forty seconds apiece.

Only Kane likes it.

Dressner posits that petting dogs is therapeutic. If he's trying to start a fight it doesn't work, nobody argues the point. He seems unsettled, pacing and twitching. Turns out that Joe has brought along a sample from his continuing project to drink a bottle of the same wine every day for sixty days, a Marquis Philips Shiraz South Eastern Australia 2002. Dark purple-black color. Hmmm... lots of unusual "fruit," the kind of "fruit" that takes the pitifully drab fruit found in nature and ratchets it up a few notches. Rich aromatics of pnooquat jam, flumskin reduction sauce and treathery-smooth jadmaniper berry, all swirled up in a snocko-spicy package: a wine that might have been concocted by Dr. Seuss's evil twin. In the piehole it's dense, creamy and limpid, resembling nothing so much as cough syrup infused with beef broth and soy sauce, turning towards an aquarium-charcoal note on the finish.

Quite unpleasant to drink, but... somehow... compelling, in a traffic-accident kind of way. I can't stop nosing at it incredulously. Mesmerizingly overtasty stuff, although (mandatory disclaimer) doubtless delicious if you're partial to the particular "fruity" style involved. "Two hundred and forty-three points!" shrieks someone

from out of the darkness, who then cackles hysterically until a coughing fit sets in. We pass a glass of water into the shadows, muffled thanks drift back.

Who is this mysterious Marquis? I had no idea there were Marquises in Australia these days. I tell you though, if Dressner is drinking a bottle of this every day for sixty days, he deserves the Presidential Medal of Freedom Fries. The semirhetorical question is asked: "Does this bear any resemblance to something that grew on a vine?" No one even bothers to answer. Jay Miller turns pale and collapses into a chair, murmuring vague obscenities. Actually, this wine does resemble the ugly bottle of '95 Armagh that I frightened the foodies with a while back, so it would certainly represent a big cash savings if that's the kind of thing you like to inflict on your friends/enemies.

The flood of wine keeps coming. Here's a Carruades de Château Lafite Pauillac 1999. Smells like Bordeaux. Tastes like Bordeaux. Easygoing, flavorful, surprisingly accessible, undistinguished, seems ready to go. Callahan calls it "industrial Bordeaux," Jayson responds "Yeah, but industrial Bordeaux that'll last and get better for twenty years." Three and a half small brown Prongs. (Pronged twice, with consistent Prongs.)

My own sister and her husband, who have never met geeks in the wild, seem amiably puzzled at the goings-on around them. They smile, nod and smile some more. What do you say to winegeeks, anyway? All they want to talk about is black cherry fruit and how everything is overoaked. What kind of an opinion can a normal person with normal priorities hope to have about that? Our friend Stu the NongEEK lights up a fat stogie. This doesn't go over well with the geeks. A few try the glare-mutter method of discouragement, but it falls on deaf eyes. Oh man. Maybe we should've had separate-but-equal parties? No, no, just keep drinking.

Château Cayrou Cahors 1988: Powdery blackberry and shoyu hints on the nose, smells light and quiet. A sip, and there's smooth dark fruit with that dark shoyu streak that turns towards licorice on the finish. Middleweight and focused, lean, balanced and decent. An unassuming wine that does its job without fanfare. Two sturdy fired red-clay Prongs that, if inverted, can be used as planters.

Château Haut-Serre Cahors 1997: Corked, begorrah. There had to be one, I suppose, and there could be a worse choice than

this. I am elected to break the news to poor Cheryl, our nongeek singer friend who brought it. She looks like she's going to cry, but takes the news bravely.

Lou Dressner approaches me. "Who are the geeks?" he asks. "I thought I knew who was and wasn't a geek, then I saw someone who I thought wasn't a geek (was it Tony Fletcher?) taking notes! It's all very disorienting. Can you tell me who is who?" I do my best to point out the geeks and the nongeeks and the one lone semigeek. I then point out the wine professionals, most of whom he's never met, and Robert Callahan, who has has met but apparently forgotten because he says "Jeez, I always thought he was older!" Maybe it's the new hairdo.

Gouvyas Douro Bago de Touriga 1999. This is one of João's wines, and I get the last pour. Something is a little funky. I run it by Lisa for the TCA test and it passes with flying colors, but there's still something odd. "It's not clean" says Callahan. "Not clean" says Dressner. "Unclean" says Sweet Melissa. Strange. Not Pronged at this time.

Brian, who has brought a Williams-Selyem Pinot Noir Russian River Valley Allen Vineyard 1997, is making squinchy faces and saying it has fallen apart. Let's see... smells spicy, plum, pepper and toasty-dark wood. Frankly, it smells like shiraz. A sip, and it's got a nice rush of sweet matte purple fruit that blooms quickly and fades quickly, turning a little jarringly towards toasty spiced wood flavors on the finish. The fruit has a reduced quality but isn't terribly twisted out of shape, and I can enjoy this in a rough-hewn kind of way for at least two-thirds of the way through. Not as bad as the conventional wisdom would have it, if you don't mind a shirazzy style of pinot. Seven and a half small spicecake Prongs, dabbed lightly with an unspecified industrial solvent then placed on bases carved from monkeypod wood and thrown into the muddy water off the Tallahatchee bridge.

Out of the blue, Dressner asks me if I've ever sued anybody. "No," I admit, "Never been sued either; I suppose in that sense I'm not a representative American." He's fussy tonight, grouching about the mosquitoes and the cigar smoke. I point out that cigar smoke is known to keep mosquitoes away, he doesn't seem placated. I guess all that weird wine he's been drinking in the name of science has put him out of sorts. Or maybe he's being sued, who knows.

The Latin Lepidopterist is pouring what he promises us will be a sexy wine, a Château L'Angelus St. Emilion 1990. Smells at first of tomato sauce and red currants; with air, cedar, tobacco and oregano hints emerge above, a pleasant graphite earthiness below. Lovely and complex nosality here, a pleasure to smell. I take a slug, and the first pieholic impression is warm red-earthly fruit with a dark espresso-licorice seam, tight and focused at the core, spreading out languidly at the edges. It's a big, rich wine, but it's light on its feet and comes across as confident and supple. As it heads into the finish there's a flash of slightly bitter coffee grounds, then some fine glassy tannins kick in. This wine has a chameleonic aspect, surprising me with different facets every time I come back to it, sometimes coming across as herbal, sometimes minerally-graphitey, sometimes meatily redfruity, a Lon Chaney wine.

There is a commotion across the garden, and SFJoe races up to me bearing the bottle of Flowers chardonnay. "Look," he bumbles, "it's fallen apart--try it now!" He's right, it has. The woodiness that was reticent on the nose has become dominant, the buttery-charred character has now beaten the tropical midpalate fruit into a misshapen lump, and a hot alcoholic burn that wasn't in evidence before has appeared on the scene. He waves the bottle-cadaver around gleefully, then spots Camblor across the way. "Ah, let me go prey on the guy with bad vision," he says, and races off to inflict the stuff on poor Manuel. I watch him go. "And we never even had time to thank him..." I mutter to myself.

Out of nowhere MartyL has arrived, bearing another sexy 1990, the Ridge Vineyards Monte Bello California 1990. This has neither the focus nor the fickleness of the Angelus, but it's just as satisfying in a more sedate, spread-out way. Smells dark and rich, hints of pencil shavings and dried herbs over plum-blackberry fruit, the red aromatics in retreat tonight. Tastes quite complete, medium-crisp, loosely knit after the more intense Angelus, but the lack of focus gives it a warmth and amiability that the kids go nuts over. A crowd pleaser.

Strangely, we drank this wine the last time I saw João. He looks nervous tonight, maybe he's not in top form. Maybe he's not fully at ease with the new haircut. Has everyone got a new haircut except me?

Marty explains that the reason he's just arriving is that he had

to work late in the legal trenches, prompting Callahan to ask what kind of law he worked in. "Mergers and acquisitions" is the reply. Robert turns to the assembled geeks: "Pray for his soul," he pleads. We do so.

There is a shriek of pain and horror from the far corner of the garden, and I know SFJoe has found Manuel.

I'm introduced to Lisa's friend Vanessa, who gives me a bottle of German fizz, and Connell's eyebrows perk up. "Where in the world did you get ahold of that...?" he asks, and goes on to chat about his experiences with other vintages. I make a mental note to self: Connell impressed, save wine for special occasion. Who is this girl who has impressed Mr. Connell? Turns out she's a sommelier herself, yes it's true, they let chicks be sommeliers these days! And not only that, she was just featured in the New York Times tasting panel when they were reviewing Loire chenin--she's not just a chick sommelier, she's a STAR chick sommelier!

Here's a good old sport, a Château Grand Puy Lacoste Pauillac 1964. The first pour off this bottle is discouraging, a good whiff of funk and a streak of madeira, but a later pour reveals the suspect to be that old nemesis neck funk. Damn that neck funk. Underneath it there's a quiet, fading wine, turning light amber-orange at the rim and smelling quietly of bricky red fruit laced with stewed tomato/baked beans with a dark shoyu note underneath and a figgy-datey brown streak in the midpalate that is the last thing that fades on the finish. A soft and quiet wine without any structure left to speak of, there are still some warm flavors that hum quietly in the piehole. Pretty nice, but utterly resolved and on the downslope.

People are being extremely noisy, bringing out some kind of a candle-decorated cake and singing in unison. I do my best to ignore them, as the bottles are dwindling and I'm way behind, but Lisa pokes me in the small of the back until I am defeated: forced to blow out candles, then serve Melissa's ferociously light lilikoi cake to all comers. In the meantime the bottles keep flowing, and I am near to throwing in the towel in my race to keep up.

Here's one of Fredrik's wines, a Domaine Filliatreau Saumur-Champigny La Grande Vignolle 2001, and there's not much left by the time it comes around to me. It's easygoing and smooth, lightly cherried at first, opening into darker black cherry-cranberry fruit and earth in the middle, lingeringly tobaccoish on the finish.

Undemanding and flavorful middleweight cab franc. He is waxing poetical about the beauty of the Loire, how it's the most beautiful place in the world. He's so convincing I don't even contradict him, even though he's wrong.

I race to catch the Breton Chinon Les Picasses 1999 before it goes by, but by the time I reach the bottle someone (is it Tony Fletcher?) is finishing off the last drop. This is the second time that this wine has eluded me at a jeebus, and I'm starting to think it's personal.

Descendientes de J. Palacios Bierzo 1999: Sweet-smelling dark purply-red fruit, smoky high-toast oak. Tastes fleshy and ripe, not bad but tiresomely generic. Four linoleum Prongs set on faux-brick bases and dipped in pasteurized processed cheese food product.

I am touched to open a package that had come in the mail yesterday to find a purple wine-dyed "Wine Tasting Triathlon" T-shirt sent as a birthday peace offering by Dean 'Loire Schnauzer' Delahanty. Schnauz, it's very much appreciated--let's never let Nicolas Joly come between us again. Robert 'Doghead' Callahan snaps a picture while I mull over a few possible canine nicknames that I could adopt, they being all the rage with the smart set these days. Chris 'Inane Quip Shar Pei' Coad perhaps, or Chris 'Tasting Note Bouvier des Flandres' Coad. I'll work on it and get back to you.

SFJoe rushes up to me with a bottle. "How do you pronounce this?" he asks, pointing to the producer's name. As I'm struggling to read Celler Vall Llach Embruix Priorat 1999 he yells "VAYyyy YYYAKCHHK!", which coming from him sounds much like a hairball-inspired noise my cat might make. The wine is dark garnet colored and smells a little wacky--plum-cocoa pudding, dark blackberry fruit and a good whiff of shoe polish volatility. The fruit is dense and dark, black and red fruit that isn't giving much in the piehole running alongside some firm but unconnected acidity. Weird and all over the place, this seems like a bit of a mess but it's an amiable mess along the lines of many of the recent so-called 'dumb American cuvées,' and me being a dumb American I don't hate it as much as others do.

To crown the festivities we have a cult Cal, a Scott-Clark Cellars Chenin Blanc California 'Acorn' 2001. Smells of sour green apple laced with white honey and lemon hints. A sip brings a hit of lean

yellow-citrus fruit, but then some startling puckery-tart acidity clamps down on my tongue. Lean and racy, but the feeling in the piehole is deceptively sturdy. A little weird. The winery newsletter claims that there's some residual sugar in this, but you'd never know from tasting it. Stern, hard chenin, unlike any I've tasted from California. There's a lean, dominatrix side that reminds me of the youthful shrillness of some of Robert Denis's Azay-Le-Rideaus. Like them, this needs time. High-acid fans like Callahan and The Wine Buyer call this the best chenin ever to come out of California, but the sense of having my cheeks pierced with the steel-spring acidity makes me reserve judgment. This is half of my two-bottle allocation; the other one will sleep for a long long time. One sharpened iron Prong, the handle wrapped with duct tape, stashed under the sink in the bathroom of an Italian restaurant.

João was pouring some of his port, but it's all gone now. Once again, I have snost and lost.

I am horrified to hear that the recent David Lillie/Howard Stern dustup has led to a run on sweet whites and thin, sour reds at wine shops throughout the tri-state area. Is nothing safe from the glaring media spotlight?

Joe passes by, sees me, yells "VAyyyy YYYAKCHHK!" I duck behind a garden gnome. Oh no wait, that's Campbell, Tony's kid.

I'm tired. I'm old now. SFJoe isn't here to keep the party rolling into the wee hours, and people are dispersing. This sucks. Where has my youth gone? Why did I fritter the best years of my life away with trivial tail-chasing? How can I have lived this long and accomplished nothing? Will I die alone and unloved, having been gradually stripped of all that I treasure, and never having been naked in a hot tub with Theresa Iverson?

Yow. Quickie midlife crisis. Shake it off, big guy, shake it off. Some days it doesn't pay to think too much, just keep the feet moving forward. Here's a Sandeman's Porto 1963: Light at the edges, fading into ethereality, but with a ruby core. Smells feathery and lightly spicy, old burnished stairway banister, cinnamon, earth and faded berry redness. A sip, and it's medium-sweet, brown-earthly flavors spread out from a muted berry/crushed brick core. Faded at the edges but still lively at the center, it's a smooth, layered wine with an air of slightly faded gentility. At forty years old, it's nearing the end of its journey, but there's still life and pleasure to

be had before it fades into the twilight.

At the end of the night Lisa and SFJoe hurl me bodily into the back of Sweet Melissa's pickup truck, she bellows "If you see a cop, LIE DOWN!" in her girlish contralto and we roar through the empty Brooklyn night to Angry Wade's Bar to abuse our bodies further. The last thing I remember clearly is Sweet Melissa, in the midst of a story about some overly potent substance she had ingested in an Amsterdam coffee house, yelping "My pussy has fallen asleep!" In a night of distractions this unusual sentiment captures what is left of my sodden attention. Lisa turns to me, raises an eyebrow and purrs "There's your title: 'Let Sleeping Cats Lie.'"

I protest that I can't possibly use that, since the mere use of the word "pussywhipped" in my last screed whipped up a boatload of controversy about propriety and hyphens, resulting in scores of emails both pro and con clogging my inbox for days. People will think I have a fixation of some kind.

But then I'm not one to look a gift title in the mouth, am I?

The Evolution of The Burger Wine

Winegeeks have a category of wine that they like to call ‘Burger Wine.’ This is geek shorthand for ‘straightforward, fruity, uncomplicated wine that doesn’t cost very much and isn’t intellectually demanding.’ When I was first getting my geek stripes, that wine was California Zinfandel. Cheap, fruity and fun, with some real character and a sense of fun about it, that was the wine that you had late at night on a Wednesday when the wife or hubby was out of town and you just needed something soothing to wash down a hamburger.

But then something funny happened. Zinfandel became a victim of its own success. Suddenly, there were single-vineyard zinfandels, luxury-cuvée zinfandels, designer zinfandels, and the rising tide lifted all of the zinfandel boats: zinfandel was no longer cheap and fun, but had taken a turn towards the dreaded ‘serious wine.’

After zinfandel it seems Australian Shiraz was the thing. Big and purple and jammy, cheap and plentiful, sometimes it seemed as if a great purple flood from Down Under would wash the streets of New York clean. But then two things happened: first, the zinfandel plague of putting on airs, second, people just got tired of big purple wines that all tasted like jam.

Handy Tips

Some small wisdom has come my way in my odyssey through the winegeek world, and I hope by passing on some of the little nuggets here I can keep people from making some of the mistakes I made on my journey.

1. Spit if You Can, Dump Otherwise.

Winegeeks have to pace themselves, which means spitting where possible (anywhere trade people gather, big tastings, auction tastings, wineries), and dumping when spitting is inappropriate (restaurants). Most of the wine's complexity is in the aromatics, so you really don't need all that much in your mouth to make an assessment of balance, mouthfeel, acidity, tannins, etc. Of course, some wines simply aren't spittable, so savor them and spit the rest. Which leads us to rule number two...

2. Never, EVER Use the Word 'Spit' in a Restaurant.

You'd think it was self-explanatory, but winegeeks habitually use the phrases 'spit bucket' and 'dump bucket' without a second thought. If you don't have these, you tend to get drunk and fall down: whereas the first isn't so bad, the second is thought to be bad form. So a couple of empty containers on the table are a necessity—you have to get the place to provide them, but you also must avoid the 'S' word at all costs.

To give an example of what can happen, consider the following cautionary tale:

One night as we were settling into our seats at the Fairway

Café, Lisa tries to ask the fresh-faced waitress to bring us some kind of a dump bucket, but in her haste to make herself understood accidentally blurts out: “You know, something to spit into.”

That does it.

The waitress turns pale, takes three steps backwards and flees in the general direction of the kitchen. “Oh, now you’ve done it,” I moan. “You’ve broken the winegeek prime directive. Dump. Dump. You have to say DUMP, never, EVER ‘spit.’” Lisa is uncertain, “She knows what we want, maybe she just went to get something for us...”

But no, here she is back again, wide-eyed, trailing two steps behind the charging manager, who bolts up to Lisa and demands “WHAT do you need?! WHAT are you asking for?!”

She tries to go demure. “Oh, you know, just something to dump our excess wine into... an empty ice bucket, a pitcher...” Perhaps even an eyelash-bat or two occurs at this point, my view is slightly obstructed.

“To ‘dump?’” he asks, eyes narrowing, “Or... or... to sssSPIT?” He hisses the last word for emphasis.

“Dump. Dump. Just dump. Dump. That’s all, just dump,” I insist, stonewalling fiercely with a fixed and dilated grin. And before he can dig further he is stymied by the arrival of two more of our party with an unheralded friend, for suddenly we are nine instead of eight and won’t fit at our allotted table. He scowls ferociously and moves off to rearrange another table for us, leaving us in peace for the moment.

Phew.

After a great deal of experimentation in both the laboratory and in real world situations, Dr. Jay Miller of the University of Jersey City has come up with this formulation, which masterfully avoids the toxic ‘Spit’ and the unpleasant ‘dump’ and ‘bucket,’ and appears to be acceptable to restaurant personnel everywhere:

“May we please have a receptacle into which we can pour our excess wine?”

Say it calmly and politely and it works like a charm. Restaurant staff are there to please, and as long as certain specific verbal land mines are avoided, will be happy to help you out. Try it, you’ll see.

3. Avoid Armagnac, Cognac or other Distilled Spirits.

If you're tasting wine, that stuff will fry your palate and push you over the cliff into undignified inebriation. Even the eighty-year-old Armagnac that tastes like mother's milk will turn on you. One glass of that is worth sixteen small sips of red wine, quantitatively speaking. I know you won't listen, just remember that I told you so when you're clutching the carpet to keep from falling off the earth.

4. Beware of Heavy Bottles

I don't mean magnums, or other large-format bottles, but regular 750-ml bottles that are made with pounds of extra glass, in order to impress the OOH-SHINY-LOUD crowd with sheer size and weight. It has been scientifically proven that the heavier the bottle, the more malformed and twisted the wine inside will be. Any bottle weighing something in the neighborhood of an artillery shell might just have self-esteem issues. You know, like those guys who seem to need to have sports cars with BIG, THROBBING engines or really LARGE, NOISY motorcycles? You kind of wonder about them, um, maybe overcompensating, right? Same thing here. This ties in with

4a. Beware of Overdesigned Labels

Any wine with a label that looks like it came out of a community college design 101 class has a little too much to prove. The wackier the label, the worse the wine. (NB: There is one wine not covered by this rule—see 'The Mouton Exception'). Worst of all, of course, is a wine with a wacky, overdesigned label in a bottle that has enough mass to have its own gravitational pull. Of course, such a wine will also more likely than not be fabulously expensive, so probably not a problem to avoid.

5. Any Wine with a TV Commercial Is To Be Avoided At All Costs

I mentioned this earlier, but here's the deal: any wine with enough distribution and advertising money to be able to afford a televised ad campaign is necessarily made factory-style in industrial quantities, filtered and stripped of character as a tradeoff for shelf life and stability. Avoid.

The C-Word

I like wine. Please, call me a wine geek.

Or, if that doesn't work for you, call me a wino, or an oenophilic-American. But please god, never ever call me a frickin' _____, or a goddamn aficionado or, worst of all a goddamn [C-WORD].

The C-word is a plague upon the house of wine.

Look, I like wine with an unhealthy passion that borders on the medicable. I like to sit around with other winos haggling well into the wee hours over arcane points of oenology and viticulture, I've planned vacations around visits to vineyards, I've done all kinds of crazyass obsessive-compulsive behaviors that, if I was into cars or computers or stamps or sports, would get me (rightly) called a [car, computer, sports] nut. ('Wine nut' will also do nicely, by the way.) But no, what people invariably call me when they find out I'm into wine is that frickin' frenchified C-word.

It must stop. It's a brick in the wall that keeps people afraid of looking stupid or oafish, not in the know, not a member of the club. Frankly, it's embarrassing. People seem to automatically assume you're some kind of snob: 'wine' and 'snob' go together like 'beer' and 'belly' or 'Jell-O' and 'shots.'

Wine, for me the average hobbyist, is about fun. It's about geography, chemistry, history, inebriation, botany. Mostly it's about hanging out with friends and geeking out on whatever the latest geek-fave we're sloshing around in our overpriced stemware at the moment.

There's a weird undercurrent of alcohol-hating in the U.S., the remains of the temperance movement that gave us the wonderful experience of Prohibition. I suspect the whole eurosnooby thing took especial root here because if one is a [C-WORD], one can't be a simple garden-variety drunkard.

Too many people are afraid of wine; they think there's some hoity-toity set of mysteries that only the acolytes of the temple of [C-WORD]ship can unlock for them. I'm convinced it's part of a marketing scheme to convince people that huge restaurant markups are acceptable and that their own taste buds aren't to be trusted.

People are afraid to ask questions; people don't know that chardonnay is a grape, or that Chablis is a place, yet they've been drinking both for years, and they don't want to ask for fear of looking silly. This is like not knowing that steak comes from a cow or that bacon comes from a turkey (or wherever it comes from), something that the tiniest amount of curiosity could easily cure.

I don't know a damn thing about cars; I can barely figure out where to stick the gas nozzle when the damn thing needs to be fed. But I know what a nice car looks like, I know why people pay a lot for Porsches and not so much for Yugos. Whatever happened to Yugo, anyway? You don't see them around much these days.

The enjoyment of wine is utterly subjective: there is no universal palate calibrator, there are no "points" in wine bottles.

A pertinent passage from Kermit Lynch's wonderful *Adventures on the Wine Route*:

This can be either a frightening or a liberating notion. You're on your own, toots, and that's the truth. Not that a good guide—a critic you dig, a retailer who's a straight-shooter, a good book or two—can't be valuable. But mostly it's just a matter of tasting and paying attention. That's the crux of the matter really, paying attention. You don't know how many times someone has come up to me and said "Wow, I had this wine I just LOVED last night, it was this great French wine... it was in a you know, a green bottle, with a... like a weird design... red, I think it had a red label... with a bird..." and so on. If you don't know what you're drinking, you'll never be able to figure out what you like. Write it down, if you have to, or save the label or have it tattooed on your ass for all I care, but just pay frickin' attention, will you please?

Sorry, sorry, I digress and grow hostile. It's late and this whole

dumb subject hits a nerve.

If you're interested in getting to know wine, seek out the local geeks.

And please, don't get me started on Sommelier...

Symbolic [204] Citation: LUKE 005:039

King James: No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, the old is better.

New International: And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.'"

Use is accepted as normal [218] Citation: 1 TIMOTHY 005:023

King James: Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities.

Chenin blanc makes the greatest wines in the world.

Why does wine writing suck so much?

What's with this whole damn snobbery thing?

They Steam Steaks, Don't They?

It was time to bury the hatchet and let bygones be bygones.

Four years had passed since the Cold Potato Salad Debacle at Minetta Tavern; four summers, with the length of four long winters. It was a Saturday night, there were ten thirsty geeks and we thought, what the hell, let's give it a shot, what's past is past, water under the bridge, that had to have been an aberration, I'm sure they've cleaned up their act.

So it was that a small crowd of New York's geekiest arrive at Greenwich Village's historic Minetta Tavern for an evening of drunken festivity. Here's toastmaster Jay Miller, here's the eternally irrepressible Brad Kane, Tony Fletcher is taking a night off from marathon training so he's here too, as are Jancis Robinson, Jill and Marty "Martin" Lebowitz, Lisa the ur-doctor, and me.

Oh, and Cambor too, he was there. No Josie, though. I think Greg and Michelle had to cancel at the last minute, or were feuding with Kane, or something. Anyhoo, they're not here too. And no Callahan either, nor Thor.

Who else isn't here? I don't know, lots of people. Who wants to know, anyway?

So let's start the ball rolling with a Clark-Scott Chardonnay Finger Lakes Kabinett Trocken 'Bath' 2003. Pale pale straw color. Smells lean and minerally. Tastes lemony-tart and chisel-hard, very light bodied and crisp, crisp, crisp. Bending the scales at a whopping 10% alcohol, this is a food wine all the way, a sort of chardon-

nay-Muscadet hybrid. Damn, this is a change of pace from the huge alcoholic chardonnays this place used to make. I like it; it's severe, but I like it. What I don't like is the name change, as that's going to throw off my alphabetization. Stupid Japanese investment consortiums, can't they leave well enough alone?

Wait, did I say Jancis Robinson was here? No, that's not right, I'm getting it all confused with the \$200 wine-and-waffles breakfast hootie at the Rainbow Room this morning that I had to miss because against all odds I retain a microscopic shred of perspective and couldn't quite bring myself to sell a kidney on eBay. It's difficult to wake up and find yourself at Minetta Tavern, you know—reality begins to acquire a rather dreamy, fluid quality. Sometimes it seems like Maureen Dowd Nelson is here too, schmoozing with the obligatory minor celebrity in the corner. Hey, is that Anson Williams?

Whoops, it's a Louis Michel & Fils Chablis Montée de Tonnerre 2002. Pale straw color. Aromatically shy at first, some light yellow apple, white flowers, cream and minerals. Tastes calm and steely-stony, medium acidity and with a subtle plushness around a solid core. Quiet and pure, a slow-moving mountain stream. Charming and minerally early on, it takes on other guises as the evening goes on, the color deepening, a quiet oxidative quality slipping in, yellow pear and tangerine-citrus notes appearing, a living wine, very interesting.

Lisa and I order the grilled sirloin special, thinking to ourselves 'how can you screw up grilled steak'? (OMINOUS CHORD) She corrals the waiter and gives her boilerplate speech about wanting it rare as can be, black and blue, bloody, "It should moo," etc. I merely say "What she said, like that."

Joseph Matrot Meursault-Charmes 2002. Pleasantly aromatic, lightly earthy apple-pear yellowfruit, touch of vanilla toastiness, minerals underneath. Good structure, nice crispness, a pleasantly cohesive little Meursault that paints by the numbers and colors inside the lines; no missteps, but not much verve either. I could drink it easily, but the Chablis is much more compelling.

The salads and appetizers arrive, my 'garden salad' is really just some mesclun greens with four slices of tomato on top, but what the hell, it's okay, I'll take it.

I pull a bottle of Robert Eymael Riesling Mönchhof Urziger Würzgarten Spätlese 2002 out of the ice bucket and, before I have a

chance to pour, Kane stops me and insists I shake the bottle. I stare at him blankly. "You know," he says, "it's been half-submerged in the ice bucket, you've got to shake it to move the cold around from top to bottom." I continue to stare at him blankly until I'm certain he's serious, turn towards Lisa to see if she wants to give a quick physics lesson, then just decide what the hell, put my thumb in the tophole and shake the damn thing up. It fizzes up, spurting lightly across the table. Riesling showers for all!

"Hey, this tastes like bubble gum," says Marty, and indeed it does, almost muscattish, quite sweet and rather bloppy and spineless, with lots of fat candy-spicy yellowfruit; there's an amiable quality to the loose glossy babyfat, but this is one fat baby. Serve frosty-cold if you must serve it at all.

Suddenly around our table appear a gaggle of white-clad waiters toting what appear to be large Jiffy-Pop Popcorn pans, aluminum oven tins wrapped with foil. With a ceremonial flourish they tear into the foil, a cloud of steam goes up, and there within are revealed...

are revealed...

(wait for it)

STEAMED STEAKS.

Yes, that's right, steamed sirloin steaks, which after a token viewing are then just as ceremoniously whisked away.

General puzzlement, agitated murmuring. The hair on the back of my neck begins to stiffen ominously.

"What was that all about?" asks Camblor. No one can say, but after a moment or two the steamy steaks reappear, this time on plates, arranged under a heap of mushrooms. Bewildered, I take a knife to mine: solid battleship gray throughout, not even a touch of pink. Lisa's is just the same. We sigh, and begin the process of trying to catch the waiter's attention.

"Look," she says when we finally flag him down, "we asked for rare, and this is well done." He sighs and says we're right, this is unacceptable, the kitchen should know better because he explained it to them carefully, tsk, tsk, then whisks off the steamed well-done steaks.

Okay, that wasn't so bad, they'll get us some properly cooked steaks; in the meantime we'll keep drinking. Who the fuck steams steaks though, what the hell is up with that? They did clearly say

'grilled' when they told us the specials, not 'steamed.' I truly believe I'd have remembered if they'd said 'steamed sirloin.' Freaky shit, man.

No food, but at least there's a Francois Charles Beaune Les Epenottes 2002. Medium purple-garnet. Smells ripe and clovey-spicy, black cherry and red plum, light mineral streak underneath. Soft and plush tasting, medium-light bodied, velvety-soft pinot. Actually pretty nice if you're not looking for classic Burgundy. Puppyish redfruit, low acidity, a pointy-tribe kind of Burg. I've brought this as sort of a sop to Kane, a ripe, soft Burgundy that I thought he might go for. After all, he likes gamay when it's overripe and acid-deficient, right? He makes a squinchy face, moans "High acid, ook," and I officially throw in the towel. From now on: no quarter asked or given.

Key change: here's a Daniel Rion Vosne-Romanée Les Chaumes 1980. Medium ruby color, browning in from the rim. Lightly horsey nose, barny funk laced with muted cinnamon over a base of faded leafy-bricky redfruit. Quiet, light bodied and shy, but pleasantly decayed and complex at first. With air the underbrush notes come to the fore, the wine is fading but lively acidity muscles it along. Necrolicious.

There's still no sign of our food; Lisa calls the waiter aside, tells him, "Look, if this is a problem we'll be happy to order something else, some pasta or something." He assures her that it's not a problem. Jay, who has ordered the T-bone (not the sirloin special) says in a tone usually reserved for Australian shiraz, "This is the worst steak I've ever had in my entire life." He generously cuts off a chunk to share with poor foodless Chris and Lisa. Actually it's not that bad, in the sense that it's at least edible. Lisa and I gnaw on the chunk we're given like hungry dingoes, monopolizing the bread basket all the while as well.

Here's a wine that gets around, a Clos Roche Blanche Gamay Touraine 2003. Juicy, strawberry-jammy and utterly delicious. It's not a classic keeper-for-the-cellar style of CRB gamay like the '02, instead a straightforwardly juicy-soft wine with a pleasant tanginess in lieu of structure, and the lightness and forward-fruitiness to get away with it. Jill opines that it's both "like California wine" and "like fruit punch!" and, excepting the innate sense of balance and lack of clumsy overwooding, she's right. At the end of the evening this is

the consensus wine of the night.

Finca Sandoval Manchuela 2002. Saturated purply-black color. Big black-raspberry-blackberry flavors, ripe and loose, a bit watery-vague in the middle, with a lot of toasty wood. Boisterous and roasty-ripe, a warm blanket of velour fruit. I liked the '01 more in its youth—although this hasn't quite the fetal quality that it had a year or so ago, it seems a bit smoother and more of a whole, but it's also lacking a bit of the intensity of the last one. It's a tough wine for our lean-and-sour crowd to warm to. Finishes blackberry-toasty; I take the rest of the bottle home and nurse it awhile, but it doesn't seem to change much. I don't know about you, but I'm keeping my fingers crossed that Victor somehow managed to get his grapes ripe in '03. Strangely, I've just come from buying a bottle of the '01 at Chambers Street, where Lyle described Victor as "the Francois Truffaut of Spain." Damn, I guess I should've sucked up a little more when he was last in town.

Everyone else is finishing up, when finally our second round of steamed steak appears. Relieved, we pick up our knives and begin to tuck into them hungrily.

Only... only...

Sweet jumpin' Jesus on a stick.

Okay, it's a joke, right? Or is someone in the kitchen trying to make a point? My new steamed steak is a very pale grayish pink on the outside; when I cut into it, ice crystals glisten up at me. Astonished, I poke at it with my finger: frozen solid! Frozen steamed steak! I say "Holy crap!", chisel off a frosty chunk and offer it around the table for examination. Kane pokes at it tentatively, "Wow... frozen..." I start giggling semi-hysterically, "Man..." is all I can say, "Oh man." I look over at Lisa, who is staring down in silent astonishment at her own crystal-glazed piece of frozen cow. There are no words.

After taking several deep, calming breaths, we call the waiter back and say LOOK AT THIS, THIS IS ABSOLUTELY ABSURD. He whisks them away, tut-tutting all the while. Jill, feeling our pain, says "My chicken and sausage is good, order that!" but I've lost faith in screw-uppable food and say please just bring me some plain spaghetti with red sauce, thinking maybe I can at least eat something before everyone else leaves.

"I think I've sent back food three times in my entire life," I

moan, shaking my head in wonderment, “and two of them were TONIGHT.”

Holy cats, I need wine. What's next, a Gentaz-Dervieux Côte-Rôtie Côte Brune Cuvée Reservée 1979. Medium ruby color, browning well in from the rim. Smells like a walk in a eucalyptus forest, hints of dried leaves and koala. Over the hill, leafy and dried out, but still has a bit of life. Well, a tiny bit anyway. Okay, not that much. Whoops, it's dead now. Oh well.

Lisa is doing some Eminem, I think it's 'White America.' No wait, it's the new single, Lose It. She's very sexy when she raps. In fact, she murders a rhyme, one word at a time. I think she's the clear star attraction of the SUNY Downstate class of '08. I'm glad I married her. Wait, I'm getting sloppily sentimental, very déclassé, must reassume my usual disaffected hauteur. More wine required to finesse the irony of posing as a worldweary poseur.

Montevervine Vino da Tavola di Toscana 'Le Pergole Torte' 1996. Cement dust and taut berry-cassis aromatics, quiet and shy. Tastes coiled and more theoretically interesting than actually pleasurable. The finish is all hard blackfruit and sandy tannins. Hold, hold, hold. It seems like there's a lot going on, but hard to read right now, especially in my Katsmanesque famished state.

Forty-five minutes after I've ordered it, a plate of spaghetti with red sauce arrives. I'd expected the worst (“How can you mess up spaghetti with red sauce?” “Well, how can you mess up steak?”), but this is actually quite good, al dente and garlicky, with a light tangy sauce. I eat hungrily, exclaiming all the while how the pasta is so good it was worth the almost hour-long wait after the first two fuckups. Lisa, who still hasn't seen any sign of her food, picks at it as well. Delicious! I can see how this could take forty-five minutes! Surely they had to pick the tomatoes and AARRRRGH! AAAARRRRGH! AAAAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHH!

Must drink more. What wine now here drink? It Domaine Lafond Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2001. Ah, the evening's Kane wine. Smells ripe and dark, raspberry jam, toast and bomber jacket. Tastes similarly ripe and squishy, a velvety-meaty low acid wine that gives you a warm wash of meaty red fruit, then evanesces with a Robitussin flourish. Hey, it's a juicy little wine that's so simple and amiable it's hard to find fault, much in the mold of the 'Ugly American Cuvées' of all those overripe Spanish jamfests that pointy

folks go nuts for.

More now wine please. Wine Alexander Valley Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley 2001 is to drink now. Medium dark garnet color, smells lightly of cedar-dusted cassis, hint of oregano, trace of dark smokiness. Taut redfruit right up front, a lot of structure, a broad-shouldered wine with a high butchness quotient. Finishes rough and tannic, rather austere, a bit of a bully. Good cohesiveness and balance, the rare California cabernet that would seem to need some time to loosen up. Or dry out further, who knows.

Wine sweet now is we have Château Pierre-Bise Quarts de Chaume 1997. Medium gold color, ambering towards orange at the rim. Always a bit of a freakazoid, the hugeness has calmed down and the tropical guava-lilikoi flavors have turned toward autumnal apricot and spiced pomander-orange. This is holding together better than any of the various '97 village Layons, but it too seems to be experiencing an accelerated aging curve. The shiny viscosity has taken a turn towards a matte texture, but the outsized facade hasn't collapsed like a soufflé; it's still a big, fun wine with a ton of sugar and a ton of botrytis and a ton of everything else.

Just as I'm finishing my dessert, an hour after everyone else has finished, Lisa's pasta arrives. She pokes at it listlessly for a moment, more amazed than anything else, then we shrug, gather our glasses and head out.

Looks like we probably won't be coming back to Minetta for awhile, says Brad. I opine that it took me four years to get over the cold potato salad, that this should be good for at least eight, so we'd check back in 2012. And, given the house specialty, they didn't even have the decency to comp us some free Ecstasy, which just made matters worse. A good MDMA buzz goes a long way towards mending fences, if you ask me. But nobody asks me except a wandering drunken Englishwoman from Manchester who wants to know where the "hot clubs" are. I can't enlighten her, sad to say, and don't have the heart to explain that she's dressed like a hooker, micro-miniskirt, rabbit fur vest and all. It's just too much, and my Manchesterese is pretty rusty. Where did Fletcher go, he speaks several Brit dialects...?

Ugh.

We go home and I eat a Boston Market meatloaf TV dinner.

Frankly, it tastes damn good.

Appendix I

Subclasses of Winegeek: A Field Guide

1. The Pointy Geek: This Winegeek regards numerical scores from critics and wine publications to be the core of wine geekery. Geeks of this subgenus can tell you with certainty the Parker/Spectator scores for each vintage of classified growth Bordeaux going back at least as far as 1982. They will rarely make a purchase without knowing what their own particular guru scored the wine (out of 100), and will rarely go against the grain, preferring to believe that their own palate is flawed when it contradicts that of whatever authority they have elevated to the position of final word.

2. The Techno-Geek: This Winegeek enjoys nothing more than seemingly arcane technical discussions concerning root uptake, soil chemistry, the excretion processes of various types of yeast, the pH levels in Robert Mondavi's urine, basically anything that can actually be measured and quantified, preferring to measure bark patterns on individual trees rather than attempt a whole forest at once.

3. The Poetaster: Flights of florid fancy are this Winegeek's specialty; the Poetaster sees wine as metaphor and metaphor as wine and will metaphorize until no one has a clue what he or she is talking about. A perfectly ordinary glass of wine

becomes a rushing tsunami of foamy fruit over a treacherous reef of minerality that crashes onto tannin beach, and so on and so forth. These geeks tend to drive techno-geeks into fits of rationalist angst.

4. The Terroirist: The followers of the High Church of Terroir are especially fervid, seeing good only in wines that express the characteristics of wherever they were grown, except possibly anywhere outside of Europe.

Appendix II

Geekspeak Glossary

Here in our Geekspeak Glossary we attempt to render some of the jargon that wine geeks love to sling around into plain, easily-comprehensible English. More often than not we fail, but we fail GLORIOUSLY!

Disclaimer: It should be noted that all definitions are entirely our own, and consequently are, more often than not, wildly inaccurate.

Acidity: One of the elements, along with Tannin, that forms the Backbone or Spine of a wine. A wine with low Acidity will taste round in the mouth, fat and limp. A wine with high Acidity will taste shrill and sharp. The idea is to get it somewhere in the middle. As grapes ripen and gain sugar, they lose Acidity, so winemakers in warmer climates often have to manipulate the Acidity of their juice by adding various or sundry acids to it.

Backbone: See Spine.

"Bad Bottle": Semi-mythical creature that is invoked when someone thinks someone else's TN is all wrong. A non-New York Winegeek will tell you you must have had a Bad Bottle if you say that you didn't enjoy a wine that he or she did at some point in the past. It's less confrontational than saying "you wouldn't know a good wine if it bit you on the ass," and easier to use in polite company, but essentially means the same thing. A New York Winegeek, on the other hand, will probably use the "...bit you on the ass" line, as we're a little more thick-skinned around here.

Beaver: See Termite.

Blind Tasting: Nothing to do with Stevie Wonder or Ray Charles, this geekspeak phrase refers to tastings where the identity of the wine being tasted is hidden, either by “bagging” the bottle or just by decanting the wine and hiding the bottle in the bushes, past the sprinkler system in that little gully.

Botrytis: A Winegeek’s favorite fungus: Botrytis Cinerea (‘noble rot’) grows on grapes in certain areas and shrivels them up, concentrating their flavor and interacting with them chemically in beguiling ways. Botrytis is found in the great sweet dessert wines of Sauternes and the Loire Valley, as well as in the grout between your shower tiles (France only).

Brett/Bretty: Some kind of little bug or something (okay, it’s a yeast called Brettanomyces) that can make a wine smell stinky or manurey. In small doses, it can be interesting, adding nice earthy, ‘barnyard’ notes, but you get a lot of it and it’s poop city. Nobody loves a wine that smells like a rest stop on the Jersey Turnpike.

Chaptalization: Adding sugar to fermenting grape juice in order to pump up the alcohol level of the resulting wine. This is sometimes done in cool climates or poor years where grapes don’t ripen quite enough to develop high amounts of sugar. Different places have different laws regarding this kind of thing, but wineries don’t usually like to talk about it.

Connoisseur: A word you should never use around a Winegeek. If he or she is a gentle Winegeek they will merely flinch, then softly remind you to call them either simply ‘Winegeek’ or ‘Oenophilic-American,’ but calling a brittle, testy Winegeek this offensive moniker can get you a bad look at the business end of a Screwpull.

Corked/Corky: Yes, we know most wine bottle have corks in them; no, that’s not what geeks mean when they say a wine is Corked or Corky. What they mean is that the wine has been contaminated by a chemical called 2,4,6-trichloro-anisol (TCA) that lurks in the black, evil hearts of some small percentage of corks, and makes the affected wine smell really dank and musty; often described as smelling like ‘wet cardboard,’ but more like wet cardboard that’s been sitting for a

while in the far corner of your funky old basement. It's pretty nasty — smell it a few times and you won't forget it. On a side note, we knew a girl in high school also named Corky who smelled perfectly fine. She works on 'The Simpsons' now...

'Cult' Wine: A wine that somebody else paid too much for.

Descriptor(s): See Note(s).

DNPIM: "Do Not Put In Mouth." Usually used as an informal rating ("That Bretty Chardonnay is really DNPIM!").

Dump Bucket: (Also Spit Bucket) A wide-mouthed container that is on the table at most geek confabs. Geeks usually have a taste or two of any given wine, then pour or spit the rest into an available receptacle.

Finish: Aftertaste. What happens in the confines of your own mouth after you swallow a nice gulp of vino. We feel that this is a private matter between a consenting adult and his or her consenting beverage.

Flight: When winegeeks gather in their geeky covens to do their thing, wines are sometimes served sequentially in small bunches (say, groups of four), sometimes thematically linked — these bunches are Flights. Small flocks of winegeeks themselves are called Gaggles, Pods or Drunken Nitpickers, depending on their plumage.

Heat: A slight burning sensation in the mouth produced by a high alcohol level. Not good. The alcohol levels in many 'blockbuster'-styled wines has been creeping up from around 12% to upwards of 15% and higher.

Malo: Malolactic fermentation, a secondary fermentation that is used to turn sharper malic acid into softer lactic acid, often resulting in a creamier mouthfeel in the finished wine. Pronounce like 'tallow' or 'fallow' to avoid confusion with the Hawaiian loin-garment.

Nose: Geekspeak for the bundle of smells that hit you when you stick your nose into a wineglass and inhale through it, having properly Swirled first, of course. Some people make distinctions between 'aroma' and 'bouquet', but we think those people are a little fishy and often look askance at them when they have their backs turned.

Note(s): Individual flavor or aromatic element in a wine, often some kind of a fruit (blackberry, cherry, lemon, grapefruit), spice (oregano, dill, vanilla), or wet mammal (i.e., dog, cat, squirrel). Notes in a wine are hints, suggestions, and only that. When a geek says she found ‘chocolate’ in her Bordeaux, it doesn’t mean she thinks someone actually slipped some Swiss Miss into her glass, just that she believes there is a chocolatey nuance to the smell or taste of the wine.

Oak (New-, Over-): If you want to start a fight at a Winegeek confab, just ask ‘How much Oak is good in a wine?’ and stand back and watch the fur fly. Many premium wines are put into small oak barrels, or if you want to be fancy, ‘barriques’ for aging (and many not-so-premium wines have oak chips dunked in them like a teabag). This can impart nice, complex, toasty dark notes to the wine, or it can leave it smelling and tasting like the inside of your high school woodshop. The newer the oak barrel, the more flavor it will impart to the juice that is inside it. Anti-oak geeks say that oakiness is used to cover up weak fruit or bad winemaking, pro-oak geeks (see Beaver, Termite, Woodchuck) say that used as a spice, it adds depth and complexity. There are all kinds of oak (French, American, Slovenian... no, seriously, Slovenian), each with a slightly different set of flavors to impart. Everyone has a different tolerance level for degrees of oakiness; deep down we’re all geeks—can’t we all just get along?

Parker Lemmings/Sheep: Critical name callously used for people who seem to inexplicably and slavishly follow the dictates of an American author and wine critic named Robert Parker, who in his publication *The Wine Advocate* hit upon the odd yet wonderfully marketable notion of “rating” wines on a “hundred-point” scale, very much like a grade on a U.S. elementary school quiz. Mr. Parker’s system of “scoring” wines numerically seems to appeal to many people’s sense of wanting the experience of tasting something to be quantifiable and linear. Some geeks get very het up about all this, for reasons unknown to us.

QPR: ‘Quality to Price Ratio’ — this handy little acronym lies at the heart of many a geek-to-geek conversation. Basically, it means you get more than your money’s worth

from a particular bottle. A bottle of plain \$8 white burgundy that tastes like a Grand Cru Chablis would be great QPR, and you would happily step on your grandmother's head to grab the last case. A \$400 Cult Wine that tastes like sangria-fixins, on the other hand, is very poor QPR indeed, and you would send it to eBay for someone with more money than sense to buy.

Riedel(s): The Rolls-Royce of wineglasses, hand-blown by unionized Austrian river sprites in their secret lairs and cooled in aromatic oils on the thighs of Vestal Virgin Supermodels. Or at least that's what we'd guess, based merely on the prices...

RS: Residual Sugar. In completely 'dry' wines the little yeasties have eaten up all the sugar and turned it into alcohol and other stuff you don't want to know about. When they are interrupted or stopped for one reason or another, RS is left, which, oddly enough, makes the wine taste kinda sweet.

Sniffing: This seems pretty self-evident, doesn't it? Winegeeks spend a lot of time doing this, often concentrating hard enough on whether that Note is 'basil' or 'oregano' to make blood vessels in their tiny geek brains burst asunder.

Snobbery: All Winegeeks are snobs, and seek to dominate lesser, wrong-thinking men and impose their views on them. Come the Revolution, Winegeeks will rule over beer-, soda-, water- and milk-drinkers with an iron fist, doling out tiny portions of their precious fluid in exchange for adulation, worship and other appropriate responses.

Speculator, The: Smug geek nickname for the American magazine The Wine Spectator, the major market-mover in the U.S.

Spine: The backbone of a wine upon which the fruit hangs. In white wines the Spine is provided by Acidity, in reds Acidity and Tannins.

Spitting: Spitting out the wine instead of swallowing it. Not pretty, but necessary at big tastings so you don't get all sloppy and make a pass at that nice man from Mondavi, or, worse yet, break your Riedels. Buckets are provided.

Sticky: Sweet dessert wines. Originally used to refer to Aussie liquor muscats and the like, this has evolved into a

term for most any sweetie with high RS.

Swirling: The act of sloshing the wineglass, with wine in it, around in small circles, the aim of which is to expose as much of the wine to air as possible without splashing it on your frock. Speaking technically, Swirling stirs up all the smellies in the liquid until they get so excited they have to leap into the air above the wine, where your nose can easily capture them. Warning: don't try this with a full wineglass—this is why geeks favor pours of a few ounces at most if they're in full-on geek mode.

Tannins/Tannic: Coming from grape seeds, skins, and also from oak, tannins are (along with acid) what give red wines backbone. If you steep tea for too long and your tongue goes all dry and fuzzy when you sip it, that is the work of tannins. Or try licking a banana peel. Or taste a wine from the Madiran region of France made from the tannat grape (whence the word 'tannin' is derived; or maybe it was tana leaves, from the old 'Mummy' movies, we can't remember...). Tannins, given time, generally calm down and 'resolve', precipitating into sediment, which is one of the points of aging wines. Another is the flush of geek pride that comes from being able to say 'Look at all my damn OLD wines! In MY day, if you paid more than forty cents for a bottle of Latour, you was a damn fool...' and so on.

Termite: See Woodchuck.

Terroir: A small, somewhat yappy breed of dog; 'Toto' in The Wizard of Oz was a Terroir.

Not going for it, huh?

Okay, then, you asked for it... Terroir is a French word that means something like 'microclimate.' Basically, when used by geeks, it's the notion that there is an individual character to grapes (and hence wines) grown in different locations, different soils, temperature, elevation, and so on, and that the expression of this character (letting the vineyard show through) is the highest goal in winemaking, rather than obscuring the individual character of the wine with winemaking tricks, lots of new oak, heavy filtration, fancy yeasts, etc. Got it? Good.

TN: Abbreviation for 'Tasting Note,' which is what

