

BOBOLINGS

November 1971

For FAPA

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Dad was a European product. He was born in this country, the fourteenth child of his father and mother, all born here. And dad's parents had been here long enough. Grandmom was born in 1853 so I assume granddad was born about 1850. He came to America when he was 16, or about 1866. I assume grandmom came over in 1861--her birth certificate was transferred to the US in that year. Dad was born in 1893, some thirty years after his parents arrived in the country. But he was a European product. Why not? He grew up on a homestead in that little-known Czechoslovakian town of Sunol, Nebraska.

One of dad's ideas was the restorative value of wine. The time when he decided mom's blood sugar was low and she needed some port wine to perk her up is still reasonably clear to me. Quite clear, considering that I was probably about seven at the time. Or maybe the value of the wine was in improving the memory. For I had most of that bottle of "Port" (from California naturally), and I remember that time far better than much of anything else from that age. The other times that I remember as clearly are falling through the hole in the silo floor, the too-fast ride down the run-away silo elevator, the night the silo caught fire, the day my sister fell down the cess pool excavation, the day Ray and I found the monster, and a few other similar gems.

I learned something about wine that day. That too much is bad. That wine is sweet (ah, the errors of generalization from a limited sample!).

That pretty much terminated my experimentation with wine for the next ten years. We might possibly have had some for Thanksgiving or Christmas. If so, it was probably a California Sauterne. But no other taste of wine comes to mind between that time in Nebraska and a night in the winter of 1943/44 at Chicago's Tam O'Shanter Club, where I somehow wound up drinking a glass of what I think was muscattel. Again, the sweetness. I finished the glass. One was enough. A lesson learned again. Red wines are sweet.

The winter of 1944/45 was somewhat different. At Christmas that year I was in a hospital in Dijon, France. And with Christmas dinner came an unheard-of thing. A glass of red wine, served gratis by the Army. On landing in Marseilles I'd tried a glass or three--vinegar, every one. I expected more of the same. But no. Fresh. Fruity. Dry! A wonderful one-glass experience which would not be repeated for many, many years.

Three more months I spent in France, and then boarded the hospital ship for home. While not related to wine, there was one more great taste sensation in store for me. The first night out of Marseilles we were served a green salad. I have not the foggiest notion of what else was served, and the salad wasn't anything special--just a tossed salad. But what a marvelous welcome back to fresh food!

Well, there I am, sailing back to America, and I find there are two other tastes from France that I want to mention, even though they aren't connected with the main theme. Or maybe they are--wine may be this or that but it's inspired the following that it has because of taste. The two other lingering taste memories that I have are black olives, received in a package from home (I'd never liked them--till then) and a fresh orange from Algeria, flown in and given to the hospital by the Air Corps types flying out of Dijon. I wonder to this day if that orange tasted so fine because it had been so long since I'd had one, or if Algerian oranges are better than ours. When next I go over, that question will receive further attention.

Back to the ship, and back in short order to the states. FDR died while I was at sea. The news of Ernie Pyle's death also came during that trip. The first was a shock, but I cried for the second. Ike and Bradley might have been the heroes to the home front, but for the European GI Pyle and Mauldin were the heroes.

Home. California oranges. Salads. Steak. Fresh milk. No more experiments trying to fry an over-age French chicken in his own fat. American beer. Bourbon. Corn on the cob. A glass of an American sauterne during a holiday. Pilsner Urquel (now there's a beer!) Nuclear Fizz. Hamburgers and hot dogs and sloppy joes and subs and pizza and coke and hot chocolate and coffee and all the other glories of American eating and drinking. And there are glories, in amongst all the junk. Maybe I don't appreciate the glories enough because they come too often. Oysters, which I love, four times in five weeks, each time prepared differently, and each time excellent. One of those dishes still stands out as the superb one--but will it after we've finished the remaining six months of the oyster season?

Home, college, girls, travel, fandom, food, employment, drink. Years which needed sensations to fill them. And I had the time to do it. I'm still doing it, and still learning about the many ways to fill those years that I'd previously missed.

Eney, while he was OE, almost invariably had a FAPA assembly party at his house on deadline weekend. There was always a Sunday dinner prepared by his mother--who's an excellent cook--and on one or two occasions, there was wine on Saturday evening

for those who wanted a variation from Pepsi. One of those wines startled me. It was white, and dry, and delicious. My experience with white wines was California sauterne, which was white, and dry, and terrible. I found that the wine was German--a Lieb-fraumilch in fact.

Three or six or nine months later I remembered that name, and when Eney offered a glass of Liebfraumilch I was happy to accept. And unhappy that I had. What I didn't know was that Liebfraumilch is a blended German white wine, and that the important information on the bottle is not so much the word "Liebfraumilch" as it is the name of the producer. I didn't even learn that much at the time--I just accepted as fate the fact that either the wine, or my taste, varied too much to make any further investigation of wine worthwhile.

But there were other things than wine to keep me occupied. Like a convention in Pittsburgh in 1960 at which I met Peggy Rae McKnight. And a Disclave in Washington at which Peggy Rae introduced her mother to Bill Evans. And thus were two fannish marriages started.

Buddie Evans is a superb cook. We seldom decline an invitation. Bill Evans appreciates wine. On occasion, depending upon the occasion, dinner is served with an appropriate wine. Bill's first love, among red wines, happens to be Bordeaux, so fairly often the wine served is a Bordeaux. I usually enjoyed the wine, but still avoided involvement until one day in 1968 or so when Bill served a superb Burgundy. Bill remembers it as an Echezeaux or Grands Echezeaux--he has a pretty good memory. I remembered it as a hint of a taste from France, some twenty-four years earlier, and a glass of wine at Christmas in Dijon--some forty miles or so from those vineyards of Echezeaux and Grands Echezeaux. It was not by any means the same taste--but the similarity was there as it had not been in the Bordeaux and certainly not in the Liebfraumilch or California sauterne. Peggy Rae also liked the wine--a fact which helped no little in keeping that memory of those pleasant tastes, then and now, up in the "we ought to go there again" slice of the brain.

And there the idea still sits, gradually being realized. In some respects it has built quite rapidly of late, yet the overall pattern is a reasonably typical growth curve. Wine was, to me, amazingly difficult to get a handle on for many years. I have the handle now and hope I'm beginning to be competent at using it to control the pot.

Those first puzzled days browsing wines though. Maybe a few minutes at a time, during lunch hour, in one of the four liquor stores near the office. So many bottles, and so little information on the bottle. Say that I'd decided on a Bordeaux. Here's a bottle: Chateau Haut-Batailley, Pauillac, 1967. Appellation Pauillac Controlée. Francis Borie, Proprietaire a Pauillac - Gironde. Or another: Chateau Du Tertre, 1967. Appellation Margaux Controlée. There is other vital information on each bottle, and some miscellaneous information. But where's the word "Bordeaux?" You run into a similar fate with burgundy. I knew, even then, that bordeaux was bottled in a bottle with sharply defined shoulders while burgundy's bottle has sloping shoulders. What I didn't know was what other wines might share those same bottles.

But I chanced a few purchases. A 1964 Cos D'Estornel. A 1962 Puligny-Montrachet white, estate bottled, F. Clerget. Both were superb. And so, I found, it is possible to go into a store and walk out with a good bottle of wine.

But, thought I, it would be so much better to know something. So I borrowed a book from Bill. Peggy found that the Prince Georges County Community College was offering a course on wine. I attended, and bought a couple of more books on wine. Our instructor, Alfio Moriconi, is editor and wine advisor to Les Amis du Vin, and after he told us a little about that group (primarily that they held occasional wine tastings) I joined the group. And as I learned, I bought some wine, and attended some of the tastings.

There's no real need to treat wine as a complex subject. It can be as simple as red or white, dry or sweet, I like it or I don't. Peggy and I even have one such criterion, brought on by a bottle of Inglenook White Pinot we tried one night. Peggy's verdict really said about all that could be said about that particular bottle--"Well, it's better than Kool Aid." The next bottle, a few nights later, was a Wente Rosé. Our joint verdict was that it failed the Kool Aid test.

My instructor Alfio would shudder at the mere thought of comparing wine with Kool Aid. Alfio sees no value to comparing even two dissimilar wines--say a California Pinot Noir and a French burgundy, which is made from the same grape. I'll have to grant that you can't learn anything about the quality of the two wines by such a comparison--the difference in soil, climate, and methods makes for radically different wines. But it can help one sort out the taste of the grape as being the pinot noir rather than one of the other wine grapes, and it can lead to conclusions as to which taste one might prefer to "study" further--the Californian, or the Burgundian.

Jeremiah was a bullfrog;  
. A very good friend of mine.  
I never understood a single word he said  
But I helped him 'a drink his wine.

The fourth verse of the above song has something to do with Kool Aid. I'd tell you what, but my daughter is the only member of the family that knows it, and she's in bed.

The Kool Aid comparison wines have, to date, been American wines. Only the two previously mentioned have fallen to this class. Oh sure, pleasant in a minor way, but not worth even their modest cost in comparison with many other pleasant drinks--including a few other California wines of equally modest cost.

On the whole, I've been disappointed with US wines. Very limited sampling to date has produced, among wines I like at the cost - Martini Vineyards Dry Chenin Blanc, Martini Mountain Red Wine, 1965 Martini Pinot Noir, and 1969 Buena Vista Pinot Chardonnay. (As to those dates, the first two were, to my recollection, non-vintage--i.e., made from the wines of more than one year--while the other two are the only dates I've sampled of the wine and producer named.) California, and Napa County in particular--is supposed to be particularly favorable to two grapes--the Cabernet Sauvignon and the Pinot Chardonnay. The first is the primary grape used in the Medoc region of Bordeaux, while the second is the grape used for the production of white burgundy. I've yet to drink a California Cabernet--they need bottle aging, and I haven't yet found a bottle of drinking age. The California Chardonnays give me a bit of a problem. I like cheese, and I like wine, and I even like both together. But I don't like my wine to smell like cheese. And the California Chardonnays do--the one named less so than the others tried, but still noticeably present.

While I'm on the subject of California wines, I'd appreciate any impressions from FAPAns with experience. Our choice here is limited--we mostly get the big producers--Christian Brothers, Almaden, Gallo, Roma for example--and the larger specialty producers--Martini, Inglenook, Beaulieu, Wente, Haraszthy (Buena Vista). I've seen others, even Martin Ray, but they are rare: such names as Stony Hill and Souvrain Cellers are just names--I've never seen their wines in the east.

I've purposely avoided US wines outside of California in my sampling simply because I have enough room to explore European-grape wines. I did, quite recently, make one exception. A man named Philip Wagner has for years been experimenting with hybrid grapes. He makes three\*wines--a white, a rosé, and (surprise) a red. The first two are supposed to be good--the red has an even better reputation, bringing such praise as best US wine east of the Rockies. At \$1.69 or so.

\*Make that four. The fourth has a german-sounding name; I knew nothing about the wine.

a bottle, who could resist for long? Not I.

The wine is Boordy's Red Wine. There are two wines of this name--one from New York, one from Maryland. The Maryland wine is the one with the good reputation. And the wine is fantastic! It's not a wine of great character, nor one with fine nuances of taste, nor yet one that needs to be sipped. It's a big, happy, fresh, fruity, dry red wine. It's somewhat fuller than my wine of Dijon, but here is the same basic character. It's funny, I was quite resistant to trying the wine. Maryland and wine just don't connect. Wow. They do now. Drink it young, slightly cool--it's as nice a wine of its type as I hope to run into. Young does mean just that, by the way--1970 is thoroughly ready to drink now, and has been for some months.

As to the French wines, on which I've devoted most of my wine attention, I don't think you need a run-down of my experiences. There are many worthy books on the subject, and I'll cite these later. (I perhaps should mention that in the use of the word many I've borrowed from Bjo, whose counting goes roughly "one, two, many.") There may be and quite probably are more than three. The fourth and higher books have eluded me.

The wine books tell you about wines. Various things--the grapes, the vineyards, the vintners, the laws. How to serve them, store them, open them. They provide vintage tables, and tell you why you shouldn't believe a vintage table. They tell you why buying a bordeaux is so much simpler than buying a burgundy: in the first case the wine will almost always be bottled by the owner, and a single vineyard (Chateau) will have a single owner (or owning company); in the second some vineyards may have fifty or more owners, and owner-bottlings ("estate" or "domaine" bottling in Burgundian terminology) are far less common than in Bordeaux. A few of the books even address the question of how to choose a wine merchant, but since most wine books come to us from England the information about Christie's wine sales is of little immediate value.

So, assuming you want to buy more than a bottle or two of wine for a holiday, how do you choose a merchant?

Well, first, if you live in Pennsylvania, move. Other states also believe that only the state should sell alcoholic drinks. Move.

Welcome to Maryland, or Colorado, or someplace. I hope you haven't moved to California. Foreign wines have tough sledding there.

You moved to DC? Good. Taxes are low. And you have a choice. You can pay \$3.59 for a 1966 Chateaux Nenin--or \$5.95. \$1.99 for a Cibs St. Jean--or \$3.99. It's fun.

Long and long ago dad gave me some good advice on driving. "Assume the other guy is out to get you." The advice is equally good for buying wine, or cars, or houses, or stocks. There may be other products that qualify--those are the first four that come to mind.

You can easily shoot 10% of your cost on a house or a car--waste it completely when a little shopping around could have provided a bargain--or at least a better bargain. We won't talk about stocks, where the price is (at any moment) fixed and you only get stung because of failure to realize that the sole purpose of any one else in the market is to get some of your money--and they happen to succeed. Wine is somewhat different than any of these. It's a relatively low cost item by the unit (bottle), varying from a bottom of maybe 99¢ for an adequate Spanish wine to \$25 for a bottle of Lafite Rothchild of reasonable age. You can go higher. One store I know wants \$35.08 (what an odd price!) for a 1969 Romanee-Conti. Another asks \$60 for the same wine. And I've seen older Lafite's and other wines--particularly Trockenbeernauslen--listed for \$200 and more. That's about \$10 an ounce.

The main point, however, is that the prices will vary widely from store to store. The reasons are innumerable. One outfit that I rather like prices a wine when it comes in, and for as long as they have that shipment, that's the price. Other stores, somewhat more logically, raise their prices over time, for both new and old stock. Some price only year alone--one store's best 1965 Bordeaux are now in the \$9 range--a price well within reason if sheer age were the only thing that mattered. '65 was a generally miserable year, and the best '65 going, Chateau Haut Brion, can be had for \$4.29. On wines, if you're not alert, you can easily waste (i.e., spend needlessly) 50% of your purchase price.

When time permits, I visit a new liquor store. A store not seen can hold a treasure. A Clos de Beze for \$3.49. The one bottle found waits my pleasure in the basement. The dealer goofed--that's an \$8 bottle. Since tother wines he had were equally overpriced I didn't worry too much. If I knew Latin I'd quote the phrase for the opposite of Caveat emptor.

You have to know what you're buying. Not in detail, but as an entity. A Chateau La Pointe, 1966, Pomerol, is not a Chateau La Pointe, 1966, St Emilion. A Corton Charlemagne 1966 Bonneau du Martray is not a Corton Charlemagne 1966 A. Montigny. (I might mention that the varied spellings and even the neames are from memory, and the memory of one that never studied French, with only occasional reference to such factual documentation as a wine label. In this particular case, the first party named is the owner of a particular plot(s) of the vineyard which French law permits to be called "Corton

Charlemagne," and is an individual who makes his own wine, from the grapes of his section(s) of that vineyard, and bottles the resultant wine. The second party is a wine "negociant"-- merchant. The section of land ("Corton Charlemagne") was the same, the year the same, but the wine is a blend of that from several owners of chunks of that particular little rounded hill. Which is the better wine is for you to say. The better price--I can buy the Bonneau for \$4.69, the other for \$4.09. But the better bargain? Well, I bought a Les Clos, 1969, Droin. It at least shares with the Corton Charlemagne the characteristic of being a white burgundy--and it's a "better" bargain for me, price and tastes considered.

Go visit a few wine stores. Try to remember names and years. For wines from Bordeaux (those with the sharply pronounced shoulders to the bottle, and almost invariably with the phrase "Mis en Bouteilles Au Chateau"), spot and price a few of those most commonly seen. "Giscours, '65, \$1.99." That's all you need remember--for Chateau Giscours. As mentioned before, for Chateau La Pointe and many others, more detail will be required. When you hit the burgundies, you have to watch for the grower's (or the negociant's) name as well.

It takes time, and it's confusing, but you're learning not only store, but how to read a label. You'll find one or two that are competitively priced--and a couple of others that sometimes have a bargain. The rest is a simple matter of location, hours, how you like the employees--knowledge, service, willingness to answer questions--and the care they exercise with their wine.

As to the contents of the bottles, there's nothing to replace experience. Wine groups, such as Les Amis du Vin, are the best way to sample the variety available.

The books I would recommend are WINE, by Hugh Johnson; THE VINTAGE WINE BOOK, by William S. Leedom; and WINES OF FRANCE, by Alexis Lichine. Both the Johnson and Leedom books cover the wines of all countries, and both do an admirable job. Johnson is a little more reliable, and quite a bit more readable, but Leedom is still a valuable source. More specialized books, such as Yoxall's THE WINES OF BURGUNDY you may want to dig into after the general texts. I should also mention Masee. He is good, as good as any of the others mentioned. He has several books out, some rather specialized, so examine carefully to insure you're getting the kind of detail you want. Finally, avoid the two current paperbacks--one from Signet, the other from Penguin. Buy a bottle of Macon Blanc instead. It won't cost much more, and you'll get better information about wine from the bottle than from these books.

The Leedom, incidentally, is a paperback--from Vintage Books.