

N is for Nature

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There are people who think what makes a good wine comes from nature - factors like rain and soil and temperature. Then there are those who think it's a matter of second nature - of picking and fermenting and ageing. But thesedays, there's a whole new world of wine making technology - and a whole new argument as to what is "natural" and what is not.

Thesedays, its chemists rather than vigneronns who are increasingly in charge of technique. It is illegal in the United States and in many other countries to add flavours or colourings. But it isn't illegal to add oak chips to wine fermenting in stainless steel barrels to get that "oak finish" promised on the label.

Adjustments can be made in the level of carbon dioxide, to vary acidity and fruitiness, or grape juice can be introduced as a sweetener. Powdered tannins can be added for a firmer feel on the palate. Pressure can be used to separate alcohol from acid. The technique known as micro-oxygenation aerates the wine and gets around the need for the age old and labourt intensive process known as racking.

These increasingly popular technologies shift wine making away from the idea of a process subject to regional variations in climate and seasonal variations in weather. Nature no longer rules; second nature eliminates the necessary vaguaries of wind and water and sunshine. While the images and copy on the labels still refer to the wine makers ancient status as an alchemical transformer of nature into art, the reality is otherwise.

But there's a whole new transformation going on, which takes wine making a step further away from the natural world. The Enologix company of Sonoma, California, makes software that predicts how a wine will rate in reviews even before it is made. Many winemakers think that the fortunes of their wine has less to do with whether they had a vintage year and more to do with the fashions current among the influential wine reviewers.

Robert M. Parker, who reviews for *Wine Spectator* magazine, says "my scores have led to higher quality at all price levels." But many would argue that his influence leads to a homogenisation of the wine, as each company tries to second guess the contemporary trends in flavours.

As Guy Debord once put it: "An era which finds it profitable to fake by chemical means various famous wines, can only sell them if it has created wine experts able to con their marks into admiring their new, more distinctive flavours."

"Whenever people lose the capacity to see things for themselves, the expert is there it offer an absolute reassurance", Debord says. In the case of wine, the media shifts from representing the gold standard in taste to creating a floating currency of value.

Wine, once a liminal product, hovering on the border between nature and second nature, between the world of wind and rain and the world of collective human labour and skill, becomes an index of a further development in the human relation to nature - the development of "third nature".

It is only when second nature develops that nature appears as a concept. Once the techniques are in place for making nature into a resource, for trapping or taming it, an appreciation arises for nature in its raw state, a state that only appears at the point where it is no longer a general condition. What cultures represent to themselves as nature is always a world we have lost. Nature, which appears as an origin, appears only retroactively, as it disappears.

The lost world of nature exercises a magic fascination over culture, which expresses itself in its finest form as romanticism. But it also expresses itself as a consumer preference, for that which is close to nature, for that which, while produced, exposes itself in its production to the serendipity of wind and rain. In spite of the fashion for organic foods and herbal remedies, the most enduring product of this hankering for a lost nature is wine.

But that very hankering for a lost nature produces its opposite, a second nature. The expanded demand for wine as a commodity leads to techniques which eliminate the vagaries of season and the peculiarities of region. It becomes second nature to prefer a natural product, but that natural product is only appears as natural because of the huge investment in a second nature of industrialised production.

The canny consumer knows about the manipulation of the appearance of nature. This is where media plays the critical role in asserting the value of the product, its authenticity. If it is not authentic in every detail of its production, a case can be made for the authenticity of its consumption - for the veracity of its flavour. Wine becomes an artifact of third nature, of the management of appearances, the valuation of signs, a third nature capable of transforming any product of second nature's industrial ingenuity into the sign of its opposite.

The very dependence of wine on the aura of nature makes it a prime candidate for this kind of vectoral transformation. It comes to depend on the owners and managers of third nature, a vectoral class and their hired specialists in communication. "It must not be forgotten that every media professional is bound by wages and other rewards and recompenses to a master, and sometimes to several; and that every one of them knows he is dispensable", as Debord writes.

In order to achieve the veracity of third nature, winemakers resort to ever more advanced techniques. They step beyond the construction of the ideal environment for wine production. They invest in processes rooted not in agriculture but in biochemical information. At the production as at the consumption end, information worms its way into the life cycle of the vintage.

And so too do the owners of information. On the one side, the chemists and even the computer programmers, making production safe for the reviewers, and on the other, the reviewers, making consumption safe for the consumer, who is spared the indignity of uncorking an uncharacteristic year.

But in the process, wine is no longer the archetypal transaction between the producer close to nature and the consumer's fidelity to his/her own nose. A third party inserts itself into the game, the owners and distributors of the information through which the appearance may be preserved of this once hallowed but long lost relation.

Into every unexpected nook and cranny of culture and economy, a vectoral class asserts its prerogatives, and the producing of the signs of production takes the place of the production of what once preceded the sign. The appearance of nature is preserved -- despite the preservatives - through the construction of a third nature in which the sign of nature itself becomes a commodity.

A HACKER MANIFESTO 2.0

http://www.feelergauge.net/projects/hackermanifesto/version_2.0/

NOTES

Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Verso, London, 1990, pp16-17; Alice Feiring, "For Better or Worse, Winemakers Go High Tech", Business, *New York Times*, 26th August 2001.