

HUGH JOHNSON SHARES HIS NOTES ON SPECIAL BOTTLES

## Drinking without thinking

The sign of Pisces determines thirst, I'm told. We Pisceans are well endowed with it. It also determines that the heart rules the head. Hence, I suppose, my *coups de coeur*. Ratiocination comes rarely, is of questionable quality, but does reach the surface every now and then—in reaction to works of popular science, for example.

I don't think Malcolm Gladwell applies his *Blink* principle to wine. I fell asleep, I am afraid, on page 25, in his long disquisition on a fake antique and how it was spotted by a famous expert who found the word "fresh" on the tip of his tongue. Gladwell's rather labored book expounds the idea that hunch matters more than technical evaluation. Wine would have given him endless case studies, but anyone could have told him that the first sniff is the truest gauge. If it tells you something, believe it.



then over the Alps to the Veneto, trying to find a model it would fit precisely. It was dark for a Loire red, ripe and round, even a trifle tough.

Blind tasting is a humiliating snare. Anyone who has played the options game devised by the late and much-missed Len Evans knows the

South Australia? Cab or Cab Shiraz? Rutherglen or Bendigo? 1990s or 2000s? 2001 or 2002?

That's at postgraduate level, I grant. More frequently the questions are "Left Bank or Right Bank? St-Julien or Margaux?" before closing in on the chateau and the vintage. Roald Dahl, of course, made a version of this inquisition the core of a story of attempted skulduggery. (It was Chateau Branaire.)

### Identity parade

Every winemaker wants the identity of his wine to matter above all. Not every consumer thinks it is that important. There is a debate here that we might as well bring out into the open. Of the pleasures that wine gives you, what proportion is simply sensual, finding a delicious drink no matter what its name may be, and what proportion is related to its identity?

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How many times have I ignored the "blink" instantly thought Pomerol, and ended by hesitantly suggesting Margaux? You can, or should be able, to get there by analysis, but your nose is your shortcut to memory. Trust it.

What wine made me think of Gladwell who has been voted, unless I'm mistaken, Public Intellectual Number One? Or was that General Petraeus?

The "blink" wine was a Chinon, of the lovely 2005 vintage. I almost saw the Loire before my eyes as I breathed its sweet, soft fruit, with a hint of green, Cabernet Franc, of course, or possibly Merlot? Foolishly, I carried it in my mind's eye around Bordeaux,

bitter self-reproach of first thinking California, then Bordeaux, then Coonawarra (aha! Of course), only to be told the answer is Sonoma.

Anyone who has not played options needs the rules. The chairman (self-appointed, bumptious, a sadist) causes a wine to be served blind to everyone at table. "Northern or southern hemisphere?" is his first question. "Raise your hand for northern." Half the hands go up. "You're wrong, it's southern." Crestfallen looks follow from parties who had been eloquent on rare vintages a moment before.

Next question: South America or the Antipodes? More stricken expressions. And so on, Victoria or

The chap in the blue corner, the identifier, is essentially a collector. He may well derive as much pleasure from the nose and the lingering palate of a good glass as the man opposite him, the pure sensualist, but his true satisfaction is related to the label. It would put him on the rack to show him a great wine blind and refuse to confirm its identity. Show him half a dozen glasses of wine, and he will want to know if they are vertical, or horizontal, or random, what their relationship is, and above all to identify "the best."

There is an element of this urge in all of us. What a pity, we would say, not to know the producer and the vintage at least, so we can find the



same thing again. How do we do on the sensual side? Can we lose ourselves in the sheer hedonistic delight of a beautiful bottle for its own sake, taking no notes and asking no questions? I sometimes envy those who can.

#### Natural resistance

Here is a sobering thought for the collector, though: We may be living in the golden age of the wine label. We can all understand the reasons why they multiply. Every ambitious

We know Nicolas Joly, Anne-Claude Leflaive, and their friends would rather die than accept genetically modified vines, but the great majority of vintners, I believe, will eventually do their sums and make the most of what science offers.

It may give us better vines than any we can imagine. How will we react if an even tastier clone of Chardonnay gives Le Montrachet an unimaginable extra excitement? If Pichon Baron can suddenly taste like Latour? If village wines can equal

in the Napa Valley, it was a ripe-grape year with some wonderful results. I had a personal reason to collect it: It was the year my wife and I met and spent a (rainy) vintage together at her family's château in the Médoc.

Now that its career is almost over, I am ready to name my wine of the vintage. Having loved the Latour, the great Haut-Brion and Pétrus, a memorable Pavié, many glorious Burgundies, as well as Champagnes and German wines, I give the golden palm to Rioja.

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producer wants his wines to be recognized and asked for by name. To emphasize the uniqueness of his style and stress its intimate connection with his terroir is his whole aim. The unique indigenous yeasts of his cellar come into play, and so may the clones he selects among his own vines. Trial and error—or, rather, trial and more trial—is the name of the game.

But will this soon seem a primitive use of resources? When there are more certain measures available, when the genome of wines is available on the Internet, will it seem so clever to be taking cuttings? Will we look back on today's practices as groping in the dark and on the vineyard characters we prize merely as superstitions from the dark ages?

If science can make mice luminous by implanting a gene from a jellyfish, it can certainly add characteristics considered desirable to grapevines. What would growers sacrifice to be relieved of mildew, or to increase the crop by 20 percent without losing quality?

premiers crus; and premiers crus, grands crus? How many of us will insist on keeping the status quo?

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#### Palme d'Or of 1964

Collectors of the 1964 vintage have had some lovely wines to enjoy over the past 43 years. Heavy rain in the Médoc mid-vintage tarnished its reputation, but on the Right Bank, in Burgundy, the Loire (especially) and in Champagne, in Germany, and even

I still have a few bottles left. López de Heredia made famous wines that year, including a white wine that could be Haut-Brion—still pale, waxy, pungent, and vital.

The other night we opened a less famous bottle—Reserva 904 from La Rioja Alta, imported by the one merchant in England in those days who took Spain seriously: Laymont & Shaw, of Truro in Cornwall. Here are my notes: "The wine of the year? I can't find the word for the deep, just fading, brilliant red, unless it is blood, or for the velvet-smooth texture of a wine brought painstakingly to perfection by racking from barrel to barrel over several years. Is it wallflowers I smell? Certainly sweet spring flowers rather than fruit, or autumn, or age. Unbelievable balance and style, a masterpiece of engineering; sweet warmth (but only 12.5% alcohol, changing very gradually over two hours toward prunes and creamy mushrooms. A hint of Port, with the cut, astringency, and length of claret. Glorious in scent, texture, flavor, and persistence." ■