
VIN BLANC

by Jim Harrison

A FEW DECADES AGO it occurred to me that so much of life for a novelist and poet is flying solo and usually in a remote area above the Matto Grosso. There are no lights in the world below, and should you be lucky enough to crash gently on a canopy of trees you will be met by hordes of ancondas and fer-de-lances after you shinny down a tree trunk. We are isolated stockbrokers of life's essences, and it is always 1929.

The grand thing about wine is that it's something you get to do with other people, along with the noble sports of fishing and hunting. When your "eye is in fine frenzy rolling," as Shakespeare would have it, you forget that you are a tribal creature and need the company of others. There is a grand pleasure in opening a good wine and cooking with friends. In fact, opening fine wine is as near to the sacramental as I get, having abandoned organized religion in my teens after a Baptist minister told me that Mozart's music was "satanic." Everywhere we are witness to the extreme confidence some people have in their stupidities.

As the years have passed you might say that I sought my spirituality through food and wine, a pleasant place to look for spirituality along with the natural world. Just the other day I was floating the Big Hole River trout fishing with a friend. About a half-hour from our destination and the end of a good fishing day we anchored in an eddy and opened a bottle of chilled Bouzeron. The wine seemed as mysteriously delicious as the flowing river. We drank in silence, watching clouds of swallows and bullbats swoop after the late afternoon insects. There isn't a three-star restaurant in France that offers a better location to drink wine. Just before finishing the bottle we suddenly had to move on because a mother moose and her baby plunged through the wild roses on the nearby bank. This is like being roused by the world's largest bar bouncer, about a thousand pounds to be exact.

This has been a time of reconsiderations for me. Only last year it would have been unthinkable for me to have a bottle of white wine in the drift boat. I connect hunting and fishing with the color of blood. With type II diabetes, however, two bottles of red wine a day became inappropriate, a euphemism of course. One bottle a day is possible with a proper morning walk with the dogs, or rowing a drift boat for four hours in a fairly heavy current.

My true, personal revolution came in Parma, Italy, last autumn. I discovered that I could have a glass of Prosecco di Valdobbiadene and then continue on with the hard work of tourism. Naturally I prefer markets to cathedrals. When I have a glass of red I mostly want another glass of red. I spent hours in the splendid market in Modena on a single glass of Prosecco. I even discovered that when

you drink Prosecco while cooking you don't blow the recipe. When I explained my discovery to my friend Mario Batali, he said, "Everybody knows that." He's a big fellow to say the least and regularly drinks Prosecco while he cooks. When we got home I ordered a number of cases and my cooking has improved. The red arrives when the game birds are properly roasted, not before.

I find that I often discover things that many people know. It reminds me that when we discovered the Grand Canyon there were already a thousand Havasupai Indians living within it. When I talked to a number of sophisticated friends about how appalled I was after seeing *Mondovino*, they lectured me on my innocence as an immature hermit, which is the essential trajectory of the novelist and poet.

Mondovino somewhat bruised my sacramental feelings about wine, but not for all that long. I quickly realized that the wine world shares a specific silliness with the worlds of art, literature, and food, not to speak of religion. At times all of these are a microcosm of the boxing world with a dozen Don Kings at the top. It is the silliness of myopia, the frog at the bottom of the well pit that thinks the well pit is the world. When I'm told that Napa Valley is the new Vatican of the wine world I say that it reminds me more of a fiefdom of Pat Robertson. To be fair and since I know them so well I have to say that for pure shabbiness the worlds of art and literature, the worlds of galleries and publishing, that Wal-Mart of words, wine takes third place.

My bruises from *Mondovino* healed rather quickly when I realized yet again that taste is idiosyncratic. There is no Monoethnic Palate to guide us, no numerical Ten Commandments to guide us with a steely embrace. Of course this is a paint by number world. Learning the world for most of us is a permanent elementary school. If you need to know what refrigerator to buy, check out *Consumer Reports*, and any amateur with a chunky wallet can concentrate on the hundred best vintages in the world. It's the next ten thousand vintages that are up for grabs. Around here in Montana there are eco-ninnies who love the natural world with a severely limited and prescriptive guidebook. Everywhere we go we also meet wine-ninnies.

Back to Bouzeron and the spirit of wine and the fact that I didn't discover this affordable wine earlier because I was basically a red wine snob. Of course on occasions I liked Puligny-Montrachet, Meursault, Sancerre, Silex, Domaine Tempier rosé when my wife and daughters would share their well-guarded horde of the latter. My first Bouzeron came with a meal of *poulet estragon* with roasted vegetables. I was a little dumbfounded by how much I liked the wine and immediately consulted my Wine Master in Seattle, Peter Lewis, who explained de Villaine's Aligoté thusly: "It is utterly pleasant and unassuming. You don't need to stretch or strain to appreciate it. It is uncomplicated; but that's not to say that it is simple. Just that the experience of it is not cerebral; it's sensual without being hedonistic." After describing certain technicalities Peter goes on to say, "It's a

quaffer, lovely to drink; in fact, at times it seems a little too easy to drink. It's one of those wines that seems mysteriously to evaporate from your glass—you weren't aware that you were drinking that much."

And there you have it. In any event, Bouzeron reminded me of my discovery of Domaine Tempier Bandol so long ago, a wine still guaranteed to counteract the weariness brought about by the corrosive parsimony of spirit found everywhere in America today. A wine that you love haunts you by ordinary means. I was struck dumb by my last bottle of 1968 Château d'Yquem in my diminished cellar, but when you find a wine you truly love under twenty bucks you should bow down and give thanks to the gods.

I have had reason to be quite embarrassed lately, a rare emotion for me. I have long poked fun at the pathetic attempts professional tasters make to characterize wine in terms of fruit other than grapes. I was caught severely off balance when Kermit Lynch sent me a case of mixed whites to dabble with. I felt immediately trapped by the ineffable mystery of taste. A ripe peach tastes exactly like a ripe peach. A fine porterhouse tastes like nothing else in the world but a fine porterhouse. Brouilly tastes like Brouilly, which I have drunk dozens of times at Café Select on Montparnasse. Good flavors are described in a general atmosphere of pleasure. Bad flavors are easier to describe because of the immense world of shared experience. So this case of varied white wines trapped me both in my own limitations as a writer and in the rather obvious limitations of language itself. I make countless aesthetic decisions when composing a novel but am far less comfortable making critiques of the work of others. With wine it is especially difficult because you must approach the bottle at the level of the vintner's intentions, just as it is pointless to say that Stephen King isn't as good as William Faulkner.

So here I am hoisted by my own petard but still refusing to introduce my case of white to the local fruit market. Here are a few favorites, leaving a number of them in silence.

1. *Domaine de la Tour du Bon 2004*: Pretty good but a little sweet for my taste. Acceptable on a warm twilight watching birds from our patio in Patagonia, Arizona. One of the thousands of wildflowers I can't name even though I like them all. Naturally had to open a red for the rather musky buffalo shank stew I had made for dinner.

2. *Philippe Fauray Saint Joseph 2004*: My father was an agronomist who with eyes closed could name the weeds and grasses he smelled. Naturally I can detect a herring egg sandwich when I bite into it. In this wine I can taste the stones of the Rhône Valley. The place suits me and so does the wine.

3. *Condrieu 2004—Fauray*: This wine was easy because I drank it with a sauté of pike, perch, and bluegill fillet Fed Exed to me as a gift from Minnesota. There was an edge of tartness I revere in expensive wines and it was very friendly with the fish.

4. *Ermitage du Pic St. Loup*: This was also easy because I love the *terroir*, and had pleasant memories of drinking it in a café in the grand square of Montpellier while watching the prettiest woman in France walk by. This wine tastes as soft and pleasant as the back of a girl's knee after she has taken a dip in the Mediterranean. I drank it with the light-breasted scaled quail I had shot, then downshifted to the mighty Vacqueyras, Sang des Cailloux, for the shoulder of wild pig.

5. *Château la Roque*: I'm served this frequently in France while I'm waiting impatiently for the red. I have learned to like it and turn to it when I find a bistro list flimsy. I love odd menu items like beef snout in vinaigrette (the best is at the wine bar Rubis in Paris) and the la Roque can stand up to it.

I have not betrayed my first love, red wine. I have only tried to balance my unbalanced taste. White wine has offered me a specific equilibrium to my travels and at home where I try to mind my manners. Since I have leavened my wine drinking with white I haven't had a single gout attack which in the past was a regular event. It's hard to be on a book tour in France when you're walking like Joe Cocker. Being an idiosyncratic man with idiosyncratic tastes I still won't drink white wine after dark. The darkness beckons red.

CAFÉ ROUGE OR ROSÉ?

FOR ONE SUMMER EVENING Café Rouge down on Berkeley's Fourth Street is not living up to its name. They are going Café Rosé, and each and every rosé will be a KLWM selection. Is that cool, or not? All will be available by the glass, so you will be able to play the field and taste around.

What good is a rosé without a red to follow it? Don't worry. They have not banned reds.

Last year's event was such a treat, the food pairings beautifully selected and the rosés at the perfect temperature. Phone 510-525-1440 for reservations.

WEDNESDAY EVENING, AUGUST 16

1782 FOURTH STREET, BERKELEY, CA