

Parker's demise offers hope for Bordeaux

by Philip Ulanowsky

At long last, Wall Street's golem of the wine world, critic Robert Parker, is getting his due. He has had it coming for a long time, but only recently have some of the wine establishment decided that enough is enough. Mr. Parker's illegitimate, decade-long reign as wine oracle, as supreme arbiter of taste and quality (read: saleability), has not only addicted a generation of yuppies to his mystical 100-point rating pronouncements, but has played a major role in leading many of the world's great winemakers to compromise their art, to make wines to suit the ratings, in order to sell, rather than making wines that will do poorly in early tastings but mature into masterpieces over decades.

Thus, we now get top Bordeaux that are ready to drink in only a few years. Of course, the wines taste delicious, a result not only of meticulous and artful winemaking on great properties, but also of improvements in technology which have added degrees of control previously unavailable to the winemaker. But the wines will not last. The worthy tradition of saving a bottle of fine wine from the year of a child's birth to their year of maturation, will die.

The speculative orgy of the 1980s is over. Older, wiser heads in the wine world now must take the bold, necessary step of casting aside its precepts and institutions—free trade, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the despised International Monetary Fund, and derivatives and similar games—and putting their influence behind an economic policy, based on Hamiltonian principles, that will provide the stability and productive prosperity necessary for a return to the great winemaking traditions. In this, they will find economist Lyndon LaRouche an essential ally.

The lesson of Harvard's Sachs

Parker's demise, now being presaged by articles popping up in the trade press and elsewhere, should not be underestimated as a signal of serious moves under way to cure much of what has infected the wine world for the past 12 years. Parker epitomizes a cultural disease, as we shall explain. His powerful backing, like that for Harvard's Jeffrey Sachs, explains the reluctance of those who truly appreciate wine's cultural role to move against him. With the pending collapse of the derivatives markets and the substantial political power that hangs on them, however, some in the wine establishment are perhaps more willing to risk angering the powers that be. They should look at the fate of Sachs. Having imposed

destruction on economies in South America and eastern Europe, Sachs was given *carte blanche* for some time to wreak his havoc in Russia. His backing was from the top; no one would touch him. However, a breaking point was reached, and Sachs was recently shown the door in Russia; his backers were evidently unable to do anything about it.

Bad advice and magic numbers

Robert Parker emerged from relative obscurity as a small-time wine writer in 1982, when he proclaimed 1982 the year of the century for Bordeaux wines, producing wines to be opened beginning in the year 2000. The Bordelais and those in the trade with long experience knew otherwise. The growing season had produced fruit with an abundance of flavor but without the classic structural characteristics for long aging. Nonetheless, a whirlwind of speculation began, driving prices up and splashing headlines about Bordeaux everywhere.

Out of this frenzy, Parker emerged as a superstar, bringing with him his made-for-yuppies wine-rating numbers game. This little wizard would taste 100 or more wines a day (according to him) and rate each on a scale from 60-100, the almost never awarded 100 representing a perfect wine. As Americans surged into the wine market, advertisements from wine stores to supermarkets (in permitting states) started including tag lines with his ratings for all possible wines. They sell. Indeed, yuppies review lists of his ratings for hours, agonizing over whether to buy a \$15 wine rated by RP as 89, or another for \$13.50, rated 88.

Great reds: the ugly ducklings

Wine made for long aging, however, is not so easily judged. To be palatable when finally opened, it must be possessed not only of very concentrated fruit but also a heavy dose of mouth-puckering tannin. Tannin is extracted from the grape skins and stems if the pressed juice is left in contact with them for an extended period, and from the oak barrels in which the wine is stored prior to bottling. As the wine develops in the bottle, the tannins soften over time, through oxidation; but in the early years, little but tannin can be tasted. Thus, the instant rating game has no place.

For centuries, the best red wines of Bordeaux have been a standard by which others were measured. The wines were made for long aging potential, sometimes developing their rich characters over spans of decades. Special tastings in recent years have continued to bring forth rare bottles of great chateaux from vintages 50, 70, even 100 years ago that still retained vitality and complex flavor. But even up until a decade or so ago, one found many chateaux of lower formal ranking, the so-called *cru bourgeois*, bottles purchased for just \$6 or \$8, whose wines were made traditionally, for long aging, and aged beautifully for 10 years or much longer.

Fine wines used to be sold, therefore, more on solid, well-earned reputation than on the basis of early tastings. After perhaps 5, 8, or 10 years, an experienced taster might

judge whether a great wine would be coming around in another five years, and maturing in a decade or two. Although Bordeaux winemaking practices reportedly changed around 1955 and 1970, leaning toward somewhat earlier maturation, the recent changes defy comparison.

Sense-certainty versus culture

Yuppies like the idea of buying wines with great aging potential, because by possessing them, they can impress others; but they are impatient by definition. Since the species relies on sense perception to make its judgments for embracing or rejecting something (the only middle ground being indifference to whatever cannot be grasped by the senses), yuppies want everything now. Wines made for long aging have to mature over time—a process that yuppies do not comprehend. Therefore, they buy what they can taste now, as long as Robert Parker gives it a high rating, a number which will impress their friends.

Like the careers of Sachs and Parker, however, yuppie domination of the wine market is coming to an end. The speculative bubble has popped, prices are starting their plunge. Wall Street's Parker faces an unhappy prospect: The 1980s that he proclaimed should not be drunk before the turn of the century, have reached their peak. Like a politician who rode into office on false promises, he is now faced with the need to admit that his vaunted '80s don't actually have it for the long haul—an admission which, reportedly, he is unwilling to make publicly.

How to save Bordeaux

Despite the hidden forces to be dealt with in dethroning Parker, his dismissal represents but a small challenge and little risk compared to that of rescuing the art of winemaking. Only a rational, stable economic environment provides the conditions under which wines may profitably be made in the traditional manner. The one road which leads to sane economics is the one which the most powerful financial interests will risk almost anything to block nations from taking. Not to take it, however, would be suicidal.

This road, this threat to the financial oligarchy, is the science of physical economy, pioneered by such republican leaders as Jean Baptiste Colbert in the 1600s, developed by Alexander Hamilton in the 1790s, as explained in his 1791 report to Congress *On the Subject of Manufactures*, and later championed both here and in Europe by the great Friedrich List. Today, following the collapse of communism and its twin dictatorship of so-called free trade, it is American economist Lyndon LaRouche whose advancement of this science of physical economy has gained the close attention of national leaders around the world, and deserves equal scrutiny in New York and Bordeaux. The point to be made is the following.

The actual source of all wealth lies not in the ground, not in natural or man-made resources, and certainly not in



Robert Parker has changed the way millions of people read a wine label. His magic numbers may be easier for yuppies to follow, but they are destroying the art of winemaking.

monetary instruments. The source is uniquely the individual human mind. Indeed, the history of the development of winemaking, carried to its highest level, exemplifies this. That history represents a continuing process of innovative individual contributions to the perfection of both the science and the art of winemaking, from the early days of cultivating superior grapes to the use of advanced technologies today.

The great winemakers of France, Italy, and other countries represent a high quality of labor power. They embody an institutional memory which cannot be replaced, a memory that typically extends over 40-60 years of direct experience and, by training and study, over generations. To force that quality of labor-power into effective retirement by imposing hedonistic standards onto a productive agricultural sector that also represents a significant and worthy contribution to western culture, is to risk losing it. One does not replace a lifetime of experience with a bright kid and how-to video, much less with a yuppie.

Thus, the effort to save Bordeaux may serve as a focal point for European winemakers in several countries. They would do well to link their efforts to those of other skilled workers, both in agriculture and industry, whose vital economic and cultural contributions are similarly being destroyed.

As for Robert Parker, the kindest gesture would be to send him to stand in line behind Jeffrey Sachs at the appropriate mental institution for the numerically insane.