

BODEGA CHACRA

PATAGONIA ~ RIO NEGRO

Highlander Wine & Spirits

February 4th, 2012

Wine of Place

This past Wednesday (February 1) a group of six winemakers from around the world hosted a panel discussion that centered on the notion of a movement towards a market that demands 'wines of place'. Trialto Wine Group is the importer for the six wineries represented, and Anthony Gismondi introduced the panel and directed the discussion.

The idea of 'wine of place' is not a new one. Much like the Slow Food movement, wine of place is a way back to more traditional philosophies. Wine of Place hinges on the notion that the varieties of grapes used to make wine should be a medium of expression for the place they are grown rather than as the dominant character of the wine. The places they are grown then must be healthy and unique in order for the wines to express well. Common terms like New World and Old World become more applicable to an approach to wine growing and wine making rather than as a reference to a wine's nation of origin. Many Old World (or European) growing regions never stopped this approach, and many Old World consumers rarely question it. The topic is geared more toward the reference point of the modern or New World wine consumer and producer, in that most wine is identified primarily by the grape variety with which it is made, with a geographical indication secondary. That all but one of the six wineries are in classically New World wine growing zones, while four of the six principals are European is not insignificant.

Laura Catena represented herself for Luca Wines and Catena Zapata from Argentina, Alberto Antonini for Haywire Winery out of Summerland, B.C., Telmo Rodriguez for his eponymous wine company, Isabelle Meunier for Evening Land Oregon, Jacques Lurton for Islander Estate Vineyards from Kangaroo Island, Australia, and finally Piero Incisa of **Bodega Chacra** out of Patagonia, Argentina.

This panel proved to be lively, as the group shared two striking similarities: jocular senses of humour and ravenous pioneering spirits. Allow me to point out the irony of a pioneering spirit driving a move to older ways. But it is ironic only in semantics, for Laura Catena explained how much courage it took for these people to do what they do. In all instances, the decision to grow wine where they do and how they do it were considered folly by their peers. Not only did they head into undiscovered growing places (the very definition of pioneer), but they embraced wine making practices that oppose the contemporary wisdom, philosophy or customs of the countries in which they grow.



Laura Catena spoke of family, Alberto Antonini of a living vineyard, Telmo Rodriguez of amazing places, by which he did not necessarily mean appellations or regions (and if I could reproduce his persistent emphasis on the word 'place' I would), Isabelle Meunier of a shared curiosity in a quest for the 'perfect garden' and Jacques Lurton of the human element and the freedom to explore. Finally, Piero Incisa somehow tied it all together, speaking of the commercialization of grape variety, of biodiversity and biodynamics as a way of life, of 'wines of consequence', of consumer curiosity and the importance of equilibrium. At the same time, he seemed the

least romantically idealistic, the most grounded, the first one to acknowledge that not all wine can or should be esoteric.

I had a few questions after all was said and done. Gismondi began by proclaiming that 'a change is coming' in the wine world. He stated that these people were the vanguard of the message. Gismondi asked Telmo Rodriguez "Can we make accessible wines at lower prices that are wines of place?" My observation was that here were six people talking to a room of fifty wine-geeks; they were proselytizing the converted. The larger issue is that these fifty geeks live and work in a city of one million that is in a country of thirty two million. A country that is significant neither as a wine producing nor consuming nation by world standards. Assuming the hopeful answer to Gismondi's question is yes, the bigger questions for me are: a) is the goal to make the majority of modern consumers aware of this distinction, b) if so, is it then possible to create demand for those wines and c) how do we accomplish a & b?

Of course the responsibility is shared. It is my job as a seller and lover of these wines to get others excited about them. It is the wine growers' job to first make such wines, then market them, then begin movements as they have. It is the consumers' responsibility to maintain a curiosity.

Or is it? Though I am the first one to champion wines of place and the last one to drink mass-produced industrial wine, it is not for me to decide for what reason a consumer buys a wine. I do not get to judge another for their own preferences. Thus if we are to see Gismondi's vision through, we would need to enlist the larger producers with deep pockets, big marketing budgets and strong political and economic influence to jump on board. The catch-22 is that to do so would be a self-defeating act, for those companies exist on the scale they do because of their ability to produce wine on an industrial scale.

I will not pretend to be able to answer the question, but only point out some of the issues. And perhaps it all comes back to equilibrium. You cannot have a movement if you are not moving against something. A movement has to start somewhere. Wine of Place needs Wine of Industry to exist. Wine of Industry keeps the economics balanced and provides a suitable choice for the majority of modern (and dare I say, 'new world') consumers. However the very argument is that wine of industry is not sustainable, for if we continue to sterilize our soils, drain our rivers and remove the human element from the process, eventually there will be no produce to supply the process. Thus the move toward wine of place.

Perhaps the purpose is not to make the majority aware of the distinction, or to cause them to seek out these wines. Perhaps it is just to reach as many as possible, however few we may be. I agree with the substance of Gismondi's grand pronouncements if not the scale that he implied.

At one point, Piero Incisa explained that the best way to make a wine of place is to do as little as possible in the vineyard, for every action has a reaction. The beautiful irony is that somehow, one must be wise and supremely able at non-action. Perhaps this approach can be applied to the quest to get the message out. Make the Wine of Place; then let us find it.

| by Matt Browman