

## Nudging sublimity

IT'S NOT OFTEN that I keep a cork. Memories of enough bottles swirl around in my head without having to have a cork collection or a label library. But this one was exceptional: 44 years old and still pale, perfect, sweet-drawing, just red-painted by the wine on the end, with no staining up the side at all. Flawless—no creases, cracks, or spots. What every young cork should aspire to but very few achieve. The result: a flawless, perfectly developed wine. I can't prove the causality. Post hoc is not propter hoc. An odd coincidence, then: It was a sublime bottle of Château Palmer 1966.

To live in the shadow of a greater vintage is not such a terrible fate. I'm sure every bottle of Palmer '66 has heard the same remark: "Not quite the '61, but..."; with this bottle, I came down heavily on the "but..." It was the most beautiful bottle of Palmer—perhaps even of any Margaux—I remember drinking (and would I be likely to forget?) The excitement started when the startlingly white cork slid so confidently out: The first glimpse of ruby/tawny and the neck of the



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half Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, leaving room for 6 per cent of Petit Verdot)? Is the Petit Verdot the perfume that nudges sublimity?

Years ago, there was a private experiment conducted among four crus classés, where they each made a small quantity of wine using each other's yeasts. The results

"Are we too late?" is probably a question more frequent in this household than many. It comes with maturity—of man and cellar. I am notorious for finding virtue in wines others consider senile. There is certainly a great difference, though, between dignified decrepitude and premature decay: disappointment in a bottle of white Burgundy gone flat at five years, and a 40-year-old claret with its balance gone, limping in trailing hints of past glory.

### Birthday honors

The true memento mori is a bottle of your birth year. Christian Moueix was too indulgent for my 70th birthday, sending me 1939 Château Ausone. I have drunk enough '39s in my time not to have overly lofty expectations. Latour is (or was) respectable. I had never met the *rarissime* (it certainly merits that description) Ausone.

My family calls it "doing a Broadbent," when I take a deep breath to justify a wine that reason says should have been despatched decades ago. I acknowledge the master, but who can keep silent in

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decanter coincided with the first sweet impact of the smell. How can perfume be so thrilling? In what way is the breath of the Margaux gravel more sweetly nuanced than the exhalation of St-Julien? Does this question even have any value? Palmer, after all, could be half across a commune boundary, like Pichon Lalande. Is it the commune, or is it the varietal mix (at Palmer, half and

frightened them: The crossovers were uncanny—too intense for comfort. It stands to reason that the cuverie, the *chai*, the soil, and probably the bedroom curtains harbor the memories, in the form of yeast cells, of centuries of vintages. Could the difference be locked up in a microscopic life form? Can I describe the '66? No; nor the lingering essence of a woman on a pillow.

the presence of a game survivor? "My" Ausone was preceded by a bottle of the nimblest, sleekest, most energizing Champagne: the 1996 Dom Pérignon. The Ausone was accompanied by a breast of duck and green peas. There were four of us, heads bowed. It gave us ten minutes of intense pleasure.

There was little color left, just a deep blush at the heart of a light

mahogany glass. (I didn't decant it.) The nose was as close to a frail old Burgundy as a Bordeaux. (Old-timers were always comparing St-Emilion to Burgundy.) A sappy woodland note, a green tinge

a couple of bottles at home, I was happy to see it paraded at the hospitable offices of Bordeaux Index, where my friend Michael Schuster conducts his tasting school, in company with the 1990.

You have to accustom yourself to the idiom, as it were. There is never, or very rarely, the sweet, earthy heart in Rhineland Pinot Noir that you find in the Côte d'Or. High-toned, herbal, misty, somehow cool and

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accompanied what richness it had. Richness had its moment, rising like a sun-warmed wraith from the glass for perhaps ten minutes, then evaporating to leave—not very much. The residue was rather hollow, very lean, faintly resinous but definitely exhausted. Everyone was too polite to mention my birthday.

#### Old-fashioned *desiderato*

Prospects, now—wines that are going to give us good cheer when they grow up. Looking at the 1996s recently, I had a *coup de coeur* in Vieux Château Certan. Maybe this is as good as it will get, I'm not sure. Now it is brimming with life, round,

Neither vintage is yet at its peak (there's a lot of future still to contemplate), but I thought the '96 had the spark of greatness in its firm underlying tannins and acidity. Another 30 years perhaps?

What to drink in the meanwhile? Now? Some of the beautifully balanced 2001s, is my answer. Château Figeac is magnificent; while Canon-la-Gaffelière is intensely fragrant with the fresh, open flavors I always associate with Cabernet Franc and Cheval Blanc.

#### Pinot Noir surprise

Two surprising and encouraging manifestations of Pinot Noir are hardy enough to counterbalance

faintly hard is the general outline. The bottle was an Assmannshäuser Höllenberg Auslese Trocken 2004 from the State Domaine at Kloster Eberbach. The interaction of cool fruit and, I suspect, slightly toasted oak was subtle, intriguing, and not at all Burgundian, but it was highly attractive *nonetheless*: crisp, complex, and admirably long.

Very different—and, to me, real news—was a Pinot Noir from Argentina. It took a Tuscan with a Danish winemaker to find a mature (they say 50-year-old) patch of good Pinot in the Rio Negro, where pears are the traditional main crop. Piero Incisa (of Sassicaia) and Anders Vinding Diers (son of my old friend

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Haut-Brion is more of a poser. Having been a bit disappointed in

the heavy Bordeaux weighting of this article. In any case, a good Pinot Noir from Germany should no longer be surprising—yet how many of us think of Spätburgunders as serious reds?

Peter) are responsible for Chacra, a lovely, delicate, minty Pinot Noir that signals yet another string to Argentina's bow. By some miracle, moreover, the 2006 vintage has only 12.5 degrees of alcohol. ■