A Matter of Taste. The semi-serious musings of a wine taster on the contentious prospects of professional tasting

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Abstract

During a Barolo en primeur tasting session, a seasoned wine taster is assailed by a procedural unease which leads him to question the foundations on which his work rests. Sparked off by his reading of Michel Le Gris’ pamphlet Dionysos crucifié, the taster’s objections and perplexities are directed towards teasing out the rules and coordinates of a tasting aesthetic which has become tamed and domesticated, at the service of a narcissistic “tyranny of instant gratification”. Such an approach translates into wines that are beaten into submission by interventionist winemakers, wines that derive from a tasting model that has been pre-emptively cleansed of tension or dissonance so as to exalt products that are easy, reassuring, docile to marketing logic, and increasingly similar. What sort of doubts, what interpretative friction can hope to reacquaint wine criticism with its true and original aims? What relations between the tongue that tastes and the tongue that speaks can respond to the needs of a new approach to wine appreciation, a ‘tasting different’?

Preface

It’s raining. It’s Wednesday and I’m in Piedmont, in the village of Barolo. The anteprima tastings, or previews, of the great red Nebbiolo wines have reached their third day. I’m here again this year in my role as the vice-curator of a well-known Italian wine guide. Around me, in the huge convention hall we’ve been given to work in, are all the most experienced Italian wine journalists, as well as a good number of international writers too. We’re tasting ‘blind’. After numbering and bagging the bottles to make them unrecognizable, the sommeliers pour
them for us in flights of five. The wines are arranged sequentially, by production zones, with the most recent vintages served first.

The first to be poured are the new-release 2010 reds from Roero, on the left bank of the Tanaro river. Next come the 2009 Barbarescos, and finally the 2008 Barolos. Within each denomination, the wines are also grouped by township and, whenever possible, by which slopes or vineyards they come from. For example: today we’ve reached the Barolo session and we’re tasting the wines from Serralunga. The sequence starts with estates whose vineyards are in Gabutti, Lazzarito and Margheria and proceeds to the more classic, or severe expressions that are found in Vigna Rionda and Cascina Francia.

Organized in this way, the panorama of the Langhe hills’ most important red wines is offered to the professional taster using a logic aimed at emphasizing the wines’ territorial matrix. The game of analogies and differences between the various expressive directions, the presumed recognizability of a certain winemaker’s ‘signature’ or of a particular estate’s style, are here subjugated to a higher order that is rooted in the vineyard, in the cru of provenance. This is a decision whose principle seems undeniable, a sacrosanct priority that organizers of events such as this are appropriating ever more frequently as they try to offer wine critics more effective interpretative bases for the consolidation of the main tasting models.

Yet I’m convinced that the sharing of such a model, which I have tried to explain perhaps a bit too hastily here, may actually not be as straightforward as it might appear. This apparent unity of intention, the synchronicity of gestures, the complicity of glances within our tasters’ community, when seen in the oblique light of a late spring morning in the Langhe, seems to me unusually precarious. I have the impression that it is precisely on this idea of the territoriality of wine that today a decisive match is being played, which threatens not only to break apart our pack of critics – already hardly a homogenous group – but to question the whole future of the communication about the taste and pleasure of drinking.

Indeed, if you look closely, it’s not just a question of allowing for a more meditated interpretative stance, capable of correlating the complexities of the various factors (seasonal climatic changes, soil characteristics, exposition and age of the vineyards, savoir-faire of the winemakers) in order to resist the temptation of communicating wine through the usual short-cuts of point-scoring and classifications. Or at least to support that scoring with more informed critical awareness. It’s not enough to comment on the data about the most recent vintage without resorting to simplistic slogans in order to present a more complex picture open to different levels of interpretation. All of this does come into it, certainly, but I think that the so-called maturity of wine criticism today should be put to the test by more radical questions that would allow for the possibility of going back to a critical reexamination of the taste of wine.
Which taste?

It is the taste of wine, explored «in the era of its industrial production», that forms the subject of an intense and persuasive book¹, the reading of which has most probably contributed to my sense of unrest in these hours. The author, Michel Le Gris, is a unique type of wine intellectual. A philosopher by training, he was formerly a music critic and now runs a wine shop in Strasbourg called Le Vinophile. If this morning I’m having so much trouble staying focused on the tannin structure of the Serralunga Barolos, it's partly his fault: I hope that at least some of the questions I’ve raised above will now be taken more seriously when seen in the light of his ideas.

What does Le Gris say? His reflections explore the boundaries of the notion of «sensorial servitude» and with extreme precision replot the coordinates of a taste’ aesthetic he feels has been trivialized and tamed. With incisive proficiency he enters into the liaisons dangereuses between the practices of today’s oenological interventionism and the correlated standardization of the paradigms of taste.

Beyond Le Gris’ philosophic melancholy about the decline of a world dominated by technocratic mercantilism, his book has the merit of painting a worrying picture of an all-too-real «tyranny of immediacy» that is essentially narcissistic in nature, and that dictates the making of wines that are increasingly subject to the logic of marketing. A logic that is necessarily conformist and belittling. It translates into a progressive reduction of the range of wine’s tactile and taste sensations as well as to the simplification of its perfumes, exacerbated by an aromatic violence that often degenerates into caricature.

If that’s how things stand, then the dominant landscape of taste today offers us the familiar features of bleak monotony. Le Gris takes us through it by presenting a meticulous depiction of the various oenological shortcuts used now to enable the creation of wines that are increasingly anonymous, as evidenced by the contradictions of a “medicine of wine” (as oenological science’s original mission had it) that becomes a formula for taste. It’s easy to see the downfall of much of modern winemaking in this trajectory. An oenology in which normal concerns for safety and hygiene often become obsessions that pile up in a race to sanitize every possible deformity preemptively in an artificial and unbearable taste model that only allows for wines with polished mouthfeel, amplified perfumes and sweet flavours. A model that seeks only the most obvious and captivating sensations, of which concentration and smoothness are the most important, and remains completely resistant to any expression of tension, restraint or dissonance in wine taste.

To be honest, my personal experience as a professional wine taster can’t help but recognize an embarrassing amount of truth in Le Gris’ words. In my daily wanderings through the multi-faceted panorama of wine, I’m continually thrown

¹Le Gris 1999.
into tastings in which the packaging of various oenological trickeries becomes apparent – here more obviously, there more subtly – from synthetic aromas to acidity correctors (and that’s to mention just two of the most common practices: there are many more, and many more worrying). Yet I’m convinced that only a small minority of my colleagues today would identify with this dilemma: that which to the few is a motive for embarrassment and unease, to the main body of tasters is seen as the ordinary manifestations of a reassuring oenological bible. If some of us complain of unnatural sensations in the taste development of a growing number of wines on today’s market, for the rest the feeling is the reverse: they are grateful for the prompt solicitude in the cellar that has enabled the wide range of wines on the market to exist. And, in the final analysis, the same reasons to be worried, for those who see in the surprising resemblances between wines made from different grape varieties in diverse areas the tell-tale signs of a frightening standardization of taste, are accepted by the rest as the toll that has to be paid to be saved from wines both rustic and unbalanced, conclusively laying to rest all the defects and solecisms that today are no longer acceptable.

*Tasting and speaking mouths*

A threat to biodiversity or a technical safeguard for an easier approach? Are these tragic precursors of an inexorable involution of taste, or standardizations of the protocols that enable even the smallest winemaker from Serralunga to propose his finely polished Barolo on the international marketplace? I keep finding objections and doubts to raise even as this third session of the Nebbiolo tastings draws to a close. And meanwhile, outside it has stopped raining, the tasters have turned off their computers, handed back their spittoons and left the convention centre with a tip of their hats.

In the ever-fuller annual calendar of tastings and trips, the community of wine tasters now moves around like a theatrical company on tour: respect and friendship go hand in hand with jealousy and controversy, the need to take a stand of the most engaged and passionate critics alternates with the irony of those who prefer the sidelines, while the brilliant intuitions of the sharpest talent scouts are matched by the inane ramblings of the inevitable freeloaders. As I watch them leave, I can already imagine the first comments about the results of the recent harvests in the Langhe being hissed through teeth blackened by Nebbiolo tannins. Who knows how many of them share my insufficiency towards these more extracted, muscular Barolos, so colour-laden, over-fruited and smoothed in their taste? And when we meet again over a beer, in a few hours’ time, who will be the first to distance themselves from all that complicated repertoire of cellar tricks (ever more refined in their fake neutrality, ever less distinguishable from the cover-up logic of *maquillage*) that managed to insinuate themselves with so few scruples even into an area as fiercely *contadino* as the Langhe, always so strongly bound to its traditions?
I hope it won’t have to be me. Frankly, I’m not keen on the role of the talk-
ing cricket. Le Gris is right when he asserts that «vinification is not fabrication» and that the pleasures tied to the taste of wine should never, ever, be predeter-
mined by a formula or guaranteed by a protocol. Unfortunately, the difference between the patient accompaniment of a wine during its stay in the cellar that respects the various expressions that vintage and terroir can give, and the restless urgency to commandeer its taste in order to guarantee the wine’s uniformity and thereby meet the changing demands of the markets seems ever more blurred. Even among the most combative opponents of agrochemical intervention – who hold high not only the ideals of ‘good’ wine, but also, equally important, wines that are ‘clean and fair’ – this critical sensitivity in tasting still seems to be in-
adequate, not only within the ranks of the wines’ producers but also among its coterie of itinerant professional tasters.

As we can see, the road that leads to the redefining of a clear and transparent relationship between a place ‘of origin’ and its wine is anything but straight. It’s likely that in the next few years the role played by technique will be put into a different perspective by both wine producers and wine critics. Many would like to see this involve a reduction in the amount of intervention used by pro-
ducers in the cellars, which would ideally coincide with more attention being paid to the vineyards as the only sure way of protecting and emphasizing the territorial character of a wine. Our role as professional tasters and critics is more controversial, if not paradoxical. Perhaps we have gone too far, often without even realizing it, beyond the orthodoxy of oenological grammar, forgetting that «the dynamic character and process of the tasting experience» also helps us to critically reassess the role of certain known solecisms.

Is it not in the wines that are the least colour-heavy, the clearest, most bare-
boned wines, even sharp at times in the potential of their lively acidity, and with some rigidity in the fabric of their tannins, that we have often discovered the most moving expressions of Nebbiolo in the Langhe? And is it not perhaps this insufficiency towards the conventional wisdom of an oenological formula, single-
minded in its pursuit of saturated colour, fruity intensity and oaky sweetness, that has allowed the best Barolos a more genuine intimacy with their specific birthplace? I’m convinced that the «other way of tasting» that Nicola Perullo speaks to us about so convincingly is driven by a paradoxical need to unlearn the exact and uniform language of oenological grammar. In the knowledge that the personality of a wine can also speak constructively through its occasional veils and hesitations. And that our irressipable search for transparent expression in wines could only be increased by a critical attitude towards a tasting model that is too easily influenced by the shifting vicissitudes of the market.

Seen from this perspective, the dialogue between the mouth that tastes and the mouth that talks is irreplaceable and the underscoring of the «linguistic

2 Nicola Perullo 2010 mentions it in the final paragraphs.
vocation of the act of tasting\textsuperscript{3} makes us weigh our words, and asserts taste as being worthy of the bonus of shared experience that is unique to us as humans. We need words that, once and for all, will stop presenting themselves as mere regurgitations of tasting impressions, naïve descriptions of sensory vitality, if we’re to regain interpretative dignity and assume responsibility, as much as possible, for a more radical critical understanding.

This is the moment to banish the seductive but lame, showy yet impoverished taste that has started to infect the wines too. And that can only be done with words that are as vibrant as the wines we love to taste.

References

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\textsuperscript{3}Cfr. Rosalia Cavalieri 2011. Stressing the decisive role of the junction between the mouth that tastes and the mouth that speaks, the author repeatedly underlines the fact that taste, «in common with a large part of the bio-cognitive faculties that we share with other animals, owes its uniqueness to the presence of a linguistic mind moulded onto a human measure». 

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