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Jefford on Monday: Sexing the Signature



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March

4,

2013

Do men and women make wine in a different way from one another?

(Image: Celia Welch)

I doubt it. Winemaking is an accumulation of practical acts. Sensibility may inform and inspire those acts, but the struggle with practicalities, and the limits imposed by site, season and equipment, are likely to be more pertinent than some intimately figured intuition in shaping a wine's aroma and flavour. A row of vines has no interest in your hormonal cocktail, and it's hard to 'engender' a cold soak.

Those, at any rate, were my convictions as I walked out into St Helena's precocious spring sunshine a week or two ago. Napa (for those living on planet Mars) is a sickle-shaped trench which nature has positioned perfectly between two crucial battle-lines: cold ocean and hot hinterland; shrouding fog and ripening sunshine. The mountain vineyards each side of the valley coax elemental forces into the wines; the alluvial fans and time-sifted sediments of the valley floor give them unparalleled ripeness. At its best, this biotope gives us glorious wines, and America's wine lovers think nothing of handing over \$250 or more for a fine example. I tasted as much as I could over five days in the region, then sat back to take a look at my notes.

That was when I began to call my assumptions into question. Several of them.

Five of the greatest Cabernets I tasted that week led me to nuance my understanding about the forcefulness of the Napa, particularly the valley floor. These were not titanic, lava-like wines which throbbed and burned in the mouth; nor were they sweet, fudgy or toffeed. You didn't need a tongue

hose afterwards.

Wine one was a Cabernet of dancing poise: the warmth of spice and the forest in summer, allied to glowingly curranty fruit, both fresh and resonant. The second wine was the greatest of all: it really did seem to have a Margaux-like aromatic refinement, with spring-heeled intensity on the palate, glorious freshness yet penetrating depth. Awesome.

The third was a denser, richer wine, with tongue-coating fruit and exquisitely palpable tannins. It was a baritone, nonetheless, and it had another perfumed finish, those perfumes lifting from blackcurrant, raspberry and mulberry fruits with enviable definition.

Wine number four was perfumed yet again, though this time the flowers mingled with star anis and plum and cherry fruits. A sweetness hovered about it, yet the finish was vivid and athletic: white teeth in a bright smile. Wine five, too, billowed with a cologne-like charm before revealing its hidden depths; there was something almost mineral in this one. Once again, the wine had near-perfect definition and purity.

I've listed the wines' names below. One and two were made by Cathy Corison; number three by Rosemary Cakebread; and numbers four and five by Celia Welch.

I don't want to overstate the case. There were a dozen or more other great wines I tasted that week with a male signature to them (notably those of Elias Fernandez, Aaron Pott and Stephen Tebb), and I suspect that Cathy, Rosemary and Celia would bristle with indignation were I to suggest anything more than that each was doing their best for fine raw materials using what are, no doubt, three contrastive sets of professional insights.

Let me just try this, though. A great vineyard site in Napa must, in a way, offer unrivalled temptations to a winemaker: if you floor the pedal, super-showiness is always at hand, big points and bright lights beckon, and America's enthusiastic and affluent wine lovers seem ready to reward many different forms of excellence, including the totally gross.

The fact is that these five wines expressed their grandeur with nuance and restraint. All showed remarkable aromatic finesse; each had a freshness as well as a sweetness at its core. It's just possible that, in order to craft fine wines of this order in this place, it helps to be a woman.

1. 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon, Corison
2. 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon, Kronos Vineyard, Corison
3. 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon, Gallica
4. 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon, Scarecrow Wine
5. 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon, Barbour Vineyards

N.b: Of those credited simply as 'winemaker' in the catalogue to the Napa Valley Premiere Wine Auction (which took place on February 23rd 2013), 155 were male and 36 were female. California may be an advanced workplace environment, but full gender equality is still a little way off, even there.

Written by Andrew Jefford

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