

A Life in Wine

Scott Estrich details his life-changing wine experiences that led him to become a sommelier and, in turn, win the Working with Wine Fellowship Wine Writing Award, which was judged by Nick Ryan.

BORDEAUX: “Would you like some wine?” the waiter queried in composed French, “Voulez-vous un peu de vin?” I swung around in my chair and gave a jittery smile as a large crystal goblet the size of a fishbowl was lowered in front of me and placed deftly among the tableware.

“So, my friend,” queried my host, one of Scandinavia’s highest ranking financial authorities, “do you like wines from Bordeaux?” As I clambered to find a coherent response, my eyes fell upon a huge bottle of wine being steadily wheeled in behind him on a trolley, coerced by a number of waitstaff. Sensing the imminent arrival, he turned his attention towards the troupe and read the label on the bottle. “1998 Petrus Pomerol,” he declared. “An Imperial size should see us through our evening, don’t you think?” I gaped at the oversized vessel as a torrent of thoughts twisted my mind in knots.

Up to this moment my life had taken more turns and spills than a British car rally. Nevertheless I had self-propelled these life changes. I yearned for life experience, for worldly insight. I quit my burgeoning career in HR, sold my BMW and left Australia in a backpack. The year was 1994. Wine, or any affinity with it (apart from uni hangovers from cheap casks), had never played any role in this mad venture. It simply hitched a ride and in the end it hijacked me.

RHÔNE: A year later I was desperately searching for work in central London, and without a work visa I had to stretch my boundaries. I landed a trial as a waiter in a French bistro, convincing the French manager, Stephan that I had the skills for the job. Having never even taken a food order before, I had to learn fast on my feet. During service I spilt soup on customers, forgot to call away tables and failed to carry more than two plates at any time. “You are ze worst waiter I ever met,” spluttered Stephan in broken Franco-infused English, “but I give you ze job cause you are so good wit ze people, and I can always teach you ow to carry plates like a waiter!”

I thrived and we became great friends. We survived the hellishly busy floor shifts by sharing honest French food and wine together after close each night. My passion for wine - and France - was born in those groggy late-night gabfests. We regularly consumed all manner of wines from Rhône, Loire and beyond, and I soaked up Stephan’s wine knowledge. Twelve months on and ready to travel again, he honored me with a bottle of a 1990 Domaine du Banneret Châteauneuf-du-Pape on our last shift. Rather than lug it around with me, we consumed it there and then. It oozed paradoxical charm like my friend’s French accent; an elegant toil, a fragrant grip, a lasting impression.

BAROLO: Enrico was a distant family friend of my father’s second wife. An Italian descendant of rich regional royalty in the Tuscan Provence, he lived a bachelor’s life in an ancient villa outside of Milan and was delighted to play host to me regardless of the vague familial connections. I figured it was the Italian way. Truth be told it was probably more a meager attempt to stave off everyday boredom by a man who owned everything. A barn adjacent to his villa housed his collection of 95 antique motorbikes. He spent four months of each year in rotation in Italy, Brazil and Australia.

Nevertheless, he was a man driven by tradition. He loved to cook and his cooking strongly reflected his heritage. There was only one location to buy tomatoes and that was 50 odd kilometres away. His favourite dish, rabbit stew with polenta, took two days to prepare and had to be consumed in his mountain cottage with buon vino. After days of preparation, mustering friends and raiding his wine cellar, we gathered in the chilly air of his cabin to share his Coniglio dish. Among the fine wines uncorked that night was a 1998 Giuseppe E Figlio Mascarello Monprivato Barolo. It expounded tar and roses, demanded deep reflection, but danced the tango with his rustic stew.

CHAMPAGNE: La Voile Rouge was a venue of decadence. A restaurant-cum-day-club on Saint-Tropez beach in southern France, it catered to the mega-wealthy and uber-stars who itched to let their hair down over lunch. These were people who never pondered their spending. My French hospitality connections got me through the door and landed me a job in the impossible dream. Each day was a fiesta, and although the work was demanding the adrenalin was always pumping as loud as the music. Top-end Champagnes were often wheeled out in bulk only to be sprayed in a fizz-war between diners at the close of lunch. Endless spumes of the world’s finest bubbles perfumed the Mediterranean air on a daily basis over an entire French summer.

After one particularly big lunch, so many bottles lay strewn across the restaurant decks that it was near impossible to walk, and free-running Champagne literally cascaded into the sea. During the laborious cleanup however I discovered an unopened bottle of 1990 Louis Roederer Cristal among the debris. “C’est a toi Capitaine!” declared the boss, chewing on his Cuban cigar, and I graciously accepted. That bottle was finally consumed on my 35th birthday in 2002 but its elegant persistence will remain with me forever.

So I adore wine. I love its humble vinous birth on a vine. I find the bond that forms between grower and grape romantic. I am mystified by the tales it tells of its terroir, how it is caressed by vessel and vintage, but most of all I love how wine can weave moments of magic into life’s grand adventure, however big or small.

“What do you think of the Petrus?” queried my host, as the waiter poured crimson fluid into the glass in front of me. I had served this man and his unhinged wife for weeks at La Voile Rouge in Saint-Tropez. In a kind gesture, they had invited me to join them and their friends for dinner. I watched as the wine settled, and a heady bouquet fondled my senses as I lifted the glass for a taste. Then it happened. It was as though the very spirit of the wine rose up and encased my mind in a tantalising rapture provoking an enthralling journey, part poetic, somewhat mystical, totally sensual. All sounds and surrounds faded away, and I was at one with the wine. 🍷

Note: This story has been checked for facts.

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