

SOCRATIC DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO HAPLESS GEEKS

This was prompted by a killer-fun assignment given to Randall Grahm and me; to *interview* each other in writing for a piece which eventually appeared in the Fall 2006 issue of *Wine & Spirits* (to whom I am grateful for allowing me to reprint this material here). Some of the dialogue ended up in the magazine proper, and some online, but all of it was fun doing, and these are a few snippets I want you to see. They favor my part of the discussion only because I didn't wish to violate Randall's privacy, but he wrote with passion and candor on the *big-picture* issues.

Randall: One of my pet peeves is SO₂ in wine. Yes, I intellectually understand why it is perhaps necessary, but that never stopped me from getting bugged by it. I truly think that many people are put off of young German wines by the staggering levels of free SO₂, more accurately the "molecular," or active SO₂ in riesling, owing in part to its very low pH. (This phenomenon is exacerbated by winemakers who also leave residual CO₂ making the wine both slightly reductive and boiling over w/ sulfur.) German wine connoisseurs understand that sweet rieslings are wines that greatly benefit from age, and that is no doubt the reason (or riesling) why they are typically pickled to the max. All well in good for German connoisseurs, but murder for the punter who wants to drink riesling in an American restaurant or does not have the means/sensibility to cellar his/her riesling. Any thought of trying to persuade your producers to create an "American cuvée" for rieslings for earlier consumption?

TT: Absolutely not. It would violate a fundamental principle. I do not believe in manipulating wines to serve a "market", I believe in finding people to cherish beautiful wines.

Randall : I agree that it is the winemaker's foremost duty to satisfy himself and in so doing, the customers will take care of themselves. But I think that there needs to be a certain cognizance of how wine is actually being consumed.

Maybe what I am suggesting would be more applicable for more entry-level wines and not for great growths, as it were. I am still persuaded that many would-be riesling drinkers are quite turned off by the presence of SO₂ in younger wines, and as a result, never get any further in their exploration. Alternatively, persuade aforesaid producers to hold back stock for sufficient time for the free SO₂ to diminish?

TT: Well, that boils down to money of course: who finances holding those wines back? In the modern mercantile climate, no one would want to.

Randall: I have been told a few times that the money part of the equation is always the easiest, but have never found that personally to be the case. To put

the question more broadly: What else is there to be done to improve customers initial impression of rieslings?

TT: I'm not trying to diss your question in the slightest, but I do want you to realize your "pet peeve" over SO2 puts you in the infra-red end of a spectrum of responses to young Riesling.

Randall: I think that you may be mistaken, Terry. I think that the people whom you meet are not likely to mention the SO2 issue,, perhaps out of fear of offending you. Maybe they are mostly experienced wine folks, who just assume that the SO2 thing is just something that has to be accepted. But the naive, untutored palate does generally react badly to SO2, though certainly with no real understanding of what it is tasting.

TT: Perhaps each of is generalizing based on his empirical knowledge combined with his tics of temperament. I sense that the people I meet are quite willing to critique me or my wines – they certainly do so often enough – but in my experience it's a minority who find SO2 in young German Rieslings objectionable. Addressing your point about the entry-level wines (and accepting your logic that markets are built on such wines) I wouldn't oppose lower SO2 levels for reasons of purism because the counter-argument is just a little more compelling. Yet even then I have misgivings, because this is a slippery slope. The moment one starts fashioning wines FOR a market one has loosed the furies onto the world. It seems blithe to assume one can defeat them at one's convenience.

Randall: If I may jump in with a thought: I think that the biggest part of the problem is a certain character of the American people. We want everyone to love us and by extension, to love our wines.

TT: Even more, we are accustomed to being passively entertained, and we have short attention spans. Many of us like a wine to do all the work for us. "Y'all just lie back while I dance for you..." I also feel we're in such a state of sensory bombardment it's only that which screams which has any chance to be heard. Most commercially desirable wines seem to combine the worst features of porn, the McLaughlin group, and World Wrestling Entertainment. Even more insidious are those pandering wines that seem to say "Pwease wuv me!" like those ghastly paintings of the kids with the enormous eyes.

Randall: I think that it is deeper than just commercial expediency, though that is certainly the largest part of it. New World winemakers make confectionary wines because their customers seem to prefer them. We in the New World largely make wines to please others rather than ourselves because we generally don't have the self-confidence that comes from being rooted in a place, to know that we have vineyards that speak to us.

TT: We haven't had centuries of trial and error to learn what to plant where. We've modeled ourselves against the most superficial attributes of old-world wines and done a kind of Disney-pastiche of those styles. And you're absolutely right: we're un-rooted and our wines express that reality ineluctably, as wine always expresses Truths of culture. That said, I do believe there's a feedback-loop between what we produce and consume, and it's not impossible to interrupt it at some point. Not easy, but not impossible.

Randall: One more question for you: On the surface, it would appear that you have found the perfect *métier*, and that should make you a happy man. Is this in fact the case?

TT: I live a charmed life, but on the other hand I sometimes feel stratified. One layer is the garden-variety mercantile wine-guy dealing with all the "issues" surrounding the zany categories with which I work. We both know those issues: education, marketing, perseverance, dog-and-pony shows, "working the press". I try to be good at those things, or as good as my fallibilities allow. The other (perhaps higher) layer is less concerned with the *job* and more concerned with the *work*. I have a voice which always says "Yes: and?" Thus if I ask myself, what's the net effect of what I do, this voice compels me through ever-more big-picture considerations.

I sell wine. Yes, and? I help ensure the prosperity of good artisan wine growers. Yes, and? I contribute to the continued existence of cultures *containing* small artisan wine growers. Yes, and? To remain sustainable I need to tell people why this is a good thing. Yes, and? In telling people why this is a good thing, I have to detail the reasons, which compels thoughts of terroir, of family, of a person's proper relationship to nature and to his *human* history. In short, I have to assert values. Yes, and? In delineating these values, I find I can't escape matters of *soul*. Yes, and? If soul enters the equation you can't select what it inhabits, because soul inhabits either all of it or none of it. So what I finally end up doing is placing wine in the context of a life of the soul. Yes, and? So now I am defending and delineating the idea of living with conscience, gratitude, eros, humor, and all the things soul imbues us with. And further, I'm placing wine squarely within this matrix and insisting we don't have enough time to settle for less. Yes, and? And we seem to need certain things: To know where we are. To be connected to something outside

ourselves. To be connected to something *inside* ourselves. And the only wines that actually speak to our *whole* lives are *authentic* wines, which are themselves both located, and connected. And confectioned wines are not designed for human beings; they are designed for “consumers . ”