




BY CORRI BARRETT

ADVENTURES WONDER

A LOOK THROUGH THE





Welcome to Wonderland, otherwise known as the bursting, burbling world of Champagne. Here in this frabjous land of mirth and mimsy we find the fruits of fortune all agrow. It appears, my dears, that Alice has followed Helena Christensen down the rabbit hole, into a universe of mass-produced, homogenized fizz, a place full of galumphing corporate powerhouses, peddling logoad bags with their booze. What is there to do, you may ask, brow a furrowed? Hmm, to start we could say, “Pardon, Monsieur Vuitton, may I have my Champagne list back, please?”

WHERE AM I?

“Curiouser and curiouser, what a strange land this is,” Alice thought as she walked through the chalky soil. It was a bit chilly for the summer time, she mused, and in every direction the twisty, twirly roads ran among rows of grape vine. Just in the distance Alice could see what appeared to be a caterpillar sitting on a wall in the vineyard. As Alice neared the creature he became larger and larger and more and more detailed and she realized it was actually a man. When she arrived within a few feet of him she could make out his bright green Marc Jacobs suit, and what’s that smell - a waft of Dior Homme? “I wonder what he is drinking in that little glass? Who could this be, and why is he sitting atop a wall in the middle of all these vineyards?”

“What is in your glass, Sir?” Alice asked in what she thought was a polite tone.

“That would be Monsieur Vuitton to you, petite fille, and this is not a glass, it is a flute, Baccarat Crystal actually, you can purchase it on Eluxury.com. Would you care for a glass of luxury?”

Quite confused, Alice asked “Is that not Champagne, Sir, eh Monsieur?”

“Of course, as I said, I am drinking luxury, a mass produced, cookie cutter product.”

“But the word ‘luxury’ doesn’t mean ‘a mass produced, cookie cutter product,’ Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Monsieur Vuitton said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“When I make a word do a lot of work like that,” said Monsieur Vuitton, “I always pay it extra. Besides I have people, publicists and advertising execs that make words mean different things. Sometimes all you have to do is make people believe that they mean something else and you don’t even have to go to the trouble of changing the thing itself at all, people are very silly, stupid creatures for the most part. Why take my outfit, is it not funny? If I put it on a beautiful model and take a picture and that picture is put on a shiny enough page of a shiny enough magazine, many, many people will pay thousands and thousands of dollars for it, which is a good thing, as I make thousands and thousands of these suits that need to be sold.”

“But don’t people get upset when they realize that the suit is not special, not individual? They spend money to make themselves feel unique and they look around and everyone is wearing the same thing. I know I would be very upset,” countered Alice.

“Oh, Mon Cherie, don’t you know that people are sheep? They want to look the same, smell the same, even drink the same thing as the person next to them, or really above them I suppose, it is all about status, that is how I am where I am, here atop this wall looking down over all these vineyards of these grapes that will go into making my luxury. That is why I am in the Champagne business in the first place, if it was any easier it would be illegal.” [+]

IN LAND CHAMPAGNE FLUTE



“But Champagne is not like a pattern-based, assembly line suit, Monsieur. Is it not special and hard to create? Such a long and intense process, the special tending of the vineyards, the need for acid, for sugar, for balance? Not one, but two fermentations? The laborious process of remuage, disgorgement, dosage?!”

Monsieur Vuitton looked down his nose at Alice and one side of his mouth turned up in a way that made Alice feel as if she was perhaps a small bug. “Bête, there are ways around all that ‘detail’ nonsense. You see, I call this a ‘house style,’ this is a Champagne made in a highly interventionist and formulaic way. I employ extensive use of chaptalization, acidification, cultured yeast strains, enzymes, nitrogenous yeast nutrients and rapid temperature controlled fermentations. I produce millions of cases of this (Monsieur Vuitton holds up his flute to the sun), the most successful, processed agricultural product in human history. My dear, northern France is not the easiest place to grow these grapes, you see, and each year the weather is different, most of the time the yield is simply not large enough for me to produce enough of the ‘good’ stuff to meet my quota.” He takes a deep sip. “Having this blending technology at my fingertips I can go about encouraging the growers to focus on high yield as opposed to high quality and to harvest as much and as soon as they possibly can. I take the good with the bad, since I will only blend away anything terrible or great anyway. This way I can meet the demands of the MTV lapping public and keep these farmers growing.” “So you have created a commodity out of the world’s most magical beverage?” Alice asked quietly.

“You say that as if it is a bad thing. Would you rather people not have enough Champagne to drink? How then would our movie stars and NBA players grasp so many a bottle by the neck and cavort in your Vegas nightclubs? How would we bathe in bubbles at every silly wedding in the world? Would you prefer we provide them with the individual and unique family fizz to do such a thing with? I serve a purpose and the only way that will change is if people start drinking that ‘growers’ stuff. Not something I encourage, as then the growers will have no need for me. But no worries, who wants to taste something unique and individual every time they open a bottle anyway? It will confuse the people, little Alice, it will make them have to remember the names and flavor profiles and the varietals and god forbid even more vintages. Aren’t there enough sub appellations in Burgundy to keep them busy? Like I said, people are really quite silly and stupid. Besides, I am

clearly doing something right, after all in 2004 alone, three brands—Moët et Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, and Mumm—accounted for two-thirds of the Champagne sold in your thirsty country. The biggest player was of course me and my Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy empire, or as I say, LVMH, I really do like to make it simple for everyone.” Another swig from the flute, “I am a \$10-billion conglomerate, I own Moët & Chandon, Dom Pérignon, Veuve Cliquot, Krug, Mercier, and Ruinart, not to mention Christian Dior, Celine and Bruno Magli, to name a small few. People are clearly willing to spend more than \$100 a bottle on my cuvée de prestige offerings though at least these Champagnes, you know Dom Pérignon and Krug Clos du Mesnil, are really quite fabulous. The rest, well, no one seems to notice they are as boring as the day is long and really not very good. Oh my, I am saying too much, the sun and swill must be getting to me. Now, my little dear, you are boring me with your little questions, your little call to arms it seems... I must rest now.” At this Monsieur Vuitton leaned back along the wall and sighed the sigh of a man content. He seemed to forget Alice was standing there so she quietly walked away.

Alice grew more and more upset as she distanced herself from the pompous man. He did not seem to notice her distaste as he continued to drink his nameless or at least mislabeled libation. How could he think that luxury was a mass produced product when it clearly was not. Is not the very essence of luxury that it was special, difficult to attain, laborious to create? Why could he not see that Champagne was special? A wonderful creation that could be so beautiful, but so often, thanks to him and his profit margins, was now so bland as to be a non-event. Who could answer these questions for her? Who could help her find her way out of this wayward wonderland?

A SMILE WITHOUT A SOMM

Alice continued her journey through the field until she came to a rocky road. It twisted around the bend; perhaps it would lead her out of this place, perhaps to another appellation that had not lost sight of terroir.

The road became more and more rocky, twisting into a dark patch. In the distance she heard singing... “Her green plastic watering can... For her fake chinese rubber plant... In fake plastic earth... a town full of rubber plants...” Radiohead? Was someone singing Radiohead? Who, in this wacky place, could be singing? Where was it coming from? Alice looked around until there, up in the tree she saw lounging on the largest limb a Master Sommelier. He looked down at Alice and grinned, Alice took this as a sign that he was perhaps more friendly than Monsieur Vuitton, “Excuse me, Sir, my name is Alice, how do you do?” “Quite well, young Miss, my friends and such call me Cheshire.”

“Oh, that’s nice, I am sorry to disturb you, but would you be so kind to tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the smiling Somm.

“I don’t much care where, so long as I get somewhere, perhaps you can direct me to where the Champagne is not so bland. You see, I made the mistake of following an ad to this place and now I have encountered such boring bubbles and tiresome house styles and now I cannot find my way out. Is this really how it is? Why does it have to taste the same every year? [+]

Why do they have to blend all the beautifully tended and harvested grapes and mash them in with the lazily fostered rest? What about something individual? What about the earth and the sun and the rain and cold? What about the people who actually make the wine? Is there no one that can show me the reason behind the myth of the magic of Champagne?"

"Do you think you can handle that, my dear? The men and women who dare to put their own names on the label? Those that are crazy enough to keep their best grapes for their own wine. Those that are willing to spend the days, the nights, the seasons toiling away to create a product that is unlike any other, unlike any of the other burbling, beauteous bubbles out there. The dirt under their nails the key to their legacy, they are a unique and daring bunch, some even call them mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said Cheshire. "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Somms, "or you wouldn't be questioning what goes on here, after all, thousands and thousands the world over seem to be content to follow the Karl Lagerfeld ads to their spumous suds."

Alice didn't think that proved it at all, however she went on. "And how do you know that you're mad?"

"Well I have the good fortune of many an angry man telling me such. You see I have been questioning the industrial effervescence for some time now. I have voiced the difference between the beauty of growers Champagne and those of the 'power' houses to all those that would listen, I have shouted it from the top of the pyramid to the bottom of the waterfall."

Alice nodded and asked, "What do you say to make the followers of bleak understand, convince them to taste the difference?"

Cheshire sat up on his branch, a bit more serious now, and began, "Simple, simple, simple, I explain that the difference is simple, one is made with individual expression and the other is made to taste the same every year. Just imagine if the great growers in burgundy combined all of the top vineyard sights and did massive blending trials in an effort to produce the same wine every year, it sounds almost absurd but in a way that is what has been happening here in Champagne for some time. Most large Champagne houses that do the majority of their volume in non-vintage blends buy the majority of the fruit and manipulate it to make a 'house style.' That is simply a crutch for a region that has incredibly strict viticulture practices and some of the most exciting expression of terroir on the planet." Cheshire shook off his stage face and asked with his now familiar grin, "Do you see? Would that convince you?"

"Well, perhaps, but is there not something more we can do? Are you fighting this fight all alone?"

"Not at all my dear, I have many an ally against the Queen of the Houses and her little henchmen. Monsieur Vuitton is just one of the lazy negociants out for profit, you know, but all the houses are in the court of the Red Queen and she has a propensity for dispensing punishment, especially when it comes to those brave enough to have an interesting Champagne list. Why, take that Mad Hatter Willie Sherer, he says no to the marketing that could have

swayed his guests and pours growers anyway. Do you realize that Aureole has never in its existence poured a negociant by the glass? But you can always find a grower or two by the glass. There are other forward thinking wine directors and Somms out there, you can find them in places like Sea Blue, Mix, and Nob Hill. There are distributors that know the secrets; they carry as many growers as they can. On my side I also have the white knight, Terry Theise, the brave warrior for the growers. He will not sleep until as many people as possible know what is missing from their bubbles, if you are very lucky you will meet him. He along with a band of brave souls like Tweedlefizz and Tweedlebuzz are fighting to bring light to the plight in the chalk. You will surely meet them on your journey, you need not worry of that." "My journey? Won't you show me the way? Which direction will I go? Won't you lead me to the Champagnes that are right for me?"

"Oh, young Alice, great Champagne is something everyone finds for themselves. You can be shown the path, which is the one there to your left by the way, but to find your preference you must trust your own palette."

As Alice turned to see the road the Somms indicated and turned back to respond she saw that the limb was empty. Cheshire had disappeared into thin air. "This really is the strangest place."

TWEEDLEFIZZ AND TWEEDLEBUZZ

After his vanishing act Alice wondered what to think of this CHESHIRE, was he leading her in the right direction? Well, he was surely better than that horrid Monsieur Vuitton and he definitely had the right idea about Champagne, so off she went on the path he set her on. The path became narrower and narrower until it came to the edge of a dark wood. Alice was a bit wary of venturing in, but it was her only path, as she was certainly not going back. Alice walked through the brush until finally she stood at a craggy rock and some trees. "Oh, that wily Somms!" thought Alice, he had lead her to a dead end! "Where am I?" Alice said aloud to herself.

"You are in Champagne," came the voice. Startled, Alice turned to see two young men standing under the tree.

"Hello, how do you do, I apologize for my fright, I just did not see you standing there. My name is Alice and it seems that I am lost."

"You don't look lost, I can see you plain as day." Said the first of the men.

"Well, yes I am here, but where is here, exactly?" "Champagne."

"Right, well, this is going in circles. What do you call yourselves?" [+]





“Why would one call themselves, when one is never far away from one’s self?”

“I see.” To the first Alice asked, “What do you call him?” while pointing to the second.

“I call him Tweedlefizz and he calls me Tweedlebuzz when attention is required, it is quite rude to point.”

“Oh, CHESHIRE said I would meet you, perhaps that is why he sent me on this path! You see I am in search of good Champagne, I know that the Queen of Houses is squashing it out and I want to try it in case it disappears.”

“That will never happen, the White Knight will not allow it.” Tweedlebuzz said. “He fights the Houses each and every day and makes sure

that everyone knows the path to growers Champagne. His army gets stronger each year, the tides of change are upon us.”

“But Monsieur Vuitton made it seem as if everything was a blend, he seemed so confident that his shiny ads and house style would keep the growers growing, he seemed so sure that they would not try and go their own way.”

“He is a silly, silly man in quite a shiny suit, I might add. You see, the more that people support the White Knight and his army of growers, the stronger they get. They make enough money to keep their best grapes and they can let their contracts run out with the houses. Eventually the houses must depend on their own supplies of fruit and if they want to compete they must be as good as the growers.” Tweedlefizz responded with a chortle at the thought of the lazy houses working as hard as the growers.

“Where can I find the White Knight? Perhaps he can lead me to the Champagne that is right for me.”

“I believe he is attending a tasting with the September Hare, it is straight through, just follow the path you are on,” Tweedlefizz explained.

“But the path I am on is a dead end, how am I to follow it any furth...” as Alice said these very words she looked up to see that in fact the path was clear and in the distance she could hear laughter and glassware clinking. “But how? I could have sworn it was blocked by a rock and trees?”

“You really should not swear; it is not ladylike at all,” Tweedlebuzz noted before he and Tweedlefizz walked off in the opposite direction.

A MAD TASTING

As Alice approached it was clear that the tasting was well under way. She realized that she had not been invited to partake and wondered if she should just say hello and wait to be asked to sit or if she should approach and tell

them of her plight. Around the table there were several guests. It seemed the host was what appeared to be a rather large and upright rabbit. Was this the September Hare? To his left there were several seats, each filled with distinguished looking ladies and gentlemen and facing in the direction of a stately gentleman holding up a flute of Champagne. He seemed to be toasting one of the guests at the table.

“... Didier Gimonet makes wines of focus; they are suave, creamy and refined with a ‘soft’ minerality dispersed through the fruit. Silky, stylish wines, rather than vigorous racy wines, deliciously accommodating to the palate.”

“Well, thank you kind sir, I do my best,” said one of the gentlemen at the table. Alice wondered if this was perhaps the White Knight’s army of Champagne growers. Perhaps she had found the chance to try some amazing Champagne. Just as she was thinking this the Hare noticed her standing there.

“Young lady, would you care to join us?” he asked.

“Yes, please do” Alice looked up to see Cheshire sitting at the table. How had she not noticed him sitting there?

“Please, sit down, join us, I believe you can guess who this gentleman is.”

“I would guess, Sir, that you are Terry Theise.”

“Correct, Young Lady, that I am, and who might you be, Miss?”

“My name is Alice and I am in search of great Champagne. I am trying to get out of this wonderland of forgettable fizz, do you think you can help me?”

“Where shall we begin?” Mr. Theise began perusing the many bottles and stems on the table, “How about this beautiful Jean Milan ‘Cuvée Tendresse,’ plenty of lavender, brioche, gardenia, something pretty, for such a pretty girl. Caroline, would you like to pour?” Terry looks at a striking young woman who stands and with a smile introduces herself as, “Caroline Milan, very nice to meet you.” She poured the sparkling liquid into the flute set before Alice.

Just as Alice went to lift the glass to her lips a thunderous crash sounded in the woods.

“OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!!!!” roared a beast of some sort. Everyone stared and turned to see a huge angry woman and several soldiers crash in upon the party.

“How dare you think you can change the way I do business!!! How dare you think you can go without selling your fruit to me! You are all sentenced to blends! Each of you will stand trial and be found guilty of individuality. Guards, arrest them!!!”

As the soldiers rushed forward and arrested each of the guests at the table, Alice noticed that once again the Somm was gone. How does he do that?

A DREAM?

They marched in silence toward the court. Alice looked around at the faces of her fellow prisoners and was surprised to note a complete absence of fear, as a matter of fact they joked and laughed as they walked along. Alice



wished she could have felt the same. What was she doing here, all she wanted was to know good champagne and look at all the trouble she had to go to, to get it.

“Are you worried?” came a voice beside her. She turned and of course it was the disappearing Somm.

“Of course I am worried, she is going to chop off our heads for going against the toxic bubbles she produces. Why is it so wrong to want to do something special, to create a unique product? And why is no one else concerned? They are laughing, this is not funny!” Alice was quite fed up with this smart mouthed wino and she was thinking it was time for some quiet. He clearly disagreed.

“Oh, silly Alice, you will see, the trial has been going on for some time, every time a wine director puts a grower on their list they must be brave. You will see. Ah, here we are.”

Alice looked up to see quite a large building before her, there were many people out front waiting and watching as the wine makers and Mr. These were marched in before them.

Once inside the angry Queen took her seat at the bench. “She is the judge?!?!?” exclaimed Alice. “How will this be a fair trial at all?”

“It won’t be, but don’t worry, you will see.” Piped up the September Hare.

“ORDER!! ORDER!! There will be order in my court!!! You, Denis Varnier, Didier Gimonet, Caroline Milan, François Peters, Jean-Paul Hébrart, Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy, Serge Billiot, Arnaud Margaine, Philippe Chartogne and the rest of the growers present are charged with confusing the public, disrupting the balance of the appellation and making it more difficult for the consumer to choose their wine! You each have created wines that are unique and you are taking away from the grand tradition that is champagne!!! You Terry These are largely to blame for this state of affairs, if you did not spend your time writing, speaking, blabbing on and on about the ‘integrity’ of the wine we would not be here today, so sir, I find you guilty of ‘spooking the herd’, you sir are a menace to the mass production of champagne. How do you plead?”

“I believe we all plead guilty, your highness, you see, we are going to continue our revolution, with or without the permission of your court. Each day more and more people become aware of the amazing wine each of these growers and countless other growers have to offer. Each day, another wine director adds one of their selections to their wine list. Each day a server sells René Geoffroy instead of Veuve Cliquot and one more person is hooked for life on REAL champagne. We are guilty of every charge.”

“But, Mr. These, there is so little of your wine since each of these men and women insist on ‘quality’, this silly low yield nonsense, why would anyone choose to list their wines on a list? What would be the reason?”

Cheshire stands up and asks, “Terry, may I take this one?”

“You may indeed, your majesty I turn over the floor to the Somm.”

Cheshire stands and once again the serious face comes out. “They are committed, committed to not just adding one bottle, destined to be overlooked, committed to putting several bottles, five or six even, finding a balanced approach from both price point and region. They will teach their staff to sell, create a true dining experience instead of dishing out the same swill as every other dining room in town. It takes that commitment, for if they are as lazy as the large houses producing these ignominious negociant wines then it won’t make a difference, but I stand by that creating even just one guest experience does make a difference, giving the new voice of champagne a stage.”

“The time to change is here; the time to take back the land is here. The time for these men and women to be allowed to leave a legacy of not only their names, but the names of their family’s, testaments to the dirt beneath their nails, to the blood, sweat and tears that fertilize the soil. The time is upon us to change the minds of those that have been exposed to the bastardized versions of champagne that we have seen flood the market. That your Royal Highness is what these people are guilty of.”

BAM! BAM! BAM! “THERE WILL BE ORDER IN THIS COURT!” You sir are in contempt and quite contemptible! OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!!!!

Alice awoke with a start; she was back at home, in Las Vegas, her magazine open to the Dom Perignon ad lying next to her. “It was a dream!” she exclaimed. How strange, it all seemed so real! But what was this? Beneath her magazine there was another volume. Pink, “how pretty” she thought. Terry These Estate Selections Champagne Catalog 2006. Where did this come from she wondered?

Alice smiled, perhaps she would find her champagne after all.

THE END

