



DRINKS

Wine as history and emotion

By Ray Isle

WHAT'S IN A GLASS OF WINE? THAT'S SIMPLE: A BEVERAGE made from fermented grapes. It affords pleasure from its taste and (might as well be upfront about it) its moderate alcohol content. But what if the answer to that question was history, science, economics, agriculture, aesthetics, chemistry and biology, not to mention emotion, human perseverance, luck, even war?

Open a bottle of Château Musar's estate red. Forget worrying about whether it tastes of blackberries or raspberries, whether it has a note of this spice or that spice. Instead, taste that Musar red and think of it in another way. Take a sip and consider that it was made in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, near the Syrian border, where wine has been made for some 6,000 years. Perhaps also note that when Gaston Hochar founded Musar in 1930, 13 years still remained before Lebanon was to gain independence from France—and 40 were to pass before the country would be ripped apart by 15 years of civil war. During the war, a million people fled Lebanon; Gaston's son Serge stayed and made wine, turning part of the winery's cellar into a bomb shelter, driving past roadblocks manned by execution squads, harvesting around shells that had fallen into his vineyards.

Did I mention tragedy, too? In 2016, Serge Hochar died while swimming in the ocean off a beach in Mexico. Sudden, swift loss.

The winery is run by his sons Marc and Gaston now. Eight months after that accident I happened to be eating pizza with a friend who runs a wine store in Maine, and drinking Château Musar.

I was surprised to see tears come to my friend's eyes. He seemed surprised too; the only explanation he offered was, "He was just such an extraordinary guy."

Wine can surprise you with emotion. Every time I drink a bottle of the Sicilian red called Rosso del Conte (not very often; it's expensive), I think of my and my wife's honeymoon, and an extraordinary afternoon we spent at the Tasca d'Almerita estate where it's made. There's a reason we say we "savor" memories. Recollection is wine's strongest flavor, sometimes.

Of course, not every wine works in this way. If you open a bottle of Cupcake red velvet, a popular blend of zinfandel, petite sirah and merlot, you'll struggle to find historical depth, or an inspiring expression of against-all-odds determination, unless the latter was on the part of a consumer-marketing department. And yet. If you do open a bottle of Cupcake red velvet, you might find it interesting to know that the second-largest wine producer in the U.S. created the beverage you're about to pour into your glass (the Wine Group, which makes over 60 million cases of wine each year). Longtime wine-industry adage: Americans talk dry and drink sweet. Red velvet is part of the skyrocketingly popular "red blend" category, largely populated by mass-produced wines with catchy and in theory millennial-friendly brand names. But don't hunt for depth. Cupcake red velvet is an artfully manufactured beverage product, just as Coke Zero or LaCroix coconut-flavored sparkling water is. That doesn't mean you shouldn't like it. Your tastes are your own. Personally, I like Coke Zero, and I think that coconut-flavored sparkling water tastes like soap. The point is more that some wines have layers—not just of flavor—that repay thinking about. □

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