The War of the Worlds

Take your pique: the blasé European approach to fine wines or the enthusiastic American embrace of...just about everything.

BY SARAH E. RICHARDS

When it comes to food and wine, the French aren't easily impressed. Take a recent Christmas with my friend Boris's French grandparents, the Ménéchals, in the Perigord in southwest France. After taking a sip of an exquisite 1982 Chateau Figeac that accompanied stuffed quail, the guests offered up a gracious *"pas mal."* One diner eventually contributed a muted *"excellent."* I sipped in silence and wondered how my family would have reacted. High fives, maybe?

Perhaps Boris's family had it too easy. Maybe living in one of France's great culinary regions, which is next door to St.-Emilion and Pomerol, made them blasé.

My family, on the other hand, lives in suburban San Diego, an area not known for foie gras and classy reds. When it comes to wines, we're big, boisterous and liable to shout, "This is fabulous!" Confronted with a 1982 Figeac, my stepfather would have insisted on silence before pouring it, and would have enumerated its virtues between bites. I even imagine him on his deathbed saying, "Remember the year we drank that 1982 Figeac? Wasn't that great?"

The Old World approach to wine, that of the Ménéchals, is typified by understated appreciation; the San Diego, or New World, approach is marked by zeal and an energetic curiosity about the new. These two approaches play out in strange ways.

Take the matter of corkscrews. Boris's grandfather, retired schoolteacher Odet Ménéchal, prefers the old spiral kind that makes the veins in his forehead pop out when he pulls on it. My parents go for the $80, die-cast Rabbit gizmo.

Or wine cellars: While my parents are building a cellar adorned with a vine-motif iron gate and museum lighting, M. Ménéchal stores his wines on a dusty bookshelf in the garage.

For a long time I thought the French way of doing things was more authentic. Eager to absorb some of their tradition, I pestered them with questions about their *cave*. When I asked him how many bottles he bought and how he decided which ones to save, M. Ménéchal furrowed his brow and replied that he buys his wine when he needs it and stashes away a couple of bottles if it's a good year. For everyday drinking he usually buys local wines at cooperatives. If he and his wife feel like it, they will take an afternoon drive to St.-Emilion or Monbazillac. When it comes to wine, everything they need is right at their doorstep. *"C'est normal,"* he said, as if everyone did it the same way.

I wanted to explain to him that everyone did not. My parents might drink a Far Niente Chardonnay and an Australian Shiraz in the same night. They shop at cavernous wine marts, where a dozen sections are devoted to the wines of nearly every region of the world. Or they buy their wine at a cruise ship tasting, a restaurant cellar or the wholesale behemoth Costco.

For my family, that's normal. At home, I want to roll my eyes at our consumer-ized culture, where armchair enthusiasts become overnight connoisseurs. But somehow I can't. I like American enthusiasm. I'm a product of it. The reason I traveled around the world or lived in France in the first place was because I had been encouraged to embrace all things global, from Ethiopian food to Israeli films.

I knew I was on solid ground when even Boris, who's lived in the United States for six years but fiercely defends his homeland's traditions (Eating radishes with cold butter? *Magnifique!*) showed signs of being seduced by the American approach to wine. Anxious to show off his New Worldly knowledge, he asked his grandparents whether they had tasted a Napa Merlot or Argentine Malbec. They had not. What about Italian Barolo or Portuguese *vinho verde*? Only when they traveled there.

I realized that there are many paths to pleasure. The Ménéchals have unadulterated French sensibilities and all the rigidity that occasionally goes with them. And it's great for them. My family discovers wine in their random way, with passion and enjoyment. The important thing is to savor, and to remember. Had my stepfather tasted that 1982 Figeac, I hope he'd recall it on his deathbed. Because it really was a great bottle of wine. WE

ILLUSTRATION GARY HOVLAND