

Cork Dork

*A Wine-Fueled Adventure Among
the Obsessive Sommeliers, Big Bottle Hunters,
and Rogue Scientists Who Taught Me
to Live for Taste*

Bianca Bosker



PENGUIN BOOKS

wines we like. Wine lovers are expected to rave over tannic, bitter Barolos, even though as children we instinctively covet sweet things and scrunch our faces at bitter flavors, an evolutionary defense against ingesting toxic foods. If you learn to love Barolo, “your palate’s not ‘maturing,’ it’s actually becoming unnatural,” Tim said. “You dispose of your natural taste for sweetness and whatever, and even learn to make faces. And not only about the wine, but about the people because it’s part of the criticism. You learn what you’re supposed to like, and you also learn what you’re *not* supposed to like, and *who* you’re not supposed to like by association of what you’re not supposed to like. You learn to criticize not only the fucking wine, but the fucking people who like that wine.”

Tim’s argument is not a new one. It recalls a theory proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1984 book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Bourdieu contends that we learn to appreciate things—golf, skinny arms, the opera, Champagne—because of the social and cultural capital we derive from embracing certain pursuits and rejecting others. As Bourdieu sees it, no taste is pure. As we interact with our social circle, we absorb cues about the things we should—and shouldn’t—celebrate in order to gain acceptance from our peers. In the end, we admire whatever will make us admirable. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,” writes Bourdieu. Lusting after Domaine de la Romanée-Conti appears more arbitrary—and even a little sinister—through this lens. A “good” wine is whatever a certain stratum of society christens a “good” wine, for reasons that might have little to do with the contents of the bottle. And we use peoples’ judgment in wines to, in turn, judge them. This puts a new, unflattering spin on the sommelier’s job: By guiding their guests to quality wines, somms essentially help the upper classes to differentiate themselves from the hoi polloi through this rather arbitrary notion of “good.”

Tim was giving voice to a nagging misgiving that had been part of what fascinated me about wine in the first place. I didn’t believe in

any mass conspiracy to dictate the world’s tastes. But it seemed possible that even the experts were guilty of appreciating wines not because those bottles were good but because they’d learned to *see* those bottles were good. What they picked as their favorites reflected their identity. I found it telling that while other people post selfies to Instagram, sommeliers share snapshots of bottles they’ve drunk. Those labels said something about who they were as people, and many ended their shifts by uploading “#bestbottleofthenight” photos, to show off what they’d tried. Morgan admitted feeling frustrated by the pressure to conform to the tastes of the moment. He griped about somms attacking people who didn’t get on board with the idea that some trendy new Champagne maker was the best thing to happen to sparkling wine since the invention of the cork. “They get all Jesuitical about it,” he complained. “There’s this whole issue where if people spend \$350 for a bottle of wine, they don’t want to admit they don’t like it.”

Perhaps “bad” wine wasn’t really *so* bad. At the very least, it offered an inviting welcome for people who might otherwise never have picked up a glass. “A lot of people start out with a sweet wine and then they’ll eventually leave and they’ll actually go to the luxury level and become a wine collector or a wine consumer or a wine snob,” said Lei. She saw her bottles as training wheels for future oenophiles. The drinkers who love their Sledgehammer now might be only a few bottles away from becoming snobs who dismiss those same wines as trash.

Before leaving Lei’s lab, I’d spotted a small plastic package on a shelf in her office. It contained wooden chips that appeared to be a kind of seasoning for wine. BUTTERSCOTCH & CHOCOLATE STAVE SAMPLERS, the label read.

Given everything I’d learned, it seemed tricky to deem these mass-market wines “bad” based purely on their taste. But was there something problematic about the way they were made—or rather, designed?

wine, got drunk, and passed out naked! So if we draw civilization back to that point—and why the fuck not!—from the beginning, wine has been with us! So?—he jabbed a finger at me—“why are we having such a *fucking* hard time getting people to drink more wine and get comfortable with it?”

Paul wanted to change the world, and to him that meant getting people to drink more wine and get comfortable with it. “Our wine world, as Thomas Friedman would say, should be flat. Flat and big as fucking shit,” he yelled. Paul believed wine was “transportational.” But he hated the people who “continue to elevate the preciousness of this little wine world?.” “I want you to be able to go to Oklahoma City or wherever the fuck it is and go to your local grocery store and there’ll be a six-pack of Budweiser for—what does it cost? Seven bucks, let’s say. And next to it there’ll be a six-pack labeled ‘Terroir Pinot Grigio.’ And it’ll be \$8 or \$9. A little upcharge, but not enough to dissuade you from going, ‘Humm which one . . . Humm I’m having family over . . . BOOM!’—*Slam!*—‘Let’s go with the Pinot Grigio.’”

Paul was interrupted by a distributor, who stopped in to pour him a sample of Greek wine. As Paul sipped the small taste, he deliberately steered the conversation away from the bottle and toward the general situation in Greece. Unlike Joe and Lara at L’Apicio, Paul didn’t care to hear a story about the winery, or its vintner. He wanted to drink it for what it was—not what he imagined it to be, not for how dreamy the view was from the vineyard. Just how the wine hit him. He was known to go to tastings dressed like a fugitive—glasses, hat pulled down, no eye contact—to avoid having to make small talk that would distract him from the wines.

When the distributor left, I asked Paul what he looked for in a bottle.

“The wine must be yummy.”

That was vague. “Are there any particular . . . criteria that goes into yummy?” I asked.

“One sip leads to a second sip,” he said. “One glass leads to a second glass. One bottle leads to a second bottle.”

Just then a leggy German wandered in searching for an aperitif, and while Paul tried to talk her into a glass of sherry, I mullied over what he’d said. *One sip leads to another.* That definition of quality, of what made a wine “good” seemed so obvious. So simple. So . . . true?

I liked that it allowed for bad wines to be great in the right moment. I thought back to a Fourth of July I’d spent on a beach in Massachusetts. The night had gone from fine to fantastic thanks to a bottle of bland, cheap bubblegun-water rosé from God-knows-where, undoubtedly made with a designer yeast strain plucked from a catalog and a whole laundry list of additives. And nothing would convince me that Morgan’s precious Rousseau would have been better. It would have distracted from roasting marshmallows, from the people, from the lobsters we cracked open on paper plates covered with sand. In that situation, that great wine would have been a bad wine. There were times where the Rousseau, or any of the “greats,” just weren’t called for. Their grandeur, no matter how good, was excessive. One sip of the manipulated junk-booze rosé had led to another sip, and then another bottle, because in that moment, it was a perfect wine.

But Paul’s definition also allowed—and hinted—that wine could be more. A sip that led to another sip because the wine was pleasing reflected just one of the many feelings that wine can produce. Great wines turn one glass into a second because the first sip elicits a sense of wonder and curiosity. Great wines keep us coming back for more sips—and more glasses—not because we’re thirsty, but because there is something we didn’t quite understand the first time around. It intrigues us. It is cryptic.

One sip leads to another simultaneously acknowledged that wine was a process. Good wine leads you on a journey to try something else. The first glass of one wine could lead to a second glass of something else. Perhaps better, perhaps worse, but at least a new experience, with new dimensions.

“So,” I asked Paul when he returned, “did you think the Greek wine was yummy?”

He lifted his eyeglasses so the frames were balancing on his eyebrows, under his spiky dark hair, and gave me a long look through narrowed eyes. “I thought I already told you that for me, one sip led to a second sip. You saw me have a second sip.”

I looked down. He’d finished the glass.

“Yeah. And there you have it: Yummy.”

Maybe that’s the thing about greatness. It defies formulaic expression. As Morgan argued, there is some mystery to it—just as no single chord elevates a piano riff from melodious to haunting, and no one color determines which paintings stop us in our tracks. If greatness could be given by a formula, it would become trivial. But we know it when we taste it. And in the way the memory of it lives on.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ten Commandments

IN THE COURSE OF MY STUDYING, TASTING, AND TIME ON THE FLOOR, my vocabulary was growing in unexpected ways—“evolving,” as sommeliers would say of an older wine, whose “aroma” had turned into a “bouquet.”

A “flight” was no longer something that required a boarding pass, but many glasses of wine in a row. “Extended skin contact” wasn’t a pickup line; it meant soaking grape skins in their juice to add texture and color. A “pooled house” was a restaurant where the staff combined their tips, not a swanky place to visit in the Hamptons.

A “single” was one shift, a “double” was two, “Restaurant Week” was “like permanent brunch,” and brunch was hell. That’s when the “SOEs”—people with a sense of entitlement—came in for nice things they didn’t want to pay full price for. A “full turn” was the life span of a table during service, from seating to resetting—“mise-ing.” The dining room could do three full turns a night on the weekends, and sometimes even three and a half “in the season,” the months between October and December, when New Yorkers binged like there was no tomorrow. At the start of each turn, the sommelier would “mark” the table with glasses, then “play the guest” in the hope he could “stretch them out” to a spendy bottle. “Necrophiliacs” liked ancient, vinegary wines that were close to dead. Drinking a great wine too soon made