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Hedonistic Fruit Bombs

Steven Shapin

Bordeaux by Robert Parker [[Buy from the London Review Bookshop](#)] · Dorling Kindersley, 1244 pp, £45.00

The Wine Buyer's Guide: 2 volumes by Robert Parker and Pierre-Antoine Rovani [[Buy from the London Review Bookshop](#)] · Dorling Kindersley, 1635 pp, £50.00

Mondovino directed by Jonathan Nossiter

Sancho Panza fancied himself a wine connoisseur of rare ability. Challenged on his claim to have a 'great natural instinct in judging wines', he assured a sceptic that you 'have only to let me smell one and I can tell positively its country, its kind, its flavour and soundness, the changes it will undergo and everything that appertains to a wine'. It was, he said, an innate ability, especially pronounced on his father's side of the family, which had two of the best wine-tasters in all of La Mancha. Sancho told the sceptic a story demonstrating just how remarkable a skill this was. Some doubtful villagers

gave the two of them some wine out of a cask to try, asking their opinion as to the condition, quality, goodness or badness of the wine. One of them tried it with the tip of his tongue, the other did no more than bring it to his nose. The first said the wine had a flavour of iron, the second said it had a stronger flavour of leather. The owner said the cask was clean, and that nothing had been added to the wine from which it could have got a flavour of either iron or leather. Nevertheless, these two great wine-tasters held to what they had said. Time went by, the wine was sold, and when they came to clean out the cask, they found in it a small key hanging to a thong of leather; see now if one who comes of the same stock has not a right to give his opinion in such like cases.

David Hume liked this story, and in 1741 retold it in his marvellous essay 'Of the Standard of Taste', where he wrestled with the question of whether such delicacy of judgment was really possible. Some people doubted any such thing, but he did not. Writing in the 1820s, Brillat-Savarin reckoned that true connoisseurship was possible only for those who had the right sort and number of taste buds, and Hume seems to have believed something similar: different bodily constitutions were the cause of varying aesthetic sensibilities. Many of his contemporaries held that, whether or not anyone could make fine discriminations of this sort, there was no way to fix standards in such matters – judgments that could be made explicit, justified and shared. Science was one thing, taste quite another: 'According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter; and the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes.' This is a rare instance, Hume noted, of proverbial common sense agreeing with philosophy. I like the Château Talbot 1983; you like Wynn's Coonawarra Cabernet Sauvignon 1990; someone else likes Mateus Rosé.

Common sense has always suspected that connoisseurship was just snobbery tricked out as expertise, and that

wine connoisseurship was one of the purest forms of pretence. Nobody could really tell one wine from another with any reliability, and the idea that one (unflawed) wine was better than another was just a mystifying marketers' strategy to get you to pay more than you needed to for fermented grape juice. It's a particularly democratic form of scepticism. In the 1830s, Tocqueville noted Americans' intolerance of the notion of authority in matters of taste: 'Equality begets in man the desire of judging for himself; it gives him in all things a taste for the tangible and the real. A contempt for tradition and for forms.' A democratic society is not prepared 'to accept big words for sterling coin'; no aesthetic Leviathan could dictate taste to a free people. An American wine enthusiasts' website uses as its slogan a twist on a well-known saying by Noam Chomsky: 'The most effective way to restrict democracy is to transfer decision-making from the public arena to unaccountable institutions: kings and princes, party dictatorships, or professional wine critics.' The site is called *winedemocracy.com* and its credo is that 'the collective ratings of wine drinkers are more valuable than the single opinions of individual wine critics.' The palate of the people is the taste of God.

So it is a remarkable thing that the United States has not only produced the wine world's current Pooh-Bah, but, of all nations, has bowed down lowest in his presence. The '24-carat taste buds' belong to Robert Parker, a 57-year-old former Baltimore lawyer, who started the bimonthly subscription-only *Wine Advocate* in 1978, and whose many books on the world's wines – *Bordeaux, The Wines of the Rhône Valley and Provence* (1987) and various editions of the all-encompassing *Wine Buyer's Guide* – now constitute biblical certainty for consumers in America and, increasingly, around the world. There are translations in French, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Polish and Swedish. Berlusconi has just made Parker a Commendatore of the Ordine al Merito, and, after Mitterrand gave Parker a knighthood in the Ordre National du Mérite in 1993, Chirac bettered it in 1999 with a knighthood in the Légion d'Honneur. Parker, Chirac said, has 'served France by bringing prestige to the country with his particular gift'. He was the man who 'taught America about French wine', though it wasn't long before Parker missed his annual tasting trip to France, citing family fears for his safety after the Iraq invasion and sowing despair among French vigneron, who had grown financially dependent on his quality assessments. Parker is now 'Lord of the Grapes': *Time* magazine announced that 'for countless wine lovers, Robert Parker's tastes are infallible'; the *Economist* wrote that 'Mr Parker's palate is thought to be the oenological equivalent of Einstein's brain'; and the *Atlantic Monthly* said that 'when it comes to the great wines – those that drive styles and prices for the entire industry – there is hardly another critic now who counts.'

Parker judges wine with mathematical precision. Discontented with existing 20-point scales – 'it is my belief that they do not provide enough flexibility' – he grades wine from 100 points (perfection: 'an extraordinary wine of profound and complex character') to 50 points, which, bizarrely, a wine gets just for showing up, but which is otherwise, he says chillingly, for 'a wine deemed to be unacceptable'. You should understand that he doesn't pluck these numbers from the air: a wine gets up to five points for colour, 15 for aroma and bouquet, 20 for flavour and finish, and ten for 'overall quality level' (a fudge factor?) or 'potential for further evolution and improvement'. (I've never quite understood that one. A perfect wine has, by definition, no ageing potential and, therefore, should be marked down, while connoisseurs' judgments of what a wine will be like in 20 years' time have been notoriously poor on many occasions: the much trumpeted 1975 clarets never softened or gave much pleasure.)

Parker's numbers (the so-called 'Parker Points') soon took on a life of their own. While first-growth clarets and grand cru Burgundies might stand on their own historically established values, Parker Points increasingly became market-makers. It was better to score 88 than 84, but the crucial break came between 89 and 90. A pro-Parker trade magazine writes frankly that 'a 91-point wine will always sell faster than an 89-point wine, and any wine scoring in the mid-80s is destined for the bargain bins', a circumstance for which I have long been grateful since I have the good fortune to enjoy many of the wines that Parker finds wanting, and have particularly fond memories of a whole case of an infamous 'Parker 50'. I have been in American wine stores where 'Parker 90s' are specially flagged for the consumer, and I have heard punters tell shop staff that they're 'not interested in

anything under 90'. Soon the Parker 100-point scale came to be widely imitated by a growing number of American wine magazines and wine writers, but Parker's scores trump anyone else's.

Some British wine writers have made their peace with Parker, while others – sceptical of such fine and confident discriminations – have tried to hold out. Jancis Robinson won't budge from the traditional 20-point scale, resisting the notion of a single standard of taste: 'There's no suggestion that Parker's not being consistent, and following his taste. This is the whole point of wine – that there are different tastes in it, and that's why I think it's dangerous that the market's being dictated by only one.' Clive Coates scores wines out of 20 points as well, but thinks the whole marking business has got out of hand: 'It tends to make people forget that the appreciation of wine is personal and temperamental . . . Nothing is more subjective and individual as personal taste.' Hugh Johnson sticks with the crudity of stars (one star = 'plain, everyday quality'; four stars = 'grand, prestigious, expensive') and tries to persuade himself that 'the whole unreal business' may eventually go away. It's an American pathology: 'America likes numbers (and so do salesmen) because they are simpler than words . . . Arguments that taste is too various, too subtle, too evanescent, too wonderful to be reduced to a pseudo-scientific set of numbers fall on deaf ears.' But years ago both Oddbins and Majestic Wine Warehouse discovered the marketing magic of Parker Points and their use has now spread to parts of the British wine establishment: Berry Bros & Rudd quote Parker's judgments and Points. The American way with taste has once again become globalised.

Nevertheless, much of Old Europe loathes Parker, and for reasons not dissimilar to those for the hatred of Bush: the power both are seen to wield is as coercive as it is crude and clumsy. The numbers do not tell the whole story here: indeed, the numbers may be a red herring. Between a 20-point scale and a 51-point scale (which is what Parker's amounts to), the issue can scarcely be one of principle. Robinson recently announced her scores for a comparative tasting of Austrian and Australian Rieslings as a dead heat: she awarded each 17.33, 'but there was just a whisker in it,' and you wonder why she didn't break the tie by going to another decimal place. Parker himself goes through the briefest of motions in disavowing dictatorship: 'There can never be any substitute for your own palate nor any better education than tasting the wine yourself.' While he advertises himself as unprejudiced, experienced and reliable, these virtues are not quite the same thing as aesthetic 'objectivity', and Parker doesn't make any such claims for himself, or hold himself responsible for the idolatry that has made him so much money. 'I have no regrets over my scoring system,' he said in a recent interview. 'If it is abused by some members of the wine trade, so be it. Any scoring system . . . ultimately makes the taster more accountable to the reader. I am comfortable with my point system and I recognise its limitations: there is nothing scientific about it, and it should not be interpreted that way.'

After all, the numbers are always accompanied by detailed tasting notes – attempts to say in more or less ordinary English what the wine is like – and even Parker's enemies almost universally concede that he has an extraordinary palate. (He's insured his olfactory sense for a modest million dollars.) There is wide agreement that his descriptive language is more standardised and less fanciful than most, and that his descriptions are at least as effective as any other wine writer's in the fiendishly difficult task of conveying some idea of taste, smell and texture. Compare Parker on the 1998 Château Léoville-Barton ('opaque purple, muscular, full-bodied', displaying 'impressive concentration, chewy, highly extracted flavours of black fruits, iron, earth and spicy wood') with Andrew Jefford in the *Financial Times* on a Georges Duboeuf 2003 cru Beaujolais ('This dark wine . . . helicopters into the mouth with spinning blades of intense fruit,' combining 'finesse and elegance with near-beefy depth'), or with the *Wall Street Journal* on the same type of wine ('Moving towards the serious side, a bit hard. Not only is this wine blue-tinged, but it tastes blue-tinged, almost like roasted lilacs'). I appreciate that 'almost', since I haven't a clue what roasted lilacs taste like.

Perhaps one shouldn't make too much of the high-toned language. Compared to the language pertaining to vision, we do not possess a rich vocabulary for describing tastes and smells. If we insist that wine descriptions be

strictly and unambiguously referential, we won't be able to say much at all. You can probably get most people to agree that sweet wines are sweet, and that, in the right circumstances, Gewürztraminer tastes of lychees, Cabernet Sauvignon of blackcurrants, Rioja of vanilla and muscat (uniquely) of grapes. Beyond that, it seems to be a lottery. The young Samuel Pepys tried mightily to be accounted a connoisseur, but all he could find to say of the Château Haut-Brion that so tickled his fancy was that it 'hath a good and most particular taste which I never before encountered'. My *feinschmecking* wife can't taste the vanilla in Rioja at all, or in many other wines that are aged in new American oak, but she thinks that 'cedar', 'cigar box' and 'lead pencil' are pretty straightforward ways of describing what a nice St-Julien or Pauillac tastes like. Some people who seem to know what they're talking about say that Rieslings are 'petrolly'; others prefer 'plasticine' for what they agree to be – but which may not be – 'the same' smell. 'Lanolin' is a standard descriptive term for an element in the bouquet of white Burgundies, but I don't know what lanolin smells like, and my own suggestion would be 'silage' or maybe that volatile smell that comes off freshly roasted espresso beans. The routine description of Loire Sauvignon as smelling like gooseberries does little for me, and 'cat's pee' as a reference for Loire Chenin Blanc does nothing at all. But what can't be described by correspondence to familiar predicates can nonetheless be evoked. Where reference fails, poetry can begin. Yet how do you tell the poetry from the bullshit? Jefford's 'helicopters' are ludicrous, but his 'wild, jammy, slightly risqué character' does evoke in me some sense of what this Beaujolais from a very hot vintage might be like. There is, however, a lot less of that sort of stuff in Parker's wine criticism.

Parker evidently thinks there has been too much bullshit in wine writing, that it's a mark of corruption, and that both a simplified vocabulary for talking about wine and a more straightforward sensibility towards what makes wine good are ways of cleansing the Augean stables of the wine world. He's a bluff, straightforward sort of guy and, if you correct for some of the company he keeps, his is a bluff, straightforward way of talking about taste. The 2000 Château Grand Pontet is an 'opaque purple-coloured, fat, ripe . . . fruit bomb' (90-92 points); the 1997 Château Léoville-Poyferré 'exhibits delicious sweet cassis fruit mixed with high-quality toasty oak' (87); and the 1999 Craneford Barossa Shiraz is a 'hedonistic, glycerin-imbued fruit bomb' with a 'sweet, fat nose of jammy black fruits' (88). Parker does intermittently lapse into olfactory arcana ('tomato skins', 'melted chocolate' and 'deeply etched' flavours), but on the whole he avoids the poetry, along with much of the bullshit, and strives for as much descriptive reference as he's capable of and which the language allows.

Parker sees his vocation as that of 'consumer advocate' and his hero is Ralph Nader. Before Parker came to the rescue, the wine consumer had, in his view, been taken for a ride: the class-ridden Anglo-French trade and their British wine-writer lackeys had mystified wine; they had passed off over-cropped, dilute and dirtily made juice as 'elegant' and 'graceful'; they had banged on about 'terroir' because they lacked the science to get enough ripe fruit in the bottle and the capital to invest in new oak barrels; they had assured consumers that wine which tasted bad when it was young would be just splendid when cellared for twenty years; they had under-delivered and overcharged. The whole business was rotten to the core, and the cure was to resolve the conflicts of interest that bound wine writers to wine producers. 'It is imperative,' Parker announces, 'for a wine critic to pay his own way.'

Uncorrupted expertise: no free bottles; no complimentary air travel; no cosy guest-rooms at Château Margaux (samples are brought to his hotel room); no chummy dinners with the countess. Parker will report on what's in the bottle, courageously unconcerned by the reputation on the label or by the affability of the wine-maker. Interviewed several years ago, he boasted: 'I don't give a shit that your family goes back to pre-Revolution and you've got more wealth than I could imagine. If this wine's no good, I'm gonna say so.' He claims to have brought 'an American point of view to this sort of elitist beverage': if the old Bordeaux families found it 'incredibly unnerving', *tant pis*. 'I always say about myself, if there's a legacy for Robert Parker, it's that he levelled the playing field.' The price to be paid for the democratisation of taste is a cool 'aloofness', but the prize is said to be an independence of judgment that 'guarantees hard-hitting, candid and uninfluenced commentary'. Not aesthetic objectivity – for there can be no such thing – but disinterestedness that you can bank on and invest in. You should

think of corrupt wine writers in the same way you think of corrupt financial advisers.

Parker's position was simultaneously political and aesthetic, and so was the response of the writers and wine-makers who have stood up to him. If there's no disputing about taste, there's also no disputing some of the material consequences of taste. Such is Parker's power that he has shifted not just judgment but the reality on which judgment is based. The wine world knows what Parker likes and increasingly supplies it. If producing an alcoholic fruit bomb increases your chances of getting a 'Parker 90', then fruit bombs we shall have, even from Bordeaux, which had for some time been the centre of resistance to supplying these jammy monsters. Parker has especially talked up the 'garagistes' – mainly tiny right-bank producers of super-rich wines – that he champions in opposition to the effete left-bank aristocracy. His favourite wine-word is 'hedonistic', but there is a stodgy joylessness about his writing that conveys little of the pleasure involved in drinking wine in its natural setting – with food, with friends, industrial analysis moderated by amiability, confidence in judgment tempered by consciousness of one's imperfections and of the variability involved in almost every feature of the scene. (When asked whether he had ever confused a Bordeaux with a Burgundy in a blind tasting, the great British wine writer Harry Waugh famously replied: 'Not since lunch.' Parker would never make such a mistake – or perhaps he would never make such a confession.) More substantively, Parker's critics have disputed not the accuracy of his palate but the kinds of wine he likes and which he tells his disciples they should like: lots of ripe fruit, lots of alcohol, lots of oak, wine that tastes 'hedonistic' even when young.

In April 2004, the issue was joined in a dispute over the 2003 Château Pavie, a St-Emilion premier grand cru that Parker has been especially keen on ever since it was taken over in 1998 by a new proprietor, Gérard Perse. For Parker, this was an 'off-the-chart effort' (95-100): 'a wine of sublime richness, minerality, delineation and nobleness . . . It offers up provocative aromas of minerals, black and red fruits, balsamic vinegar, liquorice and smoke. It traverses the palate with extraordinary richness as well as remarkable freshness and definition.' For Robinson, goaded over the years by Parker's charges of cronyism and incompetence, Pavie was a 'ridiculous wine', just the sort of super-ripe fruit bomb that always made Parker free with his Points, tasting more like a Californian zinfandel than a proper claret (12/20). An arch-establishment figure, Christie's wine director Michael Broadbent, was less restrained: 'Anyone who thinks this is good wine needs a brain and palate transplant. This wine will be scored simply as undrinkable.' Parker then took the gloves off: Robinson's comments 'are very much in keeping with her nasty swipes at all the Pavies made by Perse and mirror the comments of . . . reactionaries in Bordeaux'. She insisted that she had tasted the wine blind ('I have witnesses'); Parker insinuated that she had not, since Château Pavie uses a distinctive bottle that 'even when covered up, stands out like a black sheep'. Typical British perfidy.

Hume thought that 'it is natural for us to seek a *Standard of Taste*; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.' And he also thought – against much sentiment to the contrary – that there really were just a few Masters of Taste, people like the Panzas, who had the constitution, the skill and the integrity to offer their judgments as a pattern for others. Here Hume sounds much like Parker: 'Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.' Yet Hume reminded himself that the judgments of taste were rendered in a social setting and had social consequences. So he tempered 'delicacy of taste' with civility, wisely cautioning these Masters of Taste to 'have indulgence to such as differ from them', and observing that such persons may prove 'a great inconvenience' to be around. When Hume recommended assent to such Masters of Taste as could be found, he did not envisage a world in which the Masters' opinions would dictate the world's judgments, or one in which they would change global reality.

Parker has only a walk-on role in Jonathan Nossiter's superb *Mondovino*, but he is the éminence grise of one of the most effective and moving political documentaries of recent years. The arch-villain is Parker's long-time

friend, the Bordeaux 'flying wine consultant' Michel Rolland. Parker only scores wine; Rolland is a global force in making the wines that win big Parker scores. As Rolland says of Parker, 'He's *the* critic,' the only one whose taste matters. Chauffeured from one Pomerol château to another, Rolland puts down his cellphone just long enough to dash in – 'I won't be more than five minutes' – and bark out the technical instructions that will ensure 'hedonism' in the bottle. His Pomerol laboratory services hundreds of estates in Bordeaux alone, but Rolland is now an international presence – consulting for 'superstar' wineries in 12 countries – and his expertise has helped to forge a fruit-driven, oaky 'international style'. Rolland lacks Parker's veneer of modesty. His job, he says, is to make wine 'better'. When it is put to him that not everybody agrees with his sense of what 'better' is, he says: 'Yeah, it's called diversity. That's why there are so many bad wines.' Rolland and Parker have bent Bordeaux to their wills and their tastes. At Château Mouton-Rothschild, the technical director, Patrick Léon, explains that 'Bordeaux had to adapt to global tastes': that is, to Parker-Rolland and their aesthetic machine. Château Kirwan in Margaux engaged Rolland as their consultant a few years ago and their Parker scores rocketed as the wines became more concentrated and oaky, from 78 points in 1990 to 91-92+ in 2000 (though 'my score may turn out to be low'). Jean-Luc Thunevin of Château de Valandraud in St-Emilion – a Parker protégé and a leader of the *vin de garage* movement – has no time for wine-makers attempting to hold out against the forces of globalised taste. They are reactionaries and theirs is just the aesthetics of sour grapes. 'These guys,' Thunevin says, 'are the ayatollahs of *terroir*.'

In *Mondovino*, the 'ayatollahs' turn out to be an engaging lot: poetic peasants with mangy dogs and no cellphones in evidence. At Mas de Daumas Gassac in Languedoc, the grizzled Aimé Guibert – like Parker, an ex-lawyer – works his 40 hectares while fighting off plans by the Nasdaq-listed Californian Mondavi winery to plant up his neighbourhood and pronouncing fatwas on the New World Wine Order: 'Wine is dead'; 'Bordeaux worships only money'; Rolland and Parker represent 'a new form of fascism', a tyranny of taste. In Jurançon, the 77-year-old Yvonne Hegoburu tends the six-and-a-half hectares of her Domaine de Souch according to the Green principles of 'biodynamie' and as a homage to her dead husband; in Sardinia, Battista Columbu reckons that he has an 'ethical commitment' to continue producing his tiny quantities of unique Malvasia; and in Argentina, an indigenous farmer's single hectare of white Torrontes and red Malbec vines brings him about \$60 a month, while a few miles away Rolland jets in to consult on a joint venture with large landowners who pronounce on the natives' lack of entrepreneurial spirit and modernising drive.

Mondovino is substantively about the world of wine and taste, but formally it's skilful agit-prop against the forces of globalisation. It makes a heavy-handed gesture at straightforward anti-Americanism: the Mondavi family explain the failure of their Languedoc venture by exposing the local mayor as a Communist; a cashed-out Silicon Valley entrepreneur with a small winery in Napa gets to display his execrable taste in landscape architecture while talking about his service in Vietnam and his work with Henry Kissinger; and the camera lingers on pictures of Ronald Reagan on Robert Parker's walls. But it's an honest enough movie to distribute the blame for global homogenising tendencies, if not quite honest enough to admit that there's never been a time when the world's wine drinkers have had a greater choice of well-made wines at fairer prices. The commercial pressures of a globalised wine world express themselves in tensions indigenous to France (between an increasingly responsive Bordeaux and a largely resistant Burgundy), within a region like Burgundy (between traditionalists and modernists), and within a family: the cringe-making on-screen spats between the Volnay patriarch Hubert de Montille and his son-and-heir, Etienne, situate the stresses of globalisation in the emotional fault-lines of an old wine-making family.

As an anti-Parker American wine merchant astutely says, this is 'a battle between the resistance and the collaborators'. You could sensibly say that the collaborators are winning, but that's quite a different thing from foreseeing a future in which resistance will be crushed. If you find that you don't like Parkerised wine, or at least that you don't always like it, you've offered yourself as proof that taste isn't the kind of thing that can be imposed.

And if you find – as you no doubt will – that there are some people who share your taste, you've also proved that the market is fragmented and given a strong indication that it's likely always to remain so. The same globalised wine world that jets Rolland from Bordeaux to Italy, Chile, India, Australia and America to make oaky fruit bombs also delivers the product of Aimé Guibert's 40 hectares to my favourite wine shop in rural Massachusetts, where you can buy the 2000 vintage for quite a reasonable price and try it for yourself, and where they leave a copy of Parker's *Wine Buyer's Guide* lying around so that, if you want, you can see whether it's really any good (89 points).

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