

Book and Film Reviews

Author/Producer, Title

George M. Taber.

*Judgment of Paris: California vs. France and the Historic
1976 Paris Tasting That Revolutionized Wine*

Reviewer

Orley Ashenfelter

Alexander Payne (Director).

Sideways

Screenplay by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor.

Based on the novel by Rex Picket

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GEORGE M. TABER: *Judgment of Paris: California vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting That Revolutionized Wine*. Scribner, 2005, 288 pp., ISBN 0-7432-4751-5, \$26.00

George Taber has written much more than a book about a wine tasting. Sure, the Judgment of Paris must be the most famous organized wine tasting of all time. And sure, California cabernet and chardonnay wines topped fine French products on French soil with French judges at a time when such an outcome (1976) was considered impossible by everyone- not just the French!

But Taber's book is more than the story of a wine tasting. In the same way that Sea Biscuit is more than a story about a horse race and The Jackie Robinson Story is more than a story about baseball, Judgment of Paris is the story of the development of the California wine industry and of the personalities who made it happen. If ever a story about wine could rise above the ubiquitous "cooking, wine, and spirits" category and find a wider public, this is it.

As the only journalist present for this historic event, Taber, a long time business reporter who was then at Time magazine, is uniquely situated to set the record straight. Taber tells his story by following the history of the two men who made the winning American wines: Mike Grgich, then winemaker at Chateau Montelena, who produced the chardonnay, and Warren Winiarski, founder of Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, who produced the cabernet. Both these men have wonderful, classic American life stories of movement from nothing to

something. Mike Grgich (born in Croatia 82 years ago as Miljenko Grgic?) arrived in the Napa Valley on a Greyhound bus in the summer of 1958 via Canada, where he had immigrated in the hopes of a better life (and with \$32 sewn into a shoe!) Warren Winiarski, formerly a lecturer at the University of Chicago in their (now defunct) Great Books program, followed Route 66 to California with his wife and two young children with the same goal. Both men certainly had some familiarity with the products they were about to produce, but this was a far cry from what you can learn in a university today in Davis, Bordeaux, or Roseworthy (the famous enology program in Australia).

We learn a lot about the paths these men take and how they ended up being in the right place at the right time. Some of the common features of their good fortune seem almost eerie. Though Robert Mondavi gets a whole chapter devoted to him, the name that crops up over and over is J. Leland (Lee) Stewart. Amazingly, both Grgich's and Winiarski's first jobs in Napa were as assistants to Stewart. Connected to the Stanford family, Stewart's Souverain Vineyard provided some of the finest early examples of Napa cabernet sauvignon. (I have recently tasted Souverain cabernets from the 1960's that remain delicious.) These early days in the Napa Valley were days of cooperation, conviviality, and a lot of learning by doing.

The research behind Taber's writing is truly staggering. Taber tracks down the story behind the winemakers of all the wines in the competition, both American and French. We learn that the Veedercrest Chardonnay in the competition was made by Al Baxter, a bohemian spirit if ever there was one, who was a Professor of Philosophy at Berkeley and the author of the mystery novel *Stay Me with Flagons!* (The wine didn't do so well, however, ranking 9th out of 10.)

There is a big payoff to Taber's research, and especially to his felicitous writing style. We see it best in Chapter 19, where he tells the story of the "Stunning Upset." Taber does two things admirably in this chapter. First, he sets the record straight. (Here I have a disclaimer to make: I have published my own statistical analysis of the results of this wine tasting at <http://www.liquidasset.com/tasting.html>. As Taber correctly points out, however, the official tabulation did not include the scores of the English and American judges, who organized the event, while mine did! Though the overall results are not altered by this change, I am happy to stand corrected.) As Taber says, "...a whole mythology about the tasting grew up...as people in both California and France embellished the event....In fact, my major objective in writing this book was to set the record straight."

And then Taber brings to life the complex interaction of the judges and their own reactions to the wines. Standing like a fly on the wall, while the judges tasted the wines blindly, Taber reports, "I soon realized that the judges were becoming totally confused. The panel couldn't tell the difference between the French ones and those from California." And, as they say, the rest is history.

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ALEXANDER PAYNE (Director), *Sideways*, Screenplay by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor. Based on the novel by Rex Pickett. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2004, 123 min.

Anyone who is fairly serious about wine — from the relatively casual collector to the most knowledgeable oenophile — will tend to be skeptical about a commercial movie, particularly a Hollywood studio movie, in which wine consumption plays a central role. But very early in Alexander Payne's "Sideways," when Miles (Paul Giamatti) — a sad-sack, failed writer of novels *and* a lover of the grape — explains to his friend Jack (Thomas Haden Church) — a good-looking but over-the-hill television actor — how a white sparkling wine (1992 Byron) can be made from 100% Pinot Noir grapes and yet not exhibit even a tinge of red color, the first evidence appears that this movie about wine may have gotten it right.

That verdict was cemented for me just a few scenes later when the friends are driving through a bucolic countryside of vineyards in Santa Barbara County, at the beginning of what is to be a week-long bachelor party for the two in wine country prior to Jack's wedding, where they eventually meet up with love-interests, Maya (Virginia Madsen) and Stephanie (Sandra Oh). Miles recommends a local winery to visit because of its excellent Chardonnay, at which suggestion Jack says, "I thought you hated Chardonnay."

Miles quickly responds, "I like all varietals. I just don't generally like the way they manipulate Chardonnay in California — too much oak and secondary malolactic fermentation." At that moment, in a dark theater in Brookline, Massachusetts, I turned to my wife and said, "This is going to be good!" And it was ... the first time I saw it, the second time, and the third time (which was at home with friends and a meal and a set of wines to accompany each of the scenes).

This is a seriously good movie, indeed an excellent one, the most recent of a long line of "road movies" that themselves are part of a "road literature" that includes Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Henry Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. But back to the movie, and the wine.

In "Sideways," Miles is a classic oenophile, even if most of us would prefer not to be identified with a character who is (otherwise) distinctly unattractive in so many dimensions. But Miles gives himself away with his assessment of the nose of the first wine he and Jack taste at the first winery they visit (which was in reality, Sanford): "... a little citrus... maybe some strawberry... passion fruit... and there's a hint of like asparagus... or like a nutty Edam cheese."

With such descriptions of wine — and that's only the first of many in the film — it may come as a surprise that there is no mention, none whatsoever, of wine ratings, those numerical assessments popularized in the United States by Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* and *The Wine Spectator*. Long discussions in the film about specific wines — old and new — never mention ratings. Why? A clue is found in the novel on which the movie is based, Rex Pickett's excellent novel of the same name, published in 2004 (St. Martin's Press).

In the book, when Miles is packing for his trip, he tosses into his suitcase a copy of Jancis Robinson's *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (Oxford University, 1999), which he describes as the "brilliant and exhaustive tome on everything you ever wanted to know about the universe of wine. ... I wanted to have with me the one book that had supplied me with all the basics of my one undying passion..." So, Jancis Robinson is his guru. And if you have read Robinson's entertaining autobiography, *Tasting Pleasure: Confessions of a Wine Lover* (Viking, 1997), you know of her complete disdain for numerical ratings.

For those who have not yet seen the film, let me offer a checklist of wines that make appearances, some only very briefly. If you are able to identify every one of these in the film, you deserve to open a particularly good bottle tonight from your cellar: 1992 Byron Sparkling, Sanford Vin Gris, Kalyra Chardonnay, Kalyra Cabernet Franc, Fiddlehead Sauvignon Blanc, 2001 Whitcraft Pinot Noir (Santa Maria Valley), Sea Smoke Botella Pinot Noir, Kistler Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir, Latour Pommard 1er Cru, Hitching Post Bien Nacido Pinot Noir, Hitching Post Highliner Pinot Noir, Andrew Murray Syrah, and 1961 Cheval Blanc.

Another challenge: seven wineries appear in the film, but their real names are not used. It is not impossible to identify them: Andrew Murray, Fess Parker, Fiddlehead, Firestone, Foxen, Kalyra, and Sanford.

Enough questions. Here are some answers, although to other questions. For the readers of this journal, I offer some wine trivia from "Sideways:"

Most of the wine used in the wine-tasting scenes was non-alcoholic, and the actors wound up drinking so much of it that it made them nauseated. Hence, they had to switch periodically to the real thing.

The picture that Miles looks at when at his mother's home is actually a photo of Paul Giamatti and his father, Bart Giamatti, former Yale president and Major League Baseball commissioner.

The 1961 Cheval Blanc that Miles is saving for a special occasion is blended from Merlot and Cabernet Franc, the two grape varietals that Miles specifically denigrates in the film.

Anecdotal evidence, as reported by the international press, indicates that subsequent to the film's release, sales of Pinot Noir increased by between 20% and 500% in various markets.

The film's cheery advertising poster portrays a bottle on its side, suggesting that the title, "Sideways," refers to the cellar position of a wine bottle. But Rex Pickett's novel makes clear from the first page that "sideways" is the characters' slang for drunk. And, in truth, the novel is considerably more forthright and darker about the alcoholism that is very much a part of the story: Miles drinks to excess, particularly to drown his frequent sorrows.

Having said that, let me end with what is surely a high-point of the film, both for lovers of wine, and lovers in general. Maya asks Miles why he is so into Pinot Noir. His response, which is both moving and revealing, is this:

I don't know. It's a hard grape to grow. As you know. It's thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It's not a survivor like Cabernet that can grow anywhere and thrive even when neglected. Pinot needs constant care and attention and in fact can only grow in specific little tucked-away corners of the world. And only the most patient and nurturing growers can do it really, can tap into Pinot's most fragile, delicate qualities. Only when someone has taken the time to truly understand its potential can Pinot be coaxed into its fullest expression. And when that happens, its flavors are the most haunting and brilliant and subtle and thrilling and ancient on the planet.

On hearing this, Maya's heart opens to Miles for the first time. A few moments later, it's Miles turn to ask Maya why she is into wine. Her answer:

I like to think about the life of wine, how it's a living thing. I like to think about what was going on the year the grapes were growing, how the sun was shining that summer or if it rained... what the weather was like. I think about all those people who tended and picked the grapes, and if it's an old wine, how many of them must be dead by now. I love how wine continues to evolve, how every time I open a bottle it's going to taste different than if I had opened it on any other day. Because a bottle of wine is actually alive — it's constantly evolving and gaining complexity. That is, until it peaks — like your '61 — and begin its steady, inevitable decline... And it tastes so fucking good.

Now Miles is swept away. And so am I.

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