BATTLE OF THE SOMM

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DOES THE WORLD SOMMELIER CHAMPIONSHIP REFLECT THE EVERMORE DYNAMIC WORLD OF WINE?

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It's a lengthy 40 minute metro ride across Paris from my house in the 11th arrondissement to Montparnasse in the 14th, where this year's world sommelier championship was held. The chasm between the two is as much cultural as geographic – not just opposing banks of the Seine, but opposing worlds of aesthetics. East Paris, even in bobo mode, has not lost the bohemian side of that equation; nor have the wines consumed there. If you've been to the 11th in recent years, you can attest it has become a wine nexus of naturalism and the avant-garde. Say "*soufre*" and you might as well be uttering "Satan".

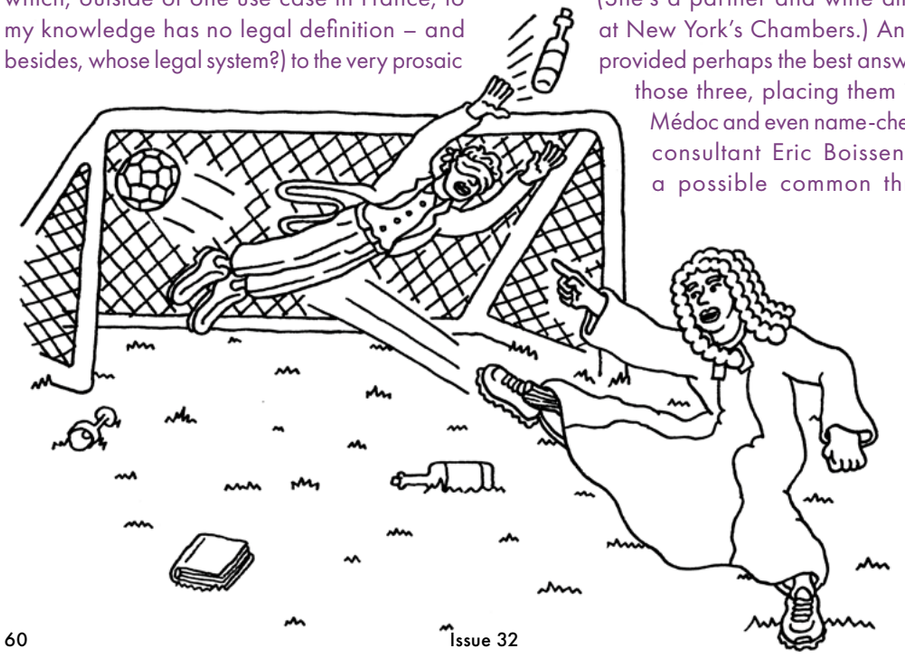
Montparnasse is the opposite in every way – all business, home to unforgiving modernist spaces and soulless malls, and to the lone skyscraper inside Paris's city limits. The wines drunk locally are less conservative (you'll find those in the 1st) than no-nonsense. Certainly, you can enjoy some solid Rhône specimens at Le Petit Sommelier, and I was delighted to find a bottle of unsulphured Drappier in a mall wine shop. But on balance the drinking is as anodyne as the architecture. That the Association de la Sommellerie Internationale, or ASI, chose this *quartier* to hold its world championship was probably a bit too on the nose in terms of its worldview. Of course, its competition for *Meilleur Sommelier du Monde* is as close as wine has to a World Cup. That metaphor cuts perhaps the wrong way, certainly if you consider what a mess Qatar and FIFA made of things last year. But more so, it raises the prospect of just what it even means to compete in such a thing. Wine tasting, as anyone who's ever seen Arsenal play will attest, is not football.

That said, this competition is taken very, very seriously, at least by the players. Every three years, ASI gathers a remarkable cohort of wine talent – top sommeliers from dozens of countries around the globe, 68 in this most recent showdown. (Regional competitions are held in the years in between.) As those of us gathered to witness can testify, the skills of these hopefuls

are extraordinary. For one thing, the sommelier element here is not abstract. Here is the rare wine competition that includes a significant service portion (versus, say, the Master of Wine exam), to the point that most contestants spend their week wearing an apron-and-tails costume semi-fondly described among them as "the penguin suit". Whether asking a wine professional to garb themselves like The Joker is the equivalent of would-be armour or a mild dose of humiliation is an open question. But costume aside, service was just the tip of the spear in the competition. The broader range of tasks asked of the dozens of hopefuls ranged from charming to sadistic, leaning to the latter. There was, of course, blind tasting, which, party trick that it is, still provides a window into a sommelier's prowess and cognitive powers of deduction. But the blind-tasting portions felt relatively earnest compared to some of the competition's more baroque tasks.

There was, for instance, the quiz of practical knowledge, with questions ranging from precise (the composition of biodynamic prep 507, which is valerian; I had to look that up) to the prosaic ("What is the legal definition of '*pét nat*'?" which, outside of one use case in France, to my knowledge has no legal definition – and besides, whose legal system?) to the very prosaic ("What is the difference between the Crabtree effect and the Pasteur effect?", specific anaerobic fermentation phenomena, neither of which have ever been discussed with me in 20 years of writing about wine) and the outright absurd (identify, if you would, the origin countries of Cienna, Anab-e-Shahi, and Yan 73, which are Australia, India, and China, and are also so far outside the realm of quality *vinifera* that they make Mauzac rosé look like a big deal).

Assuming you endured such hazing, the subsequent practical tests for semifinalists further amped up the absurdity. Apparently it wasn't enough to ask a candidate to blind taste and identify the origins and differences of three different wines; in fact, the three were the same wine, aged in three different types of oak. Such legerdemain might explain why even as formidable an entrant as France's 2023 representative, Pascaline Lepeltier, only made it to fourth place, just outside the finals. Lepeltier, who in addition to being a Master Sommelier is also a Meilleur Ouvrier de France, is renowned among peers for not only her deep intellect but also boundless energy and deft tableside manner. (She's a partner and wine director at New York's Chambers.) And she provided perhaps the best answer for those three, placing them in the Médoc and even name-checking consultant Eric Boissenot as a possible common thread.



All three contenders failed to identify two wines, which turned out to be two vintages of Pétrus. If the world's best sommeliers can't identify one of the world's best wines, is it possible that we're asking them to do the impossible? And if so, what's the point?

That task seemed downright guileless compared to some others: catching an expired serve-by date on a beer during service; or tagging the lack of *crème de violette*, needed for an Aviation cocktail, on a back bar; or identifying water kefir in a blind tasting of non-alcoholic drinks.

This sort of thing reached its pinnacle during the finals, held at the Paris La Défense Arena in the suburbs, when all three remaining contenders failed to identify two wines, which turned out to be two vintages of Pétrus. If the world's best sommeliers can't identify one of the world's best wines, is it possible that we're asking them to do the impossible? And if so, what's the point?

That Lepeltier didn't win was, of course, a great indignity to the French, who were keenly aware of the stakes, having waited more than 30 years for the competition to come home. After all, ASI was created in Reims in 1969, and the art of wine service ultimately was devised by the French. And so this was, as Philippe Faure-Brac, president of the Union de la Sommellerie Française, put it, the realisation "of a dream that this competition would come back to France". Indeed, for all the globalism of the association as it stands today, with branches on six continents, it is still very much a French creation. And while it has diversified its scope, so that aspiring somms have to study sake, baijiu, chai, and much more beyond wine, it also retains a French view of learning – in which rote memorisation plays a major role, and being right is more important than being enlightened.

That's a nice way of asking, when it comes to this mountain of esoterica: who the hell cares? That is in no way a matter of hating the player – the hundreds of thousands of hours of study put in by this cohort is awe-inspiring – so much as hating the game. That game, among other things, fails to acknowledge the ways in which wine is changing at a breakneck pace, its traditions evolving well beyond European rigour. Not to dismiss the agronomic value of Yan 73 (largely used to darken the color of Chinese wines) but would there not, perhaps, be some value in asking candidates to gain expertise into the rise of *vigneron* Champagne, versus bombarding them with Dom Pérignon, or to explore the stylistic evolution of Barolo, or the cultural resonance of zero-zero wines, or the surge of Italian varieties in Australia, or even have them dive deep into the postmodern oenology of modern Burgundy, versus ensuring they check the expiration date on a beer?

Of course, professional wine organisations are in a tricky place these days, under newfound scrutiny of their practices – witness the general meltdown of the Court of Master Sommeliers in the US. The ASI was almost neurotic in this latest contest, perhaps because of the funny business that marred its 2016 championship in Buenos Aires. Its French functionaries were so vigilant about the possibility of tampered results that I nearly caused an international incident when one of them tried to take away my mobile phone as I entered a competition room. Perhaps because of that, competitors are imbued with a sense of remarkably high stakes – encouraged to undergo an intense preparation that prompted more than a few comparisons to Olympic competition.

That was the analogy used by Andreas Larsson, 2007's best sommelier in the world, when he described how he studied practice techniques and meditation rituals of Olympic athletes, and decompressed by soaking in the tub for an hour, drinking green tea and listening to Mahler's 5th.

Such rhetoric certainly serves to scare the hell out of less-driven competitors, and probably to generate some hypey newspaper headlines. But the more I considered the gotcha nature of the tasks, and the insane preparation asked of entrants, I kept concluding that this was a lot of energy devoted to running in the opposite direction of where the wine world is today. More than that, there remains an uncomfortable dissonance between the globalism of the competition – with entrants this year from Malaysia, Ecuador, Zimbabwe and elsewhere – and the relatively narrow, highly commercial and decidedly European perspective that it maintains, one that still largely reflects the standards devised a half-century ago by a bunch of western European men. To invoke a comparison that ASI likes to use, the competition did indeed feel like a United Nations – its gathered assembly wandering the halls in their penguin suits, struggling to keep up with bureaucratic arcana.

All this made me wonder more deeply about the candidates themselves, many of whom clearly had mastered a sort of code-switching between their own interests and knowledge, and the very specific gatekeeping imposed in the competition. I've seen wine service performed in enough corners of the world to know that a tension exists between local customs and the European formality imposed by organisations such as ASI, and the fact that so little of the former was allowed to come to the table in Paris only heightened the sense that this was a dose of colonialism waged with corkscrews.

There was, for instance, a certain sameness to the food pairings proposed by somms of varying ethnicities, a narrow realm of western European dishes – lots of tartare and gougères and risotto. Hong Kong's Reeze Choi, the number three finalist, diverged a touch when he proposed spring rolls to go with a bottle of Krug, although proposing it to the sole Asian guest at the table left me wondering whether I would be offered the same. (Yes please!) But given how few non-European candidates have ever won — only one, Japan's Shinya Tasaki, in 1995 — you could be forgiven for thinking gougères are the way to a judge's heart, certainly when the culinary guest of honour at the finals was Anne-Sophie Pic, one of France's three-star chefs.

These concerns were magnified quite a bit after I read a profile of Choi in the *South China Morning Post*. Choi ended up as a sommelier not through some grand ambitions but because he was told it could earn him more money than just waiting tables. In the profile, Choi described his upbringing as relatively poor: he quit school at 16 to earn money for his family, worked at KFC and in other low-level restaurant jobs, and eventually quit restaurant work to devote himself nearly full-time to competition prep, spending up to ten hours per day studying. No green tea, no Mahler. In the paper, Choi was pictured at Big JJ Seafood Hotpot, a wine bar and one of his former employers. And I couldn't help but conclude that his experiences had made him a much more interesting, nuanced lover of wine than he was able to display on a Paris stage.

I'd made similar notes to myself throughout the competition – noting my growing unease at watching one competitor after the next rely on the same heavily Westernised set of aromas and tastes to describe wines. All those blueberries and crushed violets and apples and stone fruit. The need to broaden wine language has become a big topic of late, and I couldn't help but wonder why, with five dozen sommeliers from around the globe, there wasn't more talk of longan or fynbos (the South African equivalent of 'garrigue'), tamarind or maracuya? Wouldn't this be the point of a United Nations of wine, to mesh fundamental skills with a diversity of perspective? I know that I wouldn't want to go to Seoul or Quito, or even Tbilisi, and have the same conversation about wine that I would in Paris. Even in Paris itself, I would cringe if anyone in one of my haunts in the 11th suddenly showed up in a bow tie, discussing wine as I'd heard it done in Montparnasse.

As it happened, a few hours after the finals concluded, I found myself back in the 11th, drinking at a natural wine bar near my house, when Lepeltier showed up. The gathered crowd was full of wine luminaries, including some of the city's key wine buyers, plus *vigneron* friends from her native Loire. The room was foggy with winter sweat, a tangle of glasses and limbs and remnants of Époisses. Certainly, there was ample expertise to be found — the *vigneron* Richard Leroy was in a corner, commiserating about selected yeasts. And I only wished that a few other hopefuls from the competition were there, to enjoy the conviviality of a late Sunday in east Paris. It would have been a chance to see them relax for a moment, more in the mode of Muse than Mahler. Also a chance to show that even in the heart of France, wine has become a far more interesting prospect than the sommelier gatekeepers would acknowledge. Today you can be smart, and joyful, and brilliant, and leave the penguin suit in the closet.