

# Confessions of a Wine Buyer

By: Philip Bernot, Wine Director

Like anybody who is in the business of a thing, my opinions and beliefs about wine are frequently at odds with those of the public at large.

I do not think that this is unusual in the least; I am quite sure it is this way for most professions. Three times a week I hear “Don’t you just love Do Nothing Chardonnay? Isn’t it just the best?” Sorry, I don’t love it, and I certainly do not think it is “just the best.”

For better or for worse, when you are in the business of something you tend to become a little jaded. The latest, greatest thing is seldom either. Malbec from Argentina is all the rage right now, but Malbec has been grown in France for many, many centuries. I can’t even tell you how many sideways (get it?) glances I get when I tell people this.

The core principles of growing grapes and making wine have been around for a very long time. Technology has made wine making techniques more efficient than ever before, but at its heart it is essentially the same business the Romans plied, and many peoples before them as well.

“So what!” you say? I know we are conditioned to believe that the world is inherently egalitarian, that anybody who wants to do a thing can, but is it really true? Is there any reason to believe that a 14<sup>th</sup> generation winemaker in Alsace, who may have taken his or her first steps in the Altenbourg vineyard, isn’t a little better equipped to make superior wine than a 50-something retired investment banker who pays too much for a vineyard in Napa?

That’s no knock on Napa; it’s just that the history of the place is still in its infancy. Give Napa another two or three hundred years and a true style may begin to emerge.

The other side of the coin is the wines I do get excited about. It is not unusual for me to flip over something only to receive a lukewarm reception by the buying public.

Again, I think this is completely typical of any business. Recently I was floored by the incredible style and elegance of a certain Pinot Noir from New Zealand (Warning: this wine is no longer available, so it doesn’t really matter which wine it was). A Pinot Noir fanatic will tell you there is a certain magic in a proper Pinot that is just not in other wines. This magic is rare and elusive, but boy is it special when it is there!

This Pinot expressed this magic, and we could sell it for around \$25; so I was cautiously ecstatic. For me this wine was pretty close to the Holy Grail, a great affordable Pinot. But for sure there will be buyers of this wine that just don't get what I get. I liken this to a group of people walking in the woods, one of whom is an avid bird watcher. As the birder catches a glimpse of the exceedingly rare Turquoise Throated Puffleg it is all he can do to contain himself. But the rest of his group just see a pretty bird; they just have no idea how rare the experience is.

I have had many jobs in the wine business, but this one may be the best of all. I get to meet face-to-face with the ultimate end-user of the product, and frequently get immediate feedback on the effectiveness of my recommendations.

I get to expose people to wines they would not see otherwise, almost always with positive results. Hopefully my enthusiasm for wines of unusual value or character rubs-off on our customers, and they in turn tell all their friends.

So far, it seems to be working!