

JANCIS ROBINSON: *Tasting Pleasure: Confessions of a Wine Lover*. Viking Penguin: New York, 1997, 352 pp., ISBN – 13: 978-0670854233, (Paperback, Penguin: New York, 1999, ISBN: 0140270019, \$17.00)

One could not ask for a better travel companion for what is surely one of the most beautiful train routes in the world — from Frankfurt to Bonn along the Rhine River. After an overnight flight from Boston, I had the joy of sharing that train ride with Jancis Robinson, whom Robert Parker has called “the most gifted” of wine writers ... “witty, brilliant, authoritative.” To be accurate, I shared the train ride and my subsequent days in Bonn not with Ms. Robinson directly, but with her thoughts, as she told the story of her life with wine in *Tasting Pleasure: Confessions of a Wine Lover*.

Jancis Robinson is well known to oenophiles the world over — as the editor of the authoritative *Oxford Companion to Wine*, co-author with Hugh Johnson of *The World Atlas of Wine*, *Financial Times* columnist, host of the television mini-series, *Wine Course*, former *Wine Spectator* columnist, and most recently host of her eponymous web site. *Tasting Pleasure* presents an opportunity to sit down with Ms. Robinson, and join her as she describes in prose that are concise, entertaining, and modest her remarkable voyage of more than three decades as a lover of wine.

Jancis Robinson’s serious interest in wine began — as it does for so many oenophiles — with an epiphany, a single transformative and unforgettable experience. For Robinson, it was during her student days at Oxford in the early 1970s. Out for dinner with her generous boyfriend of the time, she shared a bottle of 1959 Chambolle-Musigny, Les Amoureuuses. In English, “Les Amoureuuses” means “the lovers.” Alas, Ms. Robinson apparently did not fall in love with the boyfriend, but most certainly did begin her love affair with red Burgundy, and — more broadly — with the world of wine.

Just as I finished reading about Jancis Robinson’s seminal experience at Oxford with fine Pinot Noir, my train entered a long tunnel above the Rhine. I closed my eyes, and was transported back to my own wine epiphany decades earlier. Our good friends, John and Lilli, had joined my wife and me for dinner at our house on New Year’s Eve, and brought with them three remarkable bottles, which opened my eyes, or rather my nose, my palate, and my heart to the transcendent experience that enjoying wine can be. I remember little about the evening’s cuisine, but I have never forgotten the wines: 1976 Chateau Lafite Rothschild, 1976 Beaulieu Vineyards Georges de Latour Private Reserve, and 1982 Penfolds Grange. The joy of that experience remained with me as my train emerged from the tunnel into the daylight.

By the mid-1980s, Jancis Robinson was already an accomplished wine writer, having written several books and a regular column in the *Sunday Times*. In *Tasting Pleasure*, she takes the reader through the joys of being a wine writer — visiting the greatest cellars, the most splendid vineyards, the best restaurants — and also through the trials of becoming the first journalist to pass the battery of exams to become a “Master of Wine.” And we learn

just enough about her life outside of wine, including her family with husband Nick Lander, a former restaurateur turned restaurant critic of the *Financial Times*.

Throughout, Robinson reminds us that she considers herself a wine writer, not a wine critic. For contrast, she offers the example of Robert Parker (and tells a wonderful story about when she first met him in Bordeaux in 1985). In her columns, books, and web site, you will not find Jancis Robinson awarding numerical scorers to wines. She views wine taste as inherently subjective, and describes wine criticism as being analogous to film criticism. We may read the reviews of a number of film critics, and over time we can perhaps calibrate those critics' tastes with our own, at which point their assessments can become useful guides to what we are likely to enjoy.

That is a far cry from the respect — indeed the allegiance — often given to Robert Parker's and others' numerical ratings. Robinson offers a delicious anecdote which illustrates just how foreign was the notion of quantitative scoring of wine before Parker. When Hugh Johnson was sent the proofs of Parker's first book, *Bordeaux*, he thought that the curious numerical entries throughout the book adjacent to descriptions of specific wines were printer's marks!

To be clear, Jancis Robinson does not disparage Robert Parker nor his great success. Indeed, she comments admiringly on his self-confidence and consistency. And, as with most of the characters who show up in this book, we are invited to come along to lunch or dinner, and learn about the meal — and, of course, the wines — that were enjoyed. At Parker's Maryland home, Robinson is delighted to share an excellent dinner accompanied by 1976 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne, 1971 Chateau Petrus, 1966 Chateau Latour, 1964 La Mission Haut-Brion, 1949 Chateau Chasse-Spleen, and 1980 Chateau d'Yquem.

That is one of many days and evenings Jancis Robinson shares throughout the book. Along the way, she introduces us to a wonderful cast of characters with whom she has worked and interacted over her career — Michael Broadbent, Anthony Barton, Clive Coates, Frances Ford Coppola, Ernest Gallo, Hugh Johnson, Alexis Lichine, Corine Mentzelopoulos, Robert Mondavi, Robert Parker, Emile Peynaud, Frank Prial, Baron Philippe and Baroness Philippine de Rothschild, Marvin Shanken, Peter Sichel, Serena Sutcliffe, and Alice Waters, to name just a few.

Early in the book, Robinson confesses that during her student days at Oxford she failed to exploit the university's renowned wine cellars. But she tells the story of once going down to inspect the cellar of All Souls College, where she was stunned to see case after case of first growths from 1961 and earlier vintages.

As I finished my breakfast aboard the train and returned to my seat, we entered another tunnel. In the dark, I pictured those marvelous wine cellars at Oxford and Cambridge. And I thought about the reality that despite my own university's claims to have patterned itself after the Oxbridge model, stellar wine cellars do not seem to have been part of the

intellectual and social inheritance. As my train emerged from the tunnel into another stunning landscape above the Rhine, I reflected on that flawed academic inheritance with some disappointment.

But there was no disappointment for me with Jancis Robinson's confessions of a wine lover. From first page to last, the book was a joyful read. There is a striking passage near the end of the book that is reminiscent of Maya's beautiful explanation to Miles in *Sideways* of her great affection for Pinot Noir. Here is Jancis Robinson telling us what makes it so rewarding to be a wine writer:

"For me wine is so much more than a liquid in a glass; the liquid is merely our link to what is so often a fascinating story, a spot on the globe, a point in time, a fashion in wine-making, an argument between neighboring farmers, rivalry between old schoolmates, perhaps proud new owners who want to make their mark at any cost."

Robinson's life in wine is indeed one of tasting pleasure, and by reading this book we have an opportunity to join her on a remarkable journey — sometimes fascinating, sometimes funny — but always remarkably pleasant. For your next train ride, your next cruise, or your next flight, you deserve a great companion. Take Jancis Robinson with you.

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