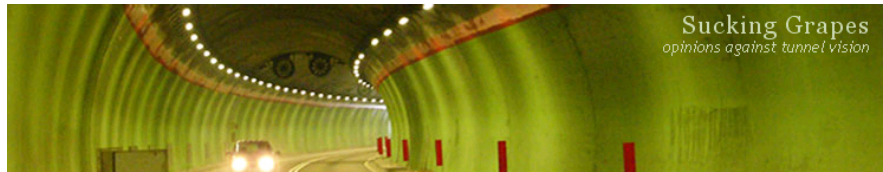


Sucking Grapes

opinions against tunnel vision

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FACE TO FACE WITH TERROIR

Posted by walter

A SUNTAN COMES WITH IT TOO

Here is a thought: warm climates are more suitable for viticulture than moderate ones as there is less humidity and therefore less or no need for combating rot and diseases with chemicals. I am joking of course, but certainly this cheeky thought crossed my mind while standing in the vineyards at Monte Bernardi, as Michael had talked me into helping picking the fruit for the 2007 vintage. Before I actually find myself in the vineyards, it has taken several phone calls to confirm my presence. Michael has been waiting for the Sangiovese to reach perfect ripeness, which had almost set in. Rain, however, would have made it necessary to postpone the picking, as the plants would have soaked up all the water, and thus diluting the fruit. It is therefore that I am waiting for the final "all clear". Although I am not a big fan of this work (I picked grapes for a couple of weeks in Bordeaux some years ago) I am quite keen to look over Michael's shoulder during what is the busiest period for any estate. And while being in the vineyards I am constantly reminded of the differences between picking in Bordeaux and in Chianti Classico.

To be brutally honest: the Medoc, according to me, is the dullest vineyard region on God's earth, and although I haven't visited Coonawarra yet, I imagine it would have no problem in challenging this flat stretch of land on the other side of the planet. In Chianti Classico however, everywhere I look is beauty. But even better: the weather is glorious, with blue skies and sunshine, and, even in the afternoon hours, not too hot. The fruit is truly gathered under perfect conditions, another reason to believe that this is going to be a great vintage (see for a detailed report on the growing season a previous article).

In Pauillac, during the 2002 vintage, it rained and as I was a novice, not well prepared for the downpours. I ended up wearing plastic waste bags, feeling the rain literally run into my rubber boots. As if this was not disheartening enough, we had the task of cutting out the rot of the affected bunches, which was easier when it was dry, and a pretty messy job when wet. Trying to untangle the fruit from the foliage under these conditions was troublesome and I cut my fingers several times with the scissors. Still, I consider it essential for any one in the trade on whatever side to have knowledge of this arduous work, which, in the end should make us all a bit humbler, something that in a restaurant environment nowadays tends to be a rare phenomenon.

I arrive at midday at Panzano and am greeted by Jennifer, Michael's sister, who quickly registers me with the local authorities as one of the seasonal workers of Monte Bernardi. Whereas we would drive to the dispersed vineyards scattered throughout Pauillac for several miles, at Monte Bernardi we only have to walk a few meters up to the Saetta vineyard. "We" in this case are quite an international bunch, consisting of three Americans, a young Frenchman, who is enrolled in a stage at the estate of Jennifer's partner, but as the grapes need a couple of days longer to ripen there, he has come to Monte Bernardi to help out. Suzanne, originally from Vienna, but has chosen Panzano as her domicile some seven years ago, is in charge of the daily running of the Monte Bernardi office, conducting tastings, seems to fully enjoy the work, and is chatting away in three different languages. As is Jennifer, combining picking with listening to her Ipod. There is Rosanna, a local lady who is extremely quick and my "picking guide". I consult her whenever I am in doubt what to pick and what to leave. And while all the fruit looks compact, shiny and healthy to me, some of the upper bunches are left, although it is very hard to resist the urge to harvest them. This is the first time that I can understand the difficulty of implementing the practice of green harvesting in a long established wine region, where the people consider "abundance of fruit" a gift from God. It is tough at first

indeed to not pick and leave seemingly perfect bunches for the birds. Michael's father and mother are there, accompanied by a bunch of dogs and Claudia, Michael's wife, with baby daughter Olivia. Rosanna immediately jumps at the occasion of holding the child, while Claudia joins the rest of us. An older, very quiet local gentleman with deep folds engraved in his face, and some younger local folk are helping, making the whole picture even more rustic.

The vineyards of Monte Bernardi total around 4 hectares and are trained on a fairly high trellising system. Compared to Bordeaux, where the trellising system is about a meter high, it makes picking easy and I hardly have to bend. Alternating, in between the rows, there are cover crops, which even out the soil, but the next row shows the stony skeleton of marl and quartz, and are uncomfortable to work on. It is impressive terroir, but I sometimes cheat and choose the other side of the row, with the cover crops. The originally white vines of the Saetta vineyard has been grafted to Sangiovese in the late 1980s by the previous owner, and occasionally the vine has resisted the graft, and still continues to grow white grapes. Although they look wonderful and taste sweetly, we leave them on the vine.

Picking is easy and almost fun, especially as there is not a lot of foliage covering the compact bunches of Sangiovese. Michael has done some defoliating earlier in the final stages of the growing cycle to expose the fruit to the sun in order to achieve perfect ripeness. The next day, when picking in the Tzingana vineyard, where Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are cultivated, there is more fiddling with leaves and branches to untangle the bunches, as these grapes need more shade. Too much sun will give a prune like, raisiny touch to the final wine, which Michael doesn't like. I can't help but think that Sangiovese is king in Chianti Classico as it excels in the climate, whereas the "strangers", Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, need to be protected more.

There is another French variety planted in the vineyards, which is Petit Verdot. This grape, which hardly ripens at all in its homeland Bordeaux nine out of ten vintages, seems to do here pretty well. Still, it produces long elongated bunches with very little fruit and tiny berries. Michael instructs us beforehand that, contrary to Sangiovese, where bunches in these conditions would not make it into the fermentation vat, Petit Verdot that looks like this needs to be picked, and if in doubt we should ask whether to reject or not.

As the crew is quite large (friends and family alike are recruited), we execute the task in record time. Michael and Jennifer are visibly relieved as two years ago the conditions were much more trying. In 2005 rains made a second selecting of the fruit necessary, for which a sorting table was installed at the reception of the winery. Still, we get to taste the 2005 Chianti Classico, and it has turned into a very elegant, perfumed wine, the results of this strict selection but even more so biodynamic practices. Michael tells me the vineyards at Monte Bernardi are healthier than the conventional treated vineyards of most of Panzano (there are still very few exceptions, the most famous one being Castello dei Rampolla, which was the first estate to employ biodynamics here, and the proprietor of which I was introduced to during a "Trager session some months before in London, who knew Monte Bernardi and complimented Michael's wine at that occasion). And I have no reasons to doubt this: while picking I smell all of a sudden fresh mint, and there it is, side by side with wild fennel, sage, wild rucola, and birds nests clinging to some of the vines. Healthy indeed.