



The Definition of Fun: An Interview with Terry Theise

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September 19, 2006

Wine importer Terry Theise is the wunderkind of fine German and Austrian wines and of small, quality grower Champagnes. As the leading importer of Austrian wine to the U.S., he has introduced scores of American palates to the charms of Grüner Veltliner—an accomplishment that in itself might be enough to guarantee vinous sainthood. In addition to the high standards of the wines in his Terry Theise Selections portfolio, Theise is also one of the best wine writers in the U.S. (or anywhere for that matter). Take, for example, this excerpt from his riff on Champagne growers, in which he discusses the importance of the individual vintner's own character:

'There's more than one way to make great wine, remember. One man likes high-strung, nervy wines, likes them tense and dashing. His neighbor, equally conscientious and quality-driven, likes wines more creamy and elegant. Each can tell you why Champagne 'should' taste the way he makes it. Some are tolerant, even embracing of different styles. This is how your humble author defines FUN. Fun is the finding of creative diversity by which we celebrate the human foible. Fun is not the search for THE BEST or the ONLY way or the RIGHT way. Fun is discovering that you're ticklish in more than one place.' (To read more of Theise's prose go to www.skurnikwines.com and click on the Terry Theise link; his catalogues on Austrian, German, and grower Champagnes can also be ordered through the website, or by calling 516 677-9300).

You've written that the kind of vintners you choose to work with are 'restless truth seekers' viticulturally speaking. Can you briefly elaborate what viticultural 'truth seekers' are?

'Truth seekers' want to receive and pass along the spoken truth of their vineyard, a truth that they don't want obscured by their own razzmatazz.

Give us an example of a truth-seeking vintner.

Jean-Baptiste Geoffroy is a small Champagne producer who was curious about the effect of morning versus afternoon sunlight on grapes. So one year, in the weeks leading up to harvest, he trimmed the canopy of leaves on ten rows of vines facing east, and on another ten rows facing west, to expose his clusters to direct sunlight. He wanted to see if there would be any difference between those grapes that got more soft morning sun and the ones that got harsher late afternoon sun. Keep in mind that each of these two experimental plots was harvested separately and vinified separately. I'm not even sure what the result was. In fact I don't know if there even was a difference between the two, but the point is that this is an example of restless truth seeking. I love that these people have to ask these questions, that they want to know what the grapes have to say. And by the way, it's in the vineyard that this kind of thing interests me, not the winery. The text of what happens to wine is in the vineyard.

What is the world's greatest grape?

Riesling. Riesling is unquestionably the world's greatest grape, white or red. In my opinion, of course.

When you think of the character of Riesling, do you think first of fruit, or first of minerals?

First minerals. It is at its core a mineral or stony wine, into which the essence of Riesling is woven. The fundamental of Riesling is mineral. If fruit is blatantly in the foreground, the grapes have probably been grown somewhere where they shouldn't be grown.

Is it possible to generalize about the differences between Riesling from Alsace, Germany and Austria?

Germany and Alsace are siblings, while Austria is a second cousin. Alsace and the Pfalz, after all, are geographic extensions of each other, lying on different sides of the same range of mountains. Germany and Alsace both have maritime climates, which is to say that their climate is influenced by gulf-stream currents coming off the Atlantic. Austria doesn't have a maritime climate--it's continental, with less rainfall. It has different soil too, namely a volcanic derivative (metamorphic/igneous) that contains, among other things, schist, silica, and mica. So there are different terroir parameters. And Austrian Riesling is almost uniformly, absolutely, dry. One cannot depend on Alsace or German Riesling to be dry.

You've convinced me that I want some Austrian Riesling-but am I going to have trouble finding it in the U.S. if I don't live on one coast or another?

It's not difficult to find, or at least not difficult on the coasts or in big cities. In the great flyover part of the country it might be a little more challenging. You certainly can find it, but sometimes it's in places you might not expect. For example, you're more apt to find Austrian wine in Aspen than in Denver.

Why is that?

All the new trends really start with restaurants. Trends are made in restaurants, then flow out from there. Like this one. People first tasted Austrian wine in restaurants, then, since they liked it, went out and wanted to buy it in their retail stores.

But what kind of selection is available in this country? Don't we still have to go to Austria to find the really great wines?

No, absolutely not. Virtually all the greatest Austrian Rieslings are available somewhere in the U.S. I'm not necessarily talking about the mediocre ones or even the good wines, I mean the greatest wines. I'm not aware of any great Austrian Riesling that doesn't have a U.S. importer.

And you've tasted virtually all of them. Which reminds me of something I've wanted to ask you: do you really taste every single one of the wines that has your name on it?

Yes, of course. That should go without saying. And remember that for each one that carries my

name I taste 5 or 6 that don't. In the old days it used to be 15 or more that I'd taste, but now I'm walking a well-known groove. I taste them all not just as a guarantee for my customers, but also for my own edification.

Let me give you a few words for you to free-associate with--in a wine context, of course. For example, if I say 'distinctiveness,' what's the first wine-related thought that comes to your mind?

Ah, the all-important distinctiveness. Distinctiveness is the telling flaw that makes the beauty of a wine even more so. It's that wonderful recognition that something is uniquely itself. Distinction is the gateway to the wonder of multiplicity. Distinctiveness is very high on my list of things to cherish about artisan wine.

Only artisan wine?

Yes. Industrial wine can have many good things going for it, but distinctiveness isn't one of them.

Okay, how about the word 'mystery.'

That's probably the highest of all possible experiences a taster can have with wine. The wine asks a series of questions, the answer to each of which is an even more probing question. And so it goes, on and on. Eventually it takes you away from itself, its discreet self, and takes you out into the larger world of beauty. I always know when that moment comes because, for me, I experience a kind of sadness. Not bitter, not a grief kind of sadness, but more what we used to call *weltschmerz*, a compassionate sadness.

'Harmony.'

Harmony is composed of two sub-groups: grace and elegance. Of course 'elegance' is accused of being a word used by wine intellectuals to indicate a lack of intensity. But that isn't what elegance is--it's not the absence of intensity, but rather the presence of grace and proportion.

Here's another word, or actually two words to respond to: 'pork schnitzel.'

The only possible response to that is: YES!

No, I mean 'pork schnitzel' in a wine context.

Oh, I see. Well then, the answer is: light-bodied, fruity reds. Or Champagne. Light bodied reds seem better than dry whites. Of course a lot depends on how you're preparing it, the kind of bread crumbs you've got, and are you cooking it in butter, lard, oil or goose fat (which is what I always use). But all things being equal, I'd go with light bodied fruity reds or Champagne.

Let's do one more word: 'Perfection.'

Perfection is the unattainable. The desire for it is more important than the realization (in fact the realization of perfection would probably kill us). It can occupy every category of life. For example, it can be what I'm feeling when I'm sitting on a hill overlooking the ocean and watching a pelican dive into the water; the weather is perfect, the food is perfect, the friend I'm with is perfect. The wine is perfect. The wine can be simple, yet still perfect-think of the right oysters with the right Muscadet. We've all experienced these perfect moments, which are attainable because they're not exulted. But whenever I hear a voice in my head saying, 'It doesn't get better than this,' another little voice whispers, 'How do you know?' In this same framework, a 100 point-wine is spiritual suicide.

Would you briefly discuss sweetness and acidity? I'm certainly not a fan of inappropriately sweet wines, but it seems to me there are also a lot of exceedingly tart, acidic wines on the market. I think that many of them can be good with the right food (Muscadet and oysters perhaps?) but as an aperitif, ultra austere wines tend to set my teeth on edge.

Certainly the acid shouldn't show too pointedly. It should harmonize with all the other components in a wine. Of course once in awhile one component will peek out from the mélange and make itself known, and there's nothing wrong with that. As for sweetness, there's the sweetness of an apple and the sweetness of a Twinkie--and let's not confuse them. Please.

If you could reduce the stylistic components you look for in a wine to one single thing, what might it be?

Clarity. First of all clarity. It's the single most important thing I look for. If you don't have clarity, how can you glean the rest of the stuff? If a wine is bleary and fuzzy, how are you going to find the beauty, the distinctiveness, and the harmony? There has to be clarity.