

2009

h-diplo

H-Diplo Article REVIEWS

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 230

Published on 13 May 2009

H-Diplo Article Review Managing Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

H-Diplo Article Review General Editor and Web Editor: George Fujii

Philip Whalen. “‘Insofar as the Ruby Wine Seduces Them’: Cultural Strategies for Selling Wine in Inter-war Burgundy.” *Contemporary European History* 18.1 (2009): 67-98. DOI: 10.1017/S0960777308004839. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0960777308004839> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR230.pdf>

Review by **Kim Munholland**, University of Minnesota Emeritus

“**T**hink Globally, Act Locally.” This environmentalist appeal provides the necessary formula for connecting Philip Whalen’s regional study of a local effort to sell Burgundy wine during the interwar years to what has become an expanded and increasingly competitive international wine market in the last third of the twentieth century, thereby becoming a subject of interest to scholars concerned about globalization, international commerce and trans-national cultural differences. We begin with local action before moving on to global thinking and a consideration of how globalization presents a challenge to the French wine industry and even to French identity.

The period from 1870 to 1950 was “a time of troubles” for the wine industry worldwide but particularly in France.¹ The causes were several, beginning with the biological damage caused by plant diseases, notably the phylloxera epidemic. Once the phylloxera epidemic had been conquered, there followed a period of overproduction as yields in French vineyards more than doubled between 1880 and 1920. Wine prices declined sharply and wine merchants (*négociants*) were accused of adulterating good with “artificial” wine in which added sugar raised the alcohol content. Protests, often violent, among the *vignerons* of the Midi led to legislation designed to eliminate fraudulent practices in 1907, an early step leading toward a broad regulation of the French wine industry in the 1930s.

For Burgundians this process was only beginning in the 1920s, and wine growers found their cellars overstocked and too few customers to absorb the surplus, partly as a result of prohibition in the United States and Scandinavia. Whalen’s study shows the way in which

¹ Rod Phillips, *A Short History of Wine* (New York, 2000), chapter 9 “A Time of Troubles: Wine and its Enemies, 1870-1950” 271-306.

Burgundy began to shape its image as a place where traditions favored the production of quality wines. Local festivals and celebrations of the harvest were developed to strengthen an image of regional identity. Revivals of folkloric traditions, such as the feast of St. Vincent, became ways of attracting customers, including tourists, to the wine of Burgundy. Regionalism became a way of identifying the unique qualities of French wine, and Whalen sees the entrepreneurs of Burgundy, such as Gaston Roupnel, taking the lead in using regionalism and tradition as a marketing tool. The emphasis upon region was also part of a broader movement to celebrate French diversity, exemplified by its wines, as part of a national identity. Central to this image was the notion of *terroir*, an always difficult term that reflects not only the qualities of a particular soil, but the care given to the harvesting of the grape, methods of fermentation, the impact of micro climates, and an almost mystical relationship between the wine-grower and the wine.

The customer for Burgundian wines, as with other French wines of distinction, had to be assured of quality, and this brought a series of regulations culminating in the AOC [Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée] legislation of 1935. This extensive regulation specified the grapes that could be used from a delimited region, set standards for yields, alcohol levels, methods of vinification and growing techniques such as restrictions on the use of irrigation. As a guarantee of quality, the AOC designation was sought by *vignerons*, because it assured both French and foreign customers of a reliable, quality product, so that over half of the wines of quality in France have an AOC designation. Whalen concludes by noting the success of the Burgundian model for the connection between *terroir* and quality has been extended to other agricultural products in France, and brisk sales of wine from Burgundy represent an economic reward that has held up in the face of growing challenges from the global wine trade (98). Whalen cites the exhibitions of wine and other French products at the 1937 Paris Exposition as evidence of a new form of commercial regionalism resulting from an emphasis upon *terroir* (97).²

Yet globalization and the general expansion of wine production have raised issues about the way in which French wines have been designated, specifically the AOC system itself. As a system to assure customers of quality wine, the AOC regulations have worked, but at a price of restrictions that discourage innovation and experimentation in wine production, even the adoption of new methods of production and agricultural practices, restrictions that do not apply to French competitors from countries of “the new world.” Moreover, French emphasis upon *terroir* for all of its merits is now less successful as a way of selling mass-produced wine in a global market than labeling wines by grape varietals. As one analysis of the international wine trade notes, AOC restrictions are more

² In a review of Gilles Laferté, *La Bourgogne et ses vins: image d'origine contrôlée* (Paris, 2006), Marion Demossier notes the way in which Laferté along with Shanny Peer, Kolleen Guy and Philip Whalen have identified a “commercial regionalist folklore’ initiated by republican elites which have invented a marketing strategy for their wines based upon the traditional images of wine-grower, *terroir* and authenticity.” Marion Demossier, *H-France Review* Vol. 9 (January 2009), No. 18.

confining than seeing wine as a California or Australian cabernet sauvignon.³ The French AOC forbids labeling by variety, so that French *vignerons* who wish to do so must step outside, or be outside, the AOC system. Many of these producers claim this is the only way to make their French wines competitive in an export market. As one on-line comment has it, “It seems that the average wine-drinking consumer is perfectly willing to learn a few dozen grape varieties to help make their purchases, but totally unwilling to learn the thousands of French appellations, especially when AOC rules prevent most producers from displaying grape varieties on their labels.”⁴

What is the answer for proud French winegrowers, who lack the towering reputations of the great French estate wines, in an international market? For those producing wines at the upper end of the market, there is no problem. The established reputations of the classified growths of Bordeaux, the great champagnes or the renowned producers of high quality Burgundy, assure that there is no economic problem, given the prestige of what they produce, limited production, and a growing demand of wealthy consumers from around the world. The story is one of crisis for many French producers of moderately priced but respectable wines seeking places in an international market. In order to market by varietal a number of producers, while remaining within the AOC for part of their production, now produce very respectable wines as “*vins du pays*” or what one French specialist calls “country wines.” These wines traditionally have been accepted as “ordinary” local wines that “do not travel.” Yet the hope is that these wines, with varietal designations or use of grape varieties not allowed by French regulations, will indeed travel onto a global market. Some French critics fear that the influence of *vins du pays* will be fatal to those wines—“vintage wines”—that fall under AOC regulations, and some very French characteristics, an insistence upon quality and a sense of *terroir*, will become submerged in a globalized wine market.⁵

On the other hand, *terroir* may have a future in a global setting, despite the difficulties that international consumers may have with the concept. A number of wines, including those from California, Australia, South Africa and Latin America, are beginning to mention particular regions that produce the grapes of their wines. On the French side, *terroir* has become a weapon in a struggle against mass-produced wines that have little individuality. Perhaps the most famous case of resistance so far is the refusal of a French village in the Midi to accept the lure of globalization represented by Robert Mondavi’s attempt to purchase land and bring the benefits of American salesmanship to the small

³ Pierre Spahni, *The International Wine Trade* (Cambridge, England, 2000): 6. Spahni identifies ten “ubiquitous” varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon and Syrah. *Ibid.* 17.

⁴ “*Terroir*-ists are becoming Grape victims!” Vincylopedia, Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée, <http://www.winepros.org/wine101/vincyc-aoc.html>, created January 8, 2005, updated September 5, 2008, accessed 4/26/09.

⁵ David Menival, “The transformation of ordinary wines: a new danger for vintage wines,” www.vdqs.net/Working_Papers/Text/WP_2005/Menival.pdf 20.

producers of Aniane.⁶ Although this affair, in which Mondavi lost, showed the power of the local against the global, perhaps it will be possible, even in the overregulated world of wine, to act both locally with *terroir* yet be able to think in a global context.⁷ For the sake of variety in a globalized world, this reviewer very much hopes so, but it remains to be seen if that is possible.

Kim Munholland is Professor of History Emeritus, University of Minnesota. His most recent book is *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945* (Berghahn, 2005). He was a historical consultant for Donald and Petie Kladstrup's *Wine and War: The French, the Nazis, and the Battle for France's Greatest Treasure* (Broadway, 2002) and he is the author of "Mon docteur le vin: Wine and Health in France, 1900-1950" in Mack P. Holt, ed. *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History* (Berg, 2006).

Copyright © 2009 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

⁶ Olivier Torrès, *La Guerre des vins: l'affaire Mondavi, mondialisation et terroirs* (Paris, 2005). For those wishing to view the struggle between traditionalists and the globalization of wine and tastes in wine, see the documentary film by Jonathan Nossiter, "Mondovino" (2005).

⁷ Most regulations are national with the exception of the EU where international limits have been imposed as a way of reducing the wine glut, or lake, in Europe. See Spahni, *International Wine Trade*, 3 on the "overregulated industry."