

## 2018 Villa d'Este Wine Symposium: A tenth-anniversary celebration to remember

The annual gathering in a convivial atmosphere and beautiful, historic surroundings on the shores of Lake Como always offers a unique combination of hedonistic indulgence and intellectual stimulation. But as Neil Beckett reports, the most recent edition was particularly special

At any other symposium it might have been a bunch of flowers or a bottle of wine—a magnum, even. But the Villa d'Este Wine Symposium is quite unlike any other, and the gifts of thanks presented by François Mauss, creator of the event, to speakers and supporters at its tenth-anniversary celebration, November 8–11, 2018, were suitably unique: ancient wine artifacts more than 4,000 years old from Georgia, the country of honor, chosen to fit perfectly the symposium's theme of "Time and the Wine World."

At the moving presentation of these treasures, Mauss recalled the inauspicious circumstances in which he had started the Symposium in November 2008, at the height of the financial crisis. He had thought it all the more desirable then to have pledges of long-term support from five of the world's most illustrious wine producers, whom he called "the Godfathers": Angelo Gaja, Egon Müller IV, Pablo Álvarez (Vega-Sicilia), Alain Vauthier (Château Ausone), and Aubert de Villaine (Domaine A&P de Villaine/Domaine de la Romanée-Conti). Mauss presented an artifact to each of these (Gaja being represented by his daughter Rossana, Vauthier by his daughter Anne Charlotte), having also thanked three others whose support he recognized as vital: Henri de Praemontal (president and managing director of Chêne & Cie/Taransaud), Jean-Marc Droulers (president and chief executive officer of Villa d'Este), and Claudio Tipa (vice president of the Bertarelli Foundation, as well as owner of Castello di Collemassari, Grattamacco, and Poggio di Sotto). An ancient cup was also presented to Hugh Johnson, the keynote speaker at

the same session (*see below*), and details of two annual scholarships for young scientists were revealed, the winners receiving €5,000 toward their studies and a *stage* in a winery, one of which will be in Georgia.

Every year since 2008, in the beautiful surroundings of Villa d'Este on Lake Como, which celebrated its 450th anniversary in 2018, Mauss has organized a brilliantly varied program of lunches and dinners (where guests may bring their own wine if they wish), seminars, tastings, and workshops. The three-day event has always attracted some of the world's most respected wine producers and sommeliers, traders and writers, as well as wine lovers who can rise to the registration fee (from €3,000 per person, or €4,000 per couple). So, making this tenth-anniversary edition extra-special was quite a challenge—but it was one to which Mauss, ably assisted by his wife Marité and their children Thomas and Olivia, rose in splendid style. The presence of Richard Geoffroy, the retiring *chef de cave* of Dom Pérignon, who presented eight great vintages back to the 1973 P3, and of Aubert de Villaine, who made available precious stocks of Romanée-St-Vivant and Romanée-Conti in five vintages back to 1971 (including the domaine's last magnums of Romanée-Conti from that year), was particularly striking testimony to the high regard in which the Mauss family and the Villa d'Este Wine Symposium are held. Another "prestige tasting," of ten Cabernets from ten countries, staged by Thomas Mauss, opened the event on the Thursday evening, while over the next two days there were also workshops on

winemaker Maxence Dulou, and wines from Georgia with Koka Archvadze. Music has always been a part of the Symposium, and two concerts sponsored by PianoForte Fazioli—the first with Khatia Buniatishvili, the second with Maurizio Baglini, Silvia Chiesa, and Nicolas Dautricourt—made for enchanting pre-dinner entertainment.

### Time past

As he introduced the first seminar on the Friday morning, Mauss identified the paradoxes of time and the different lengths and breadths on which it operates: "A vigneron may need to decide whether to harvest today or tomorrow, and yet it may take decades or even generations fully to understand his terroir. And then of course there is the long history of wine, stretching back over millennia, and its importance for civilizations and cultures." He then handed over to a speaker who was ideally qualified to discuss the history of wine from the beginning: Professor David Lordkipanidze, general director of the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi. After describing some of the earliest evidence for wine, dating back some 8,000 years (*see also Andrew Jefford, "Homo Imbibens: The Work of Patrick McGovern," WFW 60, pp.132–43*), he emphasized the crucial role of wine not only in the development of agriculture but in the rise of trade and the spread of social networks. He also highlighted the continuity of Georgia's wine culture throughout its turbulent history and suggested that the Russian

Top: The beautiful Villa d'Este overlooking Lake Como. Bottom: Anticipating an exciting Dom Pérignon tasting.



Photography (top) courtesy of Villa d'Este; (bottom) © Giulio Ziletti

embargo on Georgian wine from 2006 to 2013 had actually been very positive in the long run, in that it had stimulated investment and wrought improvements that are now widely recognized.

### Time present

The second seminar, devoted to the present, was led by Jean-Robert Pitte, a former professor of geography and president of the University of Paris IV–Sorbonne, author of *Bordeaux/Burgundy: A Vintage Rivalry*, who has a long-standing personal and professional interest in wine. He applauded Georgia for having a culture in which the art of drinking wine together is still practiced well, a worthy *tamada* (toastmaster) encouraging his companions “to deliver themselves of what they have deepest in their souls,” as well as fostering a sense of *joie de vivre*. He contrasted this with his own country, France, where he fears that neo-prohibitionist politicians and policymakers are making wine drinkers “feel guilty: We need to do the opposite!” Reminding his audience that most wine from the past few thousand years would (at best) taste very strange to us—it was rather the sense of euphoria it induced that kept Plato et al up all night at their symposiums—Pitte stated that wine has never been better or more widespread than it is today. He also welcomed what he identified as a meaningful shift in taste preferences, away from “black” and “bulldozer” wines toward “more distinctive, less excessive, more elegant wines.” Acknowledging that there are currently different ways of defining “great” wine, he dismissed those based not only on power but on price or on reputation. His own definition was a wine that is “complex, fine, harmonious, and long.” “But above all,” he insisted, “a great wine conveys great emotion. It’s emotion that counts, and emotion is not quantifiable.” We should try to understand great wine, and we are always extending the limits of our knowledge, “but we will never be able to understand great wine completely.” Great wine has an artistic dimension, even a spiritual dimension, which is not susceptible to logic, and in that sense, “it will always be beyond us.” When it comes to creating great wine, Pitte recognizes the crucial importance of the will of the winemaker but also of terroir, for it is this that makes wine “original and unique”—also among

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his criteria for greatness. The real significance of UNESCO’s award of World Heritage status to Burgundy, he suggested, was its recognition that “a specific identity, terroir, has a universal value [...]. We should celebrate the diversity of humankind. Indeed, diversity is crucial to our humanity.”

While eager to highlight much that is positive about the present, Pitte was also keen not to ignore the problems and threats. Among these he identified not only prohibitionsim in France but the very high wine and, therefore, vineyard prices in Burgundy, which are accelerating the change of ownership from families to larger companies. He also insisted that the fundamental principles behind AOC regulations need to change; while he agrees that they should still be “local,” and maybe “loyal” (more a matter of interpretation, perhaps), he thinks it totally unrealistic to suppose that they should remain “constant.” Climate change, itself a great threat, means that practices will need to be revised, and there should be far greater freedom in scientific research; for him, “It’s crazy that you can make a baby in a test tube but you can’t even experiment with the genetic modification of vines.” He respects many of the values behind the organic, biodynamic, and natural wine movements but regrets that many of their members do not respect other forms of viticulture and winemaking—“We need to be far more tolerant of our differences”—as well as their tendency “to elevate earth worms into sacred animals and their rituals into a religion.”

One of the many strengths of the Symposium is the quality of the discussion after the formal presentations, when issues are opened up to the floor. The highly respected viticultural consultant Stéphane Derenoncourt,

a regular participant at the Symposium, protested that while it might seem like a positive development that wine is now being made all around the world, it is only possible in some places through the heavy and systemic use of chemicals, which is unhealthy, so he refuses to take on projects where the viticulture cannot be “sustainable.” He also stated his belief that “creativity comes from the intimacy of people and place, not from scientific research.” Frédéric Panaïotis, *chef de cave* of Ruinart, agreed about the importance of sustainable viticulture, mentioning the progress that has been made in Champagne and predicting that “conventional [chemically sustained] viticulture will disappear over the next generation.” But he also defended the need for scientific research, on the grounds that when the consequences of fundamental changes may be so long term, it is sensible to be as sure as possible before implementing them.

### The taste of terroir

The third seminar on the Friday, which focused in on the current preoccupation with terroir, was shared by two brilliant young scientists: Axel Marchal, who administers the Diplôme Universitaire d’Aptitude à la Dégustation (DUAD) at the Institut des Science de la Vigne et du Vin at the University of Bordeaux, and Gabriel Lepousez, a neurobiologist at the Institut Pasteur in Paris. The alternative, provocative, but suitable title of their presentation was “From the Influence of Soil, Climate, and the Know-How of the Winemaker, to the Philosophical Concept of Terroir.” Lepousez began by expressing admiration for the common analogy between terroir and a musical score, but he asserted that the music of terroir is “rather rigid” and always needs “interpretation,” so it can be difficult to distinguish the relative importance and roles of terroir and winemaker. He stressed that it was “an interaction,” but one in which “an idea about the terroir may be more influential than the terroir itself.”

Neither he nor Marchal denied, however, the importance of terroir. Marchal cited advanced mass-spectrometry research, conducted on grape musts and wine from two different DRC vineyards in three different vintages, which identified “distinct chemical signatures” based on terroir



(Chloé Roullier-Gall, Marianna Lucio, Laurence Noret, Philippe Schmitt-Kopplin, Régis D Gougeon, “How Subtle is the ‘Terroir’ Effect? Chemistry-Related Signatures of Two ‘Climats de Bourgogne,’” *PLoS ONE* 9(5): e97615, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0097615; 2014). Moreover, Lepousez accepted that we are able to taste differences in terroir due to different soil types (chalky, granitic, volcanic, and so on). He was, however, keen to clarify some of the confusion surrounding the term “minerality,” which he suggested could be discussed from four different perspectives: aromas, salinity, acidity, and mouthfeel. He asserted the belief (now commonly held among scientists) that aromas frequently attributed to minerals in the soil are really due to sulfides. He gave greater credibility to the notion of salinity but emphasized that the salty impression we have of some wines is directly due not to any minerals in the soil or wine but, rather, to succinic acid generated during fermentation by stressed yeasts, which may be related to poor soils low in nutrients. (We taste the succinic acid not as sodium but as umami.) Acidity and an austere or lean mouthfeel are not due to minerals in the soil or wine, either, but are rather related to “our mental representation of minerality,” as something angular, sharp, or hard. Marchal also warned against making any simple or straightforward connection between soil or stones and any “mineral” impression we may have of the wine. But he did not doubt the importance of soil or stones for the taste of terroir, and he disagreed with enologists such as Mark Matthews (author of *Terroir and Other Myths of Winegrowing*, 2016) who dismiss the notion of terroir as nothing more than a mental construct; he suggested that they needed to spend more time tasting in Burgundy. He also stressed the need to defend the importance of terroir against other threats to its recognition or translation, including faulty winemaking, excessively interventionist winemaking, and excessively ideological winemaking, noting that the labels of many “natural” wines prioritize a part of the process—“SANS SOUFRE AJOUTÉ (NO ADDED SULFUR)” —over the place where the grapes were grown.

Photography © Giulio Ziletti

Above: António Amorim, head of the world’s largest cork company, describing its large research programs.

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### Time future

On the Saturday morning, discussions focusing on the future were opened by Jean-Marie Guillaume of the famous Guillaume nursery in Burgundy, whose presentation posed the question, “The Production of Good Grapes Without Spraying: Dream or Reality?” He said that while clonal and massal selection of vines had gradually helped to reduce susceptibility to botrytis, there remain persistent threats from downy and powdery mildew, which normally require anything from six to 18 preventive sprayings a year. Recognizing that such treatments are not sustainable, the French National Institute

for Agricultural Research (INRA) and other agencies are engaged on a large long-term project to develop two or three new grape varieties that are more resistant. Where resistance is monogenic (dependent on a single gene), it may be overcome by mutations in the pathogen, so resistance needs to be polygenic. The research is being facilitated by the far cheaper and quicker genome sequencing nowadays but is still expected to take at least 15 years. The hope is that the new resistant grape varieties may be crossed with “classic” or “emblematic” varieties to make them more resistant. Guillaume was anxious to reassure his audience that regional organizations such as the CIVA (Alsace), CIVC (Champagne), and BIVB (Burgundy) are supporting the research and that the crossings would be 99 percent of the “classic” or “emblematic” varieties and only one percent of any new variety.

António Amorim described the intensive research and development projects that his Portuguese family’s cork company, the world’s largest, are undertaking to eradicate TCA (the compound that causes “cork taint”) and to improve the consistency of oxygen transmission from natural corks. He claimed that while his company’s “technical” corks, Neutrocork, are already guaranteed to be TCA-free, its natural corks will increasingly be so as well (any TCA being below the detection threshold of 0.5 nanograms/liter). As a result of his company’s preventive measures, curative processes (ROSA Evolution), and gas chromatography screening technology introduced in 2016 (NDtech), it had already supplied 115 million guaranteed natural corks to 1,300 wine producers by the end of 2018. António Amorim also explained that while cork is an airtight seal, it conveys oxygen from its internal cell structure to the wine; but by measuring the mass of each cork, his company has managed to improve the consistency of that oxygen transmission and thereby reduce by 50 percent the free sulfur dioxide variability in tested wines. He also said that the natural phenolic compounds in cork, extracted by the acidity and alcohol in wine, have antioxidant and even anti-carcinogenic properties and that further research would improve our understanding of how natural cork may help wine to age.

At the round-table discussion that



followed, three distinguished individuals—Enrico Bernardo, a World Champion Sommelier, also now a restaurateur and wine merchant; Olivier Duha, co-founder and co-chairman of Webhelp; and Antoine Petit, chairman of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS)—were asked to predict significant market trends. Bernardo anticipated that competition among producers will only intensify, as more consumers look to discover wines that are good but not well known and may therefore be more accessible and affordable than the famous labels, even if there will still be demand for those. He related this trend to an ever-growing appetite among consumers for wine education. He expected that the US model of producer wine clubs and direct-to-consumer sales will spread to Europe and the rest of the world, partly so that producers will be less dependent on intermediaries and be able to increase their profit margins. Duha agreed that online wine sales will continue to grow for the same reasons; he disapproved of producers who allocate wine to the same buyers (private or trade) every year, arguing that the brand does not grow that way, and wished that all wines, including DRC, were offered online. Petit pointed out that there will still be intermediaries, but suggested they would increasingly be Web-based companies—“the wine equivalents of booking.com”—rather than traditional agents or merchants. He imagined that there might also

be wine equivalents of BlaBlaCar, the online marketplace for carpooling, whereby buyers could share a case of wine or a storage facility. He also thought it likely that computers will increasingly help consumers choose their wines, based on their known preferences, thereby reducing their risk, and that micro-technology will be used more and more to monitor the authenticity, integrity, provenance, storage, and transport of wine.

#### Time-sensitivity and curiosity

In his characteristically eloquent keynote address during the tenth-anniversary session on the Saturday afternoon, Hugh Johnson looked both backward and forward. He observed, “Every aspect of wine is time-sensitive, more so than any other art form, except possibly music. How old are the vines? How far in advance should I decant the wine—at the last minute, two hours before, two days before?” Regarding technological advances and the future, he admired the research being undertaken by Guillaume into new grape varieties, adding that “genetic manipulation is the elephant in the room, whether you like it or not. It would certainly offer something different, and maybe something surprising. [...] We should not be too conservative,” he urged, “despite the pleasure from the past.” At the same time, he warned that we need to be careful in our application of technology: “Now we can have almost-perfect wine—but the more polished it becomes,

often the less interesting it becomes.” He was also skeptical about ultrasound technology that is supposed to accelerate the maturation of wine: “In future, will the perfect cellar be cool, dark, and equipped with ultrasound? Nature should still be the leader. Trying to take over from it can be dangerous.”

Regarding the astonishing variety of wines available to us today, he said, “We naturally worship the stars, but we can become too fixated with them [...]. I want to get people interested in something they’ve never heard of, or never tasted. Curiosity is what drives me. I want to get my corkscrew into every cork, read every back label. I don’t expect to like everything, but it can lead to all sorts of discoveries. There is no one ‘best’ of anything. Indeed, I don’t like ‘best’ as a term; ‘better’ is okay, because it keeps the door open.” He admired the importance Mauss places on emotion in the seven-point scoring system he devised for the Grand Jury Européen and the Villa d’Este Symposium—“Pleasure” (1–3), “Emotion” (4–6), “Absolute Reference” (7)—but said he would never understand the 100-point system: “It’s against nature to think that something beautiful can be scored out of 100. A wine is not sitting an exam, it’s expressing itself. Try applying a 100-point scale to a beautiful scene, or a painting, or a piece of music. Or a friend. Have you got a 93-point friend? Wine is my friend.”

Above: Richard Geoffroy (seated, left) asking Aubert de Villaine to swap roles, to François Mauss’s amusement.

Photography © Giulio Ziletti

#### Crème de la crème

For anybody minded to score wines, all of those at the Dom Pérignon and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti tastings would have been at the upper end of any scale. As always at the Villa d’Este Symposium, the preparation and presentation of the wines was perfect, and there was ample time to taste all of them properly in silence.

Among the Dom Pérignon Champagnes—2009, 2008, 2004, 2003 (P1), 2000, 1996 Rosé, 1995 (P2), and 1973 (P3)—the 2008, 2003, 1995, and 1973 were the most exciting for me; but the comments of Richard Geoffroy will be more insightful than any attempt by me to communicate their qualities (which Simon Field MW does very well elsewhere in this issue; see pp.78–83). Acknowledging plaudits from tasters regarding the remarkable freshness of the older wines, Geoffroy explained, “We deliberately make the wines to last as long as possible, making them as reductive as we can. Maturation on the lees is reductive, too, so it reinforces the reductive dimension. Patience is the name of the game.” The two wines that most clearly illustrated his point were the 1996 Rosé P2 and the 2003. He said that while he had been gradually increasing the vintage dimension of Dom Pérignon vis-à-vis house style over the past three decades in which he had been *chef de cave*, the 1996 P1 was “more Vintage than DP”; it took until the P2 for them to come into better balance.

As the 1996 may have been picked a little too soon, so the 2003, Geoffroy admitted, was released too soon and has only recently started to reveal its complexity, energy, and sheer power. Although it was an exceptional year—“It came from Mars”—and presented “one challenge after another,” Geoffroy praised his whole team for rising to the challenges; and while it might not be “the best” DP he has made, it is the one of which he is “most proud.” As it shows now, it is certainly a magnificent, sumptuously vinous, but thrillingly vital vindication of his brave decision to make the wine, and I share his excitement over the P2 release within the next two years. The 1995 was the wine Geoffroy singled out for its overall balance: “It’s very complete; nothing is missing. If I had to choose one wine to showcase what DP is all about, it would be this 1995 P2.”

Aubert de Villaine has always generously supported the Villa d’Este Symposium, with his presence, as well as with wine direct from Domaine de la Romanée-Conti of which he is *co-gérant*. (His fellow director for 26 years, Henry-Frédéric Roch, died on November 18, 2018, at the tragically young age of 56.) But for the Symposium’s tenth anniversary de Villaine offered a particularly special tasting, which even one of the greatest collectors present described as being a “once-in-a-lifetime experience”: a deliciously appetizing 2008 Vosne-Romanée Premier Cru Cuvée Duvault-Bloch, followed by a comparison of Romanée-St-Vivant and Romanée-Conti across five vintages—2009, 1999, 1990, 1980, and 1971—and a spectacular finale in the golden guise of 2003 Montrachet. I found the Montrachet, both 2009s, the 1999 and 1990 Romanée-Conti, both 1980s, and the 1971 Romanée-St-Vivant all profoundly thrilling. (The magnum of 1971 Romanée-Conti from which my glass came was a little evolved on the nose, though still superb, endless and seamless, on the palate. It was also, de Villaine mentioned, the only tasted vintage to have been racked.) Again, however, de Villaine’s characteristically calm but candid perspective will be far more valuable than a string of inadequate superlatives from me.

With Mauss having requested at least one “difficult” vintage—to throw into sharper relief the quality of the terroir, the viticulture, and the winemaking—de Villaine explained that 1980 had indeed been a “very difficult” vintage, with a wet spring and cold July, though the small, late harvest in mid-October was healthy, having been saved by an anti-rot treatment the domaine used successfully for the first and last time that year, the pathogen developing a resistance to it subsequently. But he said he thought that 1980 had produced “very interesting wines,” with “almost more complexity than some of the sunnier vintages.” The two 1980s were certainly the greatest revelation for most of the tasters, both being wines of exquisite finesse and sublime texture, their harmony and integrity perfectly intact at nearly 40 years old (though the profundity, purity, and vitality of the Montrachet from a famously hot vintage must surely have been a surprise to many as well: a golden silken mille-feuille of fabulous opulence

and transparency). One American collector said he thought the 1980 was currently “expressing itself even better” than the far more famous 1978 vintage. I was not alone in thinking that in an ideal world, the two 1980s would have been the wines I would most like to have drunk with dinner that evening (most of the younger wines still having even more to reveal). As for the even older vintage, de Villaine explained that 1971, too, had been challenging, suffering from *coulure* and devastating hail during flowering, though the rest of the season was fine, all the way through to another mid-October harvest. But he said that the reason “it has always been very dear to me is that it was the year of my marriage” (to his American wife Pamela). Touching on why he had decided to compare these two grands crus, he said that although they are very close together (Romanée-Conti being directly above Romanée-St-Vivant), they are very different in personality, Romanée-Conti being for him “more serene.” He said that for several years he had been aware of an appreciable difference in authenticity and quality, too, there being a “wildness” to the Romanée-St-Vivant that came not from the terroir but from some of the vines. From 1996, he had therefore gradually identified and replanted the three parcels responsible, which is why, for him (as well as for many other tasters), the 1999 and 2009 Romanée-St-Vivant are far closer in quality to the Romanée-Conti than is the 1990.

At the end of the tasting, Richard Geoffroy, as awe-struck as all the other tasters, confessed to being “confounded” by the Romanée-Conti wines, due to their “floating quality”: “I wish I could do that in Champagne,” he said in wonderment. “I could have told you the same thing yesterday [at the Dom Pérignon tasting],” replied the ever-gracious de Villaine. “Let’s swap!” said the ever-mischievous Geoffroy. “You two, please don’t swap!” protested Egon Müller.

It was a moment that captured much of the magic of the Villa d’Este Symposium: the hedonistic indulgence and intellectual stimulation of special people sharing special wines in a convivial atmosphere and beautiful, historic surroundings.

*The 11th Villa d’Este Wine Symposium will be held November 7–10, 2019.* ■