

# The Wisdom of Wine

*by Alain Chatriot*

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**Philosophy has something to say about wine: about its definition, how to savor it, what it inspires, but also about the virtues of inebriation.**

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Reviewed: Pierre-Yves Quiviger, *Une philosophie du vin*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2023, 287 pp., €17.90.

The uprooting of vines in the Bordeaux region, increasingly early harvests against a backdrop of climate change, and shifting consumer practices are just some of the trends that are changing the face of contemporary winegrowing. To give some context to this situation, the social sciences—history, geography, sociology, law and economics—have long taken an interest in wine.<sup>1</sup> Pierre-Yves Quiviger, known for his research on Sieyès, among others, offers us a philosophical reflection on wine in a well-informed and entertaining book.

The author's pedagogical and humorous style makes it easy to follow the suggested reading itinerary, whatever one's level of knowledge on the subject. A short glossary of oenological and philosophical terms is accompanied by a brief but up-to-date bibliography, which opens pleasingly with a category entitled “primary literature,” listing in order of appearance all the vintages and wineries cited by the author.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. a useful overview: Jean-Marie Cadebat, *Économie du vin*, Paris, La Découverte, « Repères », 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The list is impressive, and deliberately varied. On a more personal note, while many of the choices are easy to agree with, some are a little more dubious, as are certain absences...

## What is wine?

The author's analysis, presented in just under ten chapters, is by no means confined to an anthology of philosophers' writings on wine. Rather, it is structured around a number of deceptively obvious questions. The first, which opens the book, seems to raise questions about the project itself: "Wine and knowledge, or do we need to know what we're drinking?" The book begins, without introduction, by casting doubt on the usefulness of "blind tasting"—that is, tasting a wine without knowing anything about its origin, vintage or producer. The point is thoroughly dissected, for it is less trivial than it seems, and the arguments are all carefully weighed, ending by extolling the virtues of practice and comparison.

What is wine? This is the question that shapes the second chapter, and it is no less simple to answer. The author recalls, of course, the challenges posed by successive legal definitions (national and international since the French law of 1889, known as the Griffe law, named after the senator who proposed it at the time), but he does not stop there. Adopting a stated phenomenological approach, the author explores the diversity of wines, and his reflections will serve to guide (and no doubt surprise) the neophyte. Based on eidetic variation, he concludes with a definition that is more sophisticated than it might seem: "Wine is a beverage that comes from a specific place, which is important in assessing the wine's quality; it is the result of the transformation of grapes through a fermentation process; it has a color (either white, red or rosé—or possibly orange) and it contains alcohol (but in a moderate proportion, less than one-fifth) (p. 62).

Once the object has been defined, another question arises: "What is a good wine?" Here, the author's demonstration returns to a long-standing question in the social sciences about the construction of great terroirs and the evolution of wine markets,<sup>3</sup> but chooses to address it with references to Hume and contemporary English-speaking philosophers who have written about wine (such as Roger Scruton, Barry Smith and Cain Todd). The author also reflects on the role of rankings and expert

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the classic article by Henri Enjalbert, « Comment naissent les grands crus. Bordeaux, Porto, Cognac », *Annales Economies Sociétés Civilisations*, July-September 1953 and October-December 1953, pp. 315-328 and 457-474.

appraisals—a point of great interest, even if it places little emphasis on the findings of economic sociology.<sup>4</sup>

## Drunkenness, religions and philosophers

The subsequent pages of the book are rather original, as the author tackles an aspect that is often overlooked when talking about wine: inebriation<sup>5</sup>. Even if the alcohol content of wine is moderate compared to other beverages, the alcohol ingested always causes an impairment in a person's analysis, and whatever the level of inebriation, their appreciation of the wine can be altered—hence the practice among wine professionals of spitting out the wine tasted without ingesting it. Without denying the very real health arguments and the risks associated with excessive consumption, Quiviger recalls the particular place given to drunkenness by ancient authors such as Plato and Seneca. As a counterpoint, the author tells a short and very funny story entitled “Moscow drinking”!

The question that follows is not unrelated to drunkenness, as it reflects on the “social experience of wine, or can one drink alone?” The author begins by mentioning that many wine professionals (producers, oenologists, experts, merchants, wine merchants) regularly drink alone, but that the wine experience is most often collective and accompanied by a meal. Beyond its sociological aspects, this experience also involves specific conditions: pairing with food, the serving temperature of the wine, and the quality of the glassware (unfortunately a point all too often overlooked!).

The author then makes a digression under the heading “to drink or to believe,” focusing on the link between wine and religion. This link is clearly evident in many wine names and appellations, often evoking the role played by monasteries in spreading wine throughout the long history of Christianity. But the author reminds us that this issue is not confined to the New Testament.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the books that resulted from the PhD theses of Gilles Laferté, *La Bourgogne et ses vins : image d'origine contrôlée*, Paris, Belin, 2006 and Pierre-Marie Chauvin, *Le marché des réputations. Une sociologie du monde des vins de Bordeaux*, Bordeaux, Féret, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> We can simply recall the excellent writings on this point by Gérard Oberlé, *Itinéraire spiritueux*, Paris, Grasset, 2006 and, in a more historical context, the extraordinary book by Joseph Bohling, *The Sober Revolution. Appellation Wine and the Transformation of France*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2018.

The Hebrew Bible and the Quran also give prominence to wine, with six references in six surahs for the Book of Islam. Quiviger also points out that if there is a “wine of religion” (for monotheisms, but not exclusively), there can also be a “religion of wine” with its own codes, and he illustrates this ironically: “The religion of wine manifests itself through its esoteric vocabulary, its schismatic temptations, its codified rites, its idolatry (there are “great names” whose wines everyone wants to drink [...]) and its condemnation of idolatry (the “label drinkers,” p. 177-178).

The book then takes the more conventional form of a survey of some of the great figures of the European philosophical tradition, but this is done in such a way as not to bore the reader. Plato's *Laws*, Seneca, Rabelais (now the symbolic figure of the Chinon vineyard), Locke<sup>6</sup>, Montaigne and Montesquieu (two Bordeaux luminaries!) form the first stage. The second, which ranges from Rousseau to Clément Rosset, via Kant and Kierkegaard to Gaston Bachelard and the lesser-known Mary Daly (1928-2010, feminist philosopher and theologian), is undoubtedly the most original, as the references used are often less familiar. In the case of Rousseau, Quiviger specifically refers to passages from Book II of *Emile* and from *Julie, or the New Heloise*. For Bachelard, it is not the famous philosopher of science who writes about wine, but rather the philosopher of the imaginary, who devotes the final chapter of *Earth and Reveries of Repose* to “the wine and vine of the alchemists”.

Quiviger's scholarly and informed reflections on wine also find an echo in two fascinating recent books by wine practitioners: sommelier Pascaline Lepeltier and Jura winemaker Valentin Morel<sup>7</sup>.

After a nod to Rosset, Quiviger's book concludes with a precise example of winetasting and a memorable statement: “There is no such thing as *wine*, only *wines*. Only bottles, even. Or just certain moments when those bottles are exciting (which does not always mean “delicious”), and sometimes, literally, bring tears of emotion to our eyes” (p. 256).

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<sup>6</sup> Quiviger explains that, in 1766, he wrote a pamphlet entitled *Observations sur la croissance et la culture de la vigne et des olives* [Observations on the growth and cultivation of vines and olives], observations “that are entirely devoid of any philosophical considerations, but which bear witness to a first-hand knowledge of French wine” (p. 212). Cf. on this subject: Tim Unwin, “The viticultural geography of France in the 17<sup>th</sup> century according to John Locke,” *Annales de Géographie*, vol. 109, n°614-615, 2000. pp. 395-414.

<sup>7</sup> Quiviger cites a summary work published at the end of 2022: Pascaline Lepeltier, *Mille vignes. Penser le vin de demain*, Paris, Hachette, 2022. He could not do so for the second, which has just been published, but it is well worth reading for its frank approach to the most contemporary issues, in particular the question of hybrid grape varieties in the context of environmental concerns: Valentin Morel, *Un autre vin. Comment penser la vigne face à la crise écologique*, Paris, Flammarion, 2023.

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