

# GERALD ASHER

## ON WINE



*"A book to read and reread  
for the sheer pleasure of it."*

— JAMES BEARD —

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ELIZABETH DAVID



GERALD ASHER

ON  
WINE

*Revised and Updated*  
*With an Introduction by*  
*Elizabeth David*



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# ON WINE

FOR MY SONS  
*Jeremy and Japhet*

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# INTRODUCTION

I READ somewhere recently that one of our more unconventional British wine writers once wrote of a wine that it grasped you by the hand and called you by your first name. Well, however unconventional Gerald Asher may be I don't think talking wines are much in his line—the one in question sounds ominously like the Club Buttonholer—but I do think he's a phenomenon equally unexpected. He's such a compelling talker about wine that even the most uninitiated, including myself, is going to listen and be entertained and learn, and as Gerald—to do my own bit of first-name calling—writes exactly like he talks, anyone who reads this book is going to have a lot of entertainment and enlightenment. It is like this. Should Gerald by any chance be saying—he isn't, I'm just supposing—that a wine has a hint of hyacinths he doesn't even wait for the skeptical look to appear on your face. He explains—this time I quote—that “all wines share at least traces of most of the acids, alcohols and esters occurring in everything from bananas to roses.” That's something that may be obvious to wine experts and chemists, but until I learned it from Gerald I didn't appreciate the point, so I've always been exasperated by the violets and truffles of wine analysis. I should add that Gerald seldom resorts to that kind of description, preferring to give information more illuminating and exact. Thus we learn that a wine from vineyards halfway down the higher slopes of the Sancerre hills is likely to be one of the best of the district. A particular combination of soil types contributes to this excellence. These fine points once appreciated, we have at least a clue as to why so many bottles of Sancerre don't come up to expectation and why, when one does, it does. I like that. Isn't it what anybody who has just once or twice experienced a bottle of that enchanting wine at its best

and is at last about to renounce the search for more of the same will want to know?

The kind of knowledge to be acquired from this book may well of course end in getting a trifle troublesome and expensive. So I should warn potential readers that it's pretty well crammed with tempting invitations to be off on restless quests for this or that rarity. Here's an unexpected sample. One of the most delicious rosés in the world, it turns out, so far from being the overpriced—and overpraised—Tavel of tradition, is German. It comes from the Glottertal, is made from a combination of Spätburgunder and Ruländer grapes, and is to be sought in and around Freiburg. So. And did you ever before hear of a grape from the Neckar valley called the Trollinger, from which is made another rosé which sounds as if it had been named after the poet Schiller? Well, that's a tease, because Schillerwein means that the wine is iridescent, which I take to mean that it has the shimmer of shot silk or taffeta. Still, it's only the wine of the Heidelberg students, and according to Gerald's account it wouldn't be worth going all that way just to drink like a Heidelberg student. We're warned off that one.

Now it would be most wrong of me to give the impression that this book is entirely or even mainly concerned with such unicorns as the faultless Sancerre or with what Gerald himself calls "other wines," and what one of my old friends in the English wine trade used to call funnies, a term he applied to all table wines that didn't come from Bordeaux, Burgundy, Alsace, or the classic vineyards of Germany. But I do have to explain that when I first knew Gerald Asher in London, in the 1950s, it was chiefly for his flair in finding and importing those "other wines" that he had made his firm's name known, in the restaurant world as well as to a very large list of private customers. Joyfully, we discovered that in Asher Storey's cellars there were not only choice rarities like single-vineyard Burgundies and the legendary white Château Grillet from the Rhône, but also rather more approachable treasures in the shape of a quite extraordinary collection of regional wines, some of them encountered perhaps a couple of times on trips to France or Italy but never hitherto on the English side of the Channel because, the wine trade told us, they didn't travel. Under Gerald's auspices, however, unusual wines like the red Saumur-Champigny of Anjou, sweet, mellow Monbazillac, a red Gamay and a fresh dry white Apremont from the Savoie appeared to travel with notable success. (Irrelevant though it is, I can't resist adding here that if Gerald weren't a wine merchant he would probably be the world's best travel agent, tour arranger, courier and guide.)



A beguiling *vin gris* called Cendré de Novembre from the Jura became a London restaurant favorite, and one memorable day an unknown golden dessert wine, bearing on its label the name Muscat de Beaumes-de-Venise, arrived on my doorstep. At the time that delicious wine was the product of just one single vineyard owner, and had rarely traveled further than the boundaries of its native Provence, let alone overseas. Gerald Asher, dauntless as ever, had brought some to London. I fell in love with that wine. Its rapid disappearance from the Asher Storey cellars, partly, I must own, as the result of an article I wrote about it in a small-circulation political weekly, was the occasion of much lamenting among its small band of addicts, myself not least. Beaumes-de-Venise is a familiar name now, and its wine is exported to America as well as to England, but although I still drink it with pleasure it has never again had quite the impact it did on the day Gerald sent it along and left me to discover it for myself.

This small incident I recount because I think discovery of that kind is in many ways the very essence of Gerald's book. He knows that he, as guide, can only take you so far, explain so much, give you the appropriate amount of technical background, communicate his own pleasure—as witness his joyous accounts of trips to the Beaujolais—or, as the case may be, the reverse. Then, expert guide as he is, he will leave you on your own. About wine, as about most things, you must make up your own mind and formulate your own conclusions, and nobody knows that better than Gerald Asher.

In 1981 I visited San Francisco, where Gerald now lives and works, for the very first time in my life. He was my host, and my chief guide around the city and into the country, to restaurants and to food markets, and of course it was he who initially introduced me to the wines of California which are now one of his major interests. It was an enlightening and very happy experience, and although at the time I don't think that this book was even planned, in my mind I connect it with those weeks in California as much as with France and Italy, and the London of Gerald's early days in the wine trade. It all adds up to such a happy, open-hearted, friendly book—nobody has to worry about the author's formidable knowledge and expertise, it is too discreetly concealed to be more than sensed—that it is hard to believe there can be any need for an introduction. But since I was invited to supply one, it has been my privilege to do so.

—Elizabeth David  
London, April 1982

# PREFACE

WHILE STILL a student in London, concerned with Elizabethan dramatists who had had the misfortune to be contemporaries of Shakespeare, I took a job from five to seven every evening behind the counter of a wine shop. It stood in the raffish pedestrian way between Piccadilly and Curzon Street called Shepherd Market, though better known, before the Street Offences Act, for its shepherdesses. Meat was then still rationed to eight ounces a week, or something equally measly, and red wine, I was assured, provided a necessary alternative source of strength. In the early evening, at least, most sales were half bottles of Beaujolais to solitary ladies.

When I had worked there for less than a week, the manager told me, as I arrived one afternoon, that we had to meet a delicate situation. Without warning to allow appropriate preparation, our Beaujolais supplier had replaced the 1947 vintage. Afraid that the regular customers would check other stores before accepting the 1949, he instructed me to hand each of those I recognized a free half bottle. But first he had me taste it against the last of the 1947 so that I could say, with assurance, that the new vintage was every bit as good, if not better. It was a novel experience, comparing one wine with another, and though I suppose there are more bizarre ways of finding a life's vocation, that's when and how I discovered mine.

I soon migrated from Shepherd Market to Pall Mall, to the offices of a large London wine shipper, where I checked the identification numbers of wooden crates returned for credit against records kept in old-fashioned ledgers. It was work tedious beyond imagining in today's world of disposable cartons and electronic

records. The stock clerk at the next desk had the job I envied. He went down to the cellars once a month to reconcile his books with actual bottles. I would hear him discussing problems over the telephone with the cellar manager and reporting the discrepancies to the managing director. It was his habit to vary pronunciation of the wine names according to circumstances, perhaps to avoid misunderstandings. The Vosne-Romanée of the office, for example, became Vozny-Romany when he spoke to the cellars, Pauillac became Polly-Ack, and Pouilly-Fuissé, inevitably, Pussy-Fussy.

The young men in the office were free to try any wines open in the tasting room. I am sure there wasn't an actual ban on women clerks and secretaries doing the same thing, but it was understood that they didn't. By a process I no longer remember, I was put in charge of the tasting room and was later allowed to be a silent participant at the ritual of checking current stocks, appraising new wines, examining returned bottles. But tasting such a wide range of disconnected wines, both healthy and sick, day after day, was exposure rather than education. A normal working session assembles wines so varied, and for such different purposes, that it is difficult to arrive at the general conclusions necessary to build a framework of tasting reference.

The London wine trade was, and is, close. At that time, at the beginning of the 1950s, prominent companies were still family controlled if not family owned. They clustered on and around Mark Lane and Tower Hill, to be near the docks and the Custom House, and in the Pall Mall and St. James's area, within striking distance of the West End's clubs, restaurants, and hotels. A well-organized system of trade training now takes entrants through a methodically graduated series of lectures, tastings, and practical work, culminating in examinations for the professional diploma of Master of Wine. The trainees of my day, however, sponsored by their respective companies, presented themselves each spring, very self-consciously, at the Upper Thames Street building of the Worshipful Company of Vintners, and in the splendor of a paneled hall where five kings had dined together in 1363, were there introduced to the ancient mysteries of wine. On Thursday mornings, I recall, under the auspices of the Wine Trade Club (which had been founded by André Simon and his contemporaries), distinguished members of the trade imparted to us some-

thing of their knowledge and experience, guiding us through tastings for which each of us would bring six tulip-shaped nosing glasses in identical cardboard boxes.

"Wine," we were taught, like an article of the faith, "is the alcoholic beverage obtained from the juice of freshly gathered grapes, the fermentation of which has been carried through in the district of origin and according to local tradition and practice." Winemaking, thirty years ago, lacked the sophistication that has since become universal. Stainless steel, cultured yeasts, temperature-controlled fermentation and clarification by centrifuge were not unknown, but they had not imposed the dominant grapy fragrance that brings out similarities in modern wines rather than the bold differences we knew. Technique has now acquired importance beyond soil and grape variety. We find red Graves, made by carbonic maceration, that taste like tannic Beaujolais, and *trocken* Rheingau wines that can easily be mistaken for merely unsuccessful Alsations. Recently, in La Mancha, south of Madrid, a wine-maker told me that a well-known brand of Liebfraumilch was his criterion in making and judging his white Valdepeñas. It is all the inevitable result of marketing wine instead of selling it, I suppose. Once we looked for ways to teach the world how to enjoy wine's variety. Now we teach winemakers the ways of the world.

As each spring series ended, we wrote essays that summarized and discussed what we had learned, and depending on their quality we received Certificates of Attendance, Certificates of Merit, or, with luck, bursaries that paid expenses to one of the wine regions where study, and sometimes work, opportunities were arranged. I benefited from these bursaries, and the extended periods I was able to spend in Spain, France, and Germany over three years provided a foundation for my professional training.

Abroad, I saw the physical connection of wines and vineyards, and began to understand the link between wines and those who produce them, especially in the context of the food they ate and the way they lived. My *optique* of wine, as the French would say, was bound up with it as an expression of people, time, and place. I can debate chemical composition of soils with the best of them, but when carried to excess, as they too often are, such preoccupations are a barrier to pleasure, not an enhancement. At the tables of growers and merchants wines were indeed analyzed, pondered, discussed, and compared, sometimes in practical winemaking terms,

but always with natural awareness of what we were, after all, talking about, much as a fruit farmer might talk of the cultivation of pears in the course of enjoying one. There was none of the technical one-upmanship, the brittle display, the squandering of pleasure by pointlessly ferreting out and commenting on every fault, real or imagined, that can spell disaster for a convivial evening.

Though I learned a great deal about wine and the wine trade at this time, no one taught me how to make a sales presentation or even how to write an order, because we took for granted that ours was an occupation for gentlemen and that familiarity with wine allied to friendship, rather than salesmanship (a word that would not have been used), was the key to success. So, partly because it was known as the representatives' grave, used both to test the mettle of new men and to dispose of old, but mostly because I was raised there and was presumed to have the qualification of some local acquaintance, I was dispatched to reveal my newly acquired knowledge to the farmers of East Anglia, propelled there in a small, battered Ford, essential transportation nonetheless described by my managing director as a "perk." In providing it, he felt himself relieved of any obligation to increase my salary in keeping with my responsibilities.

Though close to London, East Anglia was still a rural backwater where rook-filled elm trees swayed tall above wide, flat horizons. Except for Ipswich, a city festooned with bus wires and hoardings, I remember nothing ugly about the busy towns and villages of my "territory." But then they included Cambridge and Norwich; Ely, King's Lynn, and Newmarket; Fakenham, Lavenham, and Bury St. Edmunds. Specially satisfying, because I love the pale blur of an East Anglian seashore, were regular visits to Aldeburgh, Southwold, and Cromer. It was a happy time, and within months I had revived for my employers accounts long considered lost, bringing a respectable volume of increased business.

The wine trade was regarded as a convenient refuge for those of good family who were ill equipped for the intellectual challenge of law or medicine, yet insufficiently rich to be placed in private banking in the City. He who had every right to be modest in his expectations was thus kept from the shame of idleness, but, in the process, depressed the expectations of the rest of us. For

nearly five years my "salary" had remained unchanged. Proud of my accomplishments, I asked the managing director if he would review it. He was taken aback. "Young man," he said, turning me down, "if I were to grant an increase, it would merely encourage you to ask again another time. There'd be no holding you."

On those conditions there wasn't, and I decided to set up in business on my own. In addition to customers in East Anglia, I had developed a few accounts in London, among them Ivan Storey's Soup Kitchen on Chandos Place adjacent to Charing Cross Hospital, where Ivan was a staff psychiatrist. He had converted an unprepossessing shop front into a student-chic soup, salad, and omelet bar. Blowups of nineteenth-century etchings hung in surreal combinations above tables and benches designed by Terence Conran, then fresh from design school and very much in his post-Festival of Britain bent-wire and plywood period. The venture was hugely successful. Exhilarated, Ivan rented additional premises on Wilton Place near Knightsbridge, where now stands the new Berkeley Hotel, and there he opened an even larger, smarter Soup Kitchen with a consumption of wine, whether by customers, patients, staff, or friends of staff (distinctions were vague) that was prodigious. When he heard what I intended to do, he offered to join me as a partner: hence, Asher Storey & Company.

Except for the bright yellow cover (I was Beardsley-struck at the time), our first list could hardly have been more conventional or dull. I recognized my mistake, and realized that we needed to offer alternatives to other shippers' wines rather than attempt to duplicate them. Their well-established and prestigious labels were too strong for us to compete with directly. I had always been interested in the "lesser" wines of France and went off in search of them. Unlike Bordeaux and Burgundy, meticulously charted and served by brokers and English-speaking shippers who made overseas trade a simple matter, the tributary valleys of the Loire, the far reaches of the southwest, and the slopes of the Jura and Savoie were at that time unsurveyed, and I had only imprecise references by nineteenth-century writers and uninformative pamphlets to go by. Modern books, after dealing adequately with Champagne, Burgundy, and Bordeaux, tended to lump "other French wines" into a few paragraphs that did little more than acknowledge that there were such things. I learned about them as I went,

and having decided for myself what *was* the essential character of Jurançon, of Irancy, of Jasnières, of Apremont, of whatever, I had to choose, in each case, the wine that showed that character best, discover which grower was the most reliable, and arrive myself at definitions of "quality" and "value" in wines isolated from the mainstream of the trade even within France. (The French are the most parochial of wine drinkers: few in the Rhône Valley have tasted Bordeaux; Alsatians do not drink Loire wine; Burgundians have no curiosity about the wines of Dordogne or Pyrenees.) Some of the growers had lists of private customers, including a few in Paris who ordered a case from time to time as a reminder, perhaps, of a summer vacation or as a sentimental attachment to their native region. But most sold their wines to local restaurateurs, and it was through them that I found my most valuable sources.

Just as my later move to California revealed unexpected aspects of European wines, so my involvement with these "lesser" wines, set deep in the fabric of rural French life, gave me an uncommon perspective of the classic wines in which I had been trained. Asher Storey and its retail side, Wine Vaults, grew, and though we maintained an emphasis on lesser-known French wines (to this day, from what is said, one might be forgiven for imagining that I invented them), we needed those classic wines, too. At that period, Burgundy and Bordeaux were shipped to England mainly through the established *négoçiants*. There was little estate-bottled Burgundy imported, surprisingly, and wines of the small, unclassified vineyards of Bordeaux were mostly bottled and sold under the labels of major shippers. But in my search for the lesser wines I had formed habits hard to break. In particular, I was used to buying only in growers' cellars, picking out what I wanted barrel by barrel. I approached the great regions in the same way, tramping through *chai* and *cave*, asking the questions I would have asked in Lot or Languedoc. The growers responded with warmth and enthusiasm, and our mutual respect became the basis of friendships that have endured.

Since 1967, when we had first received inquiries for our more esoteric French wines, I had been visiting the United States twice a year to sell wines for direct shipment from France. Taking the view that I was selling "British expertise," the British Embassy in Washington generously sponsored me by providing the chancery rotunda for the first tasting of our wines. In 1971 I moved to the



United States permanently, leaving a large, old-fashioned house in an overgrown garden near London for a small city apartment high above Manhattan in order to assume responsibility for imported wine sales at Austin, Nichols & Company.

Austin, Nichols were then preeminent in the United States for their unequaled stocks of Bordeaux classified growths. In London, Bordeaux classified growths had played a minor role for me; indeed, my attachment to lesser-known wines had given me somewhat the reputation of an iconoclast. But in New York, to my surprise and amusement, the importance of Austin, Nichols' Bordeaux business was such that I was an instant pillar of the wine establishment.

There were other, less amusing, surprises. If in England the wine trade is a gentlemen's occupation, the "industry" is hardly thought of that way in the United States. I had to supply mug shot, fingerprints, and personal history to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, whose representatives visited friends and acquaintances in the course of their inquiries. It was clear that I was to consider myself henceforth a potential criminal, at very least. Indeed, I was soon to realize that the laws relating to the sale of wine—irrational, demeaning, and absurdly varied from state to state—make certain that everyone involved with the wine and spirit trade of this country will at some time, knowingly or unknowingly, commit an offense. As Bernard Rudofsky, in *Notes and Footnotes on the Lost Art of Living*, comments wryly, "If Jesus Christ should want to visit this country, he certainly would have to mend his ways. A repetition of the multiplication of bread might be greeted with hosannas, but a miracle of changing water into wine would land him in jail in the holier of the states."

State regulations are unbelievably complicated and messy. They add unnecessary costs to the simple distribution of wine, and in many states they seriously restrict the choice of what might reasonably be enjoyed within the bounds of law. For years North Carolina "protected" its residents from fine old Bordeaux because of a state regulation requiring chemical analysis of any wine to be offered for sale. This meant that if we, or any other importer, had a small quantity of, say, Cheval Blanc 1947, none would be offered to the Tarheel State; we were not about to dispatch even one precious bottle to the pipettes and test tubes of a Raleigh laboratory. And the state of Washington still requires chemical analysis of any wine to be sold above the Columbia River.



Winemakers of the world disregard the offensive implication but are cynical about the whole wasteful process. They know that once a wine is "approved," subsequent shipments, even if from later, and therefore different, bottlings, or from later vintages, are not subject to reanalysis. Until quite recently, Michigan subjected all trial bottles to a taste test in the laboratory, as well as chemical analysis. The qualifications a technician might need to fulfill the role of arbiter of what could, and what could not, please the palates of an entire, populous, and sophisticated state would be hard to describe, let alone find, combined, in one mere mortal. The industry suffers this rigmarole quietly as part of the fiscal and emotional cost of doing business, reluctant to disturb relations with state officials, most of whom do their best to make the unworkable workable. Change is unlikely: it can come only through legislation, and the subject is too sensitive for most politicians. They see in it little chance of political advantage to offset the probable political risk.

By representing Austin, Nichols on the Wine Committee (and later on the Champagne Committee) of the National Association of Beverage Importers in New York, I learned a great deal about the structure of the industry and the personalities involved. While absorbing so much that was new, I regretted only that my work as an importer left largely undisturbed my ignorance of American wine.

I had already met California wine under the most propitious of circumstances. In 1967, on my first visit to San Francisco, I had been invited, through a friend's introduction, to a dinner in Pacific Heights where I was served Château Latour 1955 alongside Inglenook Cabernet Sauvignon 1954. Had I nurtured any condescending prejudice, it would have been dispelled. On my return in 1968 I visited the Napa Valley and met Robert Mondavi, then as now overflowing with enthusiasm, and Joe Heitz, calmly matter-of-fact about his wine but as proud as he had a right to be.

Later, when I had moved to New York, I continued to spend a day or two in Napa or Sonoma whenever I visited the West Coast. In a burst of activity, vineyards were spreading in all directions. That included Monterey County, where, early in 1974, a project between a San Francisco corporation and a new vineyard and winery was being formed. The purpose of the joint venture was to develop a range of quality wines that would help bring