

Film and Book Reviews

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JASON WISE (Director): *SOMM 3*. Written by Christina Wise and Jason Wise, Produced by Forgotten Man Films, Distributed by Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2018; 1 h 18 min.

This is the third in a trilogy of documentaries about the wine world from Jason Wise. The first—*Somm*, a marvelous film which I reviewed for this *Journal* in 2013 (Stavins, 2013)—followed a group of four thirty-something sommeliers as they prepared for the exam that would permit them to join the Court of Master Sommeliers, the pinnacle of the profession, a level achieved by only 200 people globally over half a century. The second in the series—*Somm: Into the Bottle*—provided an exploration of the many elements that go into producing a bottle of wine. And the third—*Somm 3*—unites its predecessors by combining information and evocative scenes with a genuine dramatic arc, which may not have you on pins and needles as the first film did, but nevertheless provides what is needed to create a film that should not be missed by oenophiles, and many others for that matter.

Before going further, I must take note of some unfortunate, even tragic events that have recently involved the segment of the wine industry—sommeliers—featured in this and the previous films in the series. Five years after the original *Somm* was released, a cheating scandal rocked the Court of Master Sommeliers, when the results of the tasting portion of the 2018 exam were invalidated because a proctor had disclosed confidential test information the day of the exam. And, if that were not enough, a *New York Times* investigation revealed in October 2020 a pattern of sexual harassment of female candidates by older male Master Sommeliers (Moskin, 2020).

That may be only part of the problem since a quick look at relevant data suggests that gender discrimination may also be at work. Of course, careful analysis would be needed to validate or reject such a charge (perhaps in a future article in this *Journal*?), but the numbers raise questions, with women comprising less than 17% of new U.S. Master Sommeliers over the past 20 years, falling below nearly all job categories in a recent assessment, except for truck drivers, where women are about 8% of the labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). This stands in contrast to the casual empiricism of many of us when we have noted that women we know seem to have, on average, substantially more discerning palates than our male friends (including ourselves), an observation that is pointed out in Wise's latest film.

The lynchpin of *Somm 3* is the 1976 Judgment of Paris blind tasting, which pitted a set of upstart California wines against renowned French versions of the same varietals, and resulted in a psychological win for the new world wines when they stood up to and in some cases beat their old world competitors when judged by a panel of French experts. That tasting—and issues surrounding the statistical analysis of the results—have been documented in this *Journal* (Cicchetti, 2006), and the story has previously been told with considerable humor and affection, if not great accuracy, in the feature film *Bottle Shock* (2008).

The 1976 tasting, which many believe launched the modern era of California premium wine production, provides a theme and a set of dramatic devices which bring together three legends of the wine world and a panel of young New York City sommeliers who engage in a blind tasting which in some regards is a natural sequel to the 1976 Paris tasting.

One of the legends is Fred Dame, who was celebrated in the original *Somm* as the first American to become a Master Sommelier in 1984. Another of the legends is Jancis Robinson, the highly respected wine critic and *Financial Times* columnist, whose autobiography I reviewed in this *Journal* (Stavins, 2007). Robinson talks about the historically small number of women in the wine industry but also emphasizes that women are playing increasingly important roles throughout the wine world, although she also notes that “competitive (blind) wine tasting is a very male thing.” The last of the three legends in *Somm 3* functions as the hub of the film’s narrative because this legendary character provides a real connection between the other elements of the movie—Steven Spurrier, the famed Paris-based proprietor of a wine shop and school, who organized and hosted the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting.

There are virtually no simple “talking heads” in this documentary. Even people being interviewed are nearly always in action. More than this, the film provides brilliant cinematography of equally beautiful scenes (and inspiring music), which provide a most pleasant escape from social distancing during a global pandemic!

Blind tasting of wine is demonstrated in a session with Fred Dame, hosted by Jay Fletcher, which takes place for some unknown reason at a hotel in Big Sky, Montana. The session also demonstrates the film maker’s creativity as Dame’s commentary on the mystery wine is illustrated—sentence by sentence, and sometimes word by word—with a series of rapidly changing, beautiful, and appropriate images. Before the tasting begins, we are made aware by Fletcher that the wine Dame will blind taste is a 1995 E. Guigal Chateau d’Ampuis Côte-Rôtie.

Dame observes the wine in his glass, swirls it, tastes it, and as he speaks, the following scenes appear: “This is a classic wine from the Rhone Valley (aerial film of the Rhone River), it’s Syrah (close-up of Syrah grapes ripening on the vine) with a little bit of Viognier (extreme close-up of white grapes on the vine). It’s got new oak (oak barrels stained by red wine in a large cellar). The wine is a 1995 vintage (image of vineyard). So, we’ve got a 22 year old wine (glasses on the table). It’s 1995 Côte-Rôtie.” He nails it! Of course, if they continued to burrow down for the specific producer and vineyard, presumably he failed because the scene in the film stops there. Still, this was reminiscent of some of the captivating scenes from the original *Somm*, and hence fun to watch—but painful to write about now, after the recent disclosures of Mr. Dame’s own involvement in the sexual harassment scandal documented in the *New York Times*.

In Paris, Spurrier mentions that if his 1976 blind tasting (which featured wines based on Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon) were to be redone today, he

would want it to compare new world and old world wines based on Pinot Noir. That provides the premise for the present-day New York City blind comparison of new world bottles of Pinot Noir with several prominent wines from Burgundy. This tasting is organized by and held in the Manhattan wine shop, Verve Wine, owned by Dustin Wilson, one of the four young men preparing in *Somm* for the Master Sommelier exam. (The three others make relatively brief appearances in *Somm 3*: Brian McClintic, DLynn Proctor, and Ian Cauble.)

As Wilson prepares his tasting event, he notes that Jancis Robinson's *Oxford Companion to Wine* (1994 to 2015) "has been part of my library from day one;" and some readers may recall that Miles characterized the same book in the movie *Sideways* as the "brilliant and exhaustive tome on everything you ever wanted to know about the universe of wine" (Stavins, 2006). Wilson invites several young New York male and female sommeliers to his tasting, before which he explains that they should not guess where the wines are from but simply rank them in order of their judgments of quality. Included are two premier cru from Burgundy, plus one wine each from the Willamette Valley in Oregon, Santa Barbara County in California, Patagonia in Argentina, and Geelong in Australia. I will not divulge the results, but I will say that the discussion among this group is as interesting as the outcome.

The various elements of the film are beautifully intertwined as we move from one part of the world to another: from elements of the New York City tasting to a get-together of the three legends—Dame, Robinson, and Spurrier—in a Paris restaurant, to historical vignettes about the three, the tasting with Dame, a visit to Spurrier's own Bride Valley Vineyard in Dorset, England, and much more.

The three legends of the industry proceed to describe and taste bottles each has brought to Paris of their respective "Aha! wines"—the bottle that had constituted a transformative and unforgettable experience which made them a lover of fine wine. For Robinson, it was during her student days at Oxford in the early 1970s. Out for dinner with her generous boyfriend of the time, she shared a bottle of 1959 Chambolle-Musigny, Les Amoureuses (Stavins, 2007). For Dame, it was a bottle of 1968 Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon; and for Spurrier, 1908 Cockburn's Vintage Port.

The film has a dramatic arc that progressively emerges, as much of the film appears to have been unscripted. While it cannot match the suspense and tension that characterized the first *Somm*, the various elements of *Somm 3* are brought together nicely at the conclusion, when Dustin Wilson takes the top three bottles selected at the blind tasting of New York sommeliers to Paris, to be tasted blind by Fred Dame, Jancis Robinson, and Steven Spurrier.

On re-watching the film, sitting with those three famous elders of the wine world in the private dining room of a Parisian bistro, there is much on which I found myself reflecting: the wines, the sommeliers, these three legends, and the recent successes of women in some aspects of the wine world, despite the awesome challenges and apparently terrible treatment so many have faced. Perhaps there is a story there

for Jason Wise's next passionate and sensitive film about the world of wine and the remarkable people who seem to inhabit it.

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 doi:10.1017/jwe.2020.44

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DINA MANDE (Director): *Tin City*. Written by Dina Mande. Gravitas, 2019; made available through hoopla, 1 h 19 min.

Can artisanal wine be made in an industrial park? Why would anyone want to do so when most wine lovers might not want to associate tin buildings as part of the terroir where the wine is produced? In her documentary film *Tin City*, Dina Meade illustrates how a thriving community of passionate, hard-working individuals has come to produce world class wine, spirits, and beer in Paso Robles, California. While Paso Robles has a well-known and rapidly expanding wine scene, few are familiar with the existence of a neighborhood of winemakers who share ideas, equipment, and clientele within a 20-acre industrial park of buildings on cul-de-sacs. *Tin City* explores this new wine scene development of a community of unpretentious passionate individuals who have a great appreciation for soil, climate, and grape varieties of the Paso region. They want to create unique products using their own skills and techniques, not in large, highly capitalized wineries, breweries, and distilleries but rather in this village of tin buildings called Tin City outside of downtown.