

ADDRESS GIVEN AT
THE CONVENTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WINE & FOOD SOCIETY
BY HUGO DUNN-MEYNELL, VANCOUVER, 8th OCTOBER 1983

WOULD ANDRÉ BE PROUD OF US?

A few days ago, I was in my office in London and sifting through some old files.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a crumpled piece of paper caught in the back of the drawer. It was dated 27th January 1964, and signed by R.A.B. Butler (later, Lord Butler) the Foreign Secretary of Great Britain. It reads:

"Dear Monsieur Simon,

It is with great pleasure that I am writing to inform you that Her Majesty The Queen has been pleased to appoint you to be an honorary Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. This honour, to the bestowal of which the French Government has given their agreement, is conferred by Her Majesty in recognition of the important part you have taken in advancing the knowledge of the uses of wine and food . . . both in regard to historical times and the present day."

It is an unusual thing for a national from outside the Commonwealth to receive such an honour from the Queen. We of the Wine & Food Society have every reason to be proud of our Founder. It is my purpose today to put before you some thoughts about his career and philosophy that may enable you to decide for yourselves whether, 13 years after his death, he would approve of us.

I have read somewhere that, when the French Emperor was at the height of his fame, he had a curious conceit to know whether there was a single adult person in the French Empire who did not know the name Napoleon Bonaparte. Accordingly, he instructed a secretary to institute a piece of research into the matter - no more odd, perhaps, than some of those questionnaires with which the marketing profession bombard us these days. The operation did not last long: withing twenty-four hours, a man who had never heard of Napoleon was found within a mile of his home in the Tuileries.

I was reminded of this recently, when a member of our Society - and not a very "young" member at that - telephoned my office in its headquarters for information about a wine, and the reply quoted something written by André Simon. "Oh", he asked, "Who was that?"

I would like to think that the majority of members of the Wine & Food Society have heard André Simon's name before; but may I be pardoned for wondering how many of us really know who he was?

André Louis Simon, born in Paris in 1877, died 93 years later in London, having spent well over half his lifetime in Britain. He never surrendered his original nationality, and clung even more tenaciously to the French accent - though he became a distinguished writer in the English language, and was probably the most prolific author about food and drink that there has ever been. In 1933, he did us a great favor, he founded the Wine & Food Society.

When, shortly after André's death, Michael Broadbent delivered a memoir of him to a great meeting of wine-lovers in London, he pointed out what a different world it was in the year of our Founder's birth. Queen Victoria was that year proclaimed Empress of India; Great Britain annexed the Transvaal; Brahms composed his second symphony; Rodin's provocative bronzes were causing a scandal in Paris - as were the outrageous works of Degas, Monet, Renoir and Cezanne. Christies, the London auctioneers, was selling magnums of

Chateau Lafite at 190 shillings (shall we say \$14) a dozen! Most significant of all, it was the last year before the whole of Europe heard the dreadful word 'phylloxera.'

Those of you who have read André's two books of autobiography "By Request" and "In the Twilight" will know that his childhood ambition was to be a journalist. Indeed, his first job was on the staff of a newspaper - well, a sort of newspaper: the official Gazette of the Papal Guard. Although the situation lasted only six months - I feel surprised he stayed that long! - it gave him an interest in writing and a whiff of printer's ink that was to become in his affection second only to the bouquet of wine. However, he soon quit that calling, and for the best of reasons: he met a young lady named Edith Symons, and fell instantly in love. His salary as a reporter was far too small for a married man, so he looked for another profession. And found it, in the champagne trade. It is interesting to reflect that, were it not for a chance introduction to a 19-year old girl, André Simon could easily have lived out his life as a newspaperman, and he might never have gone to live in an English-speaking country. As it is, he gratefully accepted an offer, in 1902, to go and sell Pommery champagne in Britain. I think we should all be grateful to Edith Symons, and I'm rather pleased that I once met her.

In England, André was an instant and enormous success. He earned high commissions and - for the first time in his life - lived luxuriously. I have here the menu of a quiet dinner party he gave for a few friends, in a provincial hotel, before leaving on a business trip in November 1907:

"The fare: Whitstable Natives

 Tortue Claire

 Rougets à la Vaucluse

Blanchailles à la Diable

Casseroles de Ris de Veau à la South Western

Selle de Pré-salé Renaissance

Céleris braisés à la Moëlle

Choufleur au gratin

Pommes Dauphine et Fondantes

Sorbet au Pommery

Cigarettes Teofani

Faisan en volière

Bécassine flambée à la Fine Champagne

Panier de Pommes Paille

Salade Demi-deuil

Soufflé Palmyre

Chartreuse de Fruits à la Moderne

Bombe Alhambra

Petits Fours Parisiens

Croûte à la Baron

Dessert et Café

What the "Dessert" was, I can't imagine: he seemed by that stage to have exhausted the whole repertoire of Francatelli.

The lot was, of course, "irrigated" (as the French say) by an appropriate sequence of bottles, starting with sherry and ending with both port and brandy, one after the other. In the years when

most of us knew André, there was always a chill of "austerity" in the air. I believe we should all be thankful that, so early in his life, he lived in an environment where the highest quality was affordable - and I wonder whether, when he coined his own motto, which he passed on to us "Not too much, but enough - and the best" it was a piece of nostalgia for the quality of life of a successful man in Britain, before the sordid events of 1914 changed everything. I would suggest to you also that his intimate familiarity with the workings of the wine trade gave him enormous authority when, in due course, he crossed the counter and became a mentor and spokesman for the thousands of wine-loving customers who have made up our Society over the past half-century.

In 1914, on the day before war was declared, André informed his wife and five children that his duty was to defend his native country; and off he went to join the French Army. André Simon was always an optimist, and careful with money: he bought a round-trip ticket. It was 5 years before he could use the return ticket.

When the recruiting sergeant asked Monsieur Simon his profession, he hesitated to describe himself as a 'Wine Salesman,' which he felt sounded slightly decadent; so he said he was a "man of letters." They made him regimental postman.

Our Founder, patriot thought he was, can hardly have enjoyed exchanging a comfortable life in London for the privations of the Western Front - substituting Ypres for Yquem! - so he decided to make a modest improvement in his army lifestyle. Somehow he talked the Commanding Officer into promoting him to a commissioned rank. He celebrated by holding, in the trenches, a Waterloo Centenary Banquet on the 18th June, 1915. Rather an eccentric event for a Frenchman to organize perhaps, but then Anuré could always find a stylish reason for a party. I think it must have been the very first of those "memorable meals" with which in later years he used to make our mouths water in the Society's Journal. I have the menu:

it contains such delicacies as Termite Soup and Salmon de Tin, and records that fireworks would probably be provided after dinner by courtesy of the German Army.

How fortunate for us all that André survived that War. A time was to come, however, 20 years later, when his gastronomic capacity to make the best of things in wartime would again be put to good use. Indeed, within days of the British Ministry of Food's distribution in 1939 of the first ration-books, André published this Society's Unration Book, with coupons for herbs, nettles, wild fruits, mushrooms and many other good things that would help save his members - and anyone else who would spend 4 cents on a copy - from several years of culinary boredom.

But I am running ahead. André returned to Britain in 1919, and there followed a decade of mounting prosperity for the champagne trade. He and Edith moved, with their family, into a fine country house in Sussex. He also acquired an apartment in Westminster, two minutes walk from the Cathedral, where he attended Mass daily. His religion was very important to him: he shared Benjamin Franklin's belief that "wine is a living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy." His own enthusiasm for gastronomy was firmly rooted in the conviction that it was an insult to our Creator (referred to always by André as Le Bon Dieu; God was a Frenchman, of course) to abuse His splendid gifts of food and drink.

André was in his fifties, the secure, successful patriarch of a happy family, and doyen of wine-shippers in Britain, when disaster came. First, the Depression, then Britain left the Gold Standard. In the ensuing slump, sales of wine fell off alarmingly. Especially the wine in which he traded, which became so unfashionable that some London nightclubs substituted tankards for glasses, so that people would not be embarrassed to be seen drinking champagne in public. Pommery, like its competitors, retrenched, and they abruptly terminated André's contract - he had handled their sales on the

basis of a purely verbal agreement for precisely 30 years. Looking back at that time, it is easy to understand why André Simon vowed he had finished for life with the wine trade. Indeed, he never sold another bottle.

Well, tragedies have a way, sometimes, of opening up opportunities. It was not long before André saw in his enforced inactivity a chance to tackle something he had wished to do for a very long time. He had already achieved great things for the trade, which had now rejected him, but there was no "wine-lovers" society, no formal education for ordinary people in the appreciation of wine and good food; no periodical devoted to these things for the benefit not of the sellers but of the customers. People had agreed with him that it would be a good idea to form an association of folk who believed that "an intelligent appreciation of the pleasures of the table means more than the mere satisfaction of appetite" - but it required dynamism to get such a thing going. Here was a man who had plenty of that quality, and time to spare, and was equipped by his knowledge and training and enthusiasm to establish a Wine and Food Society. Fifty years ago this month, he did just that.

It was not a propitious moment. Britain had to cope with two million unemployed. America was little better off economically, and Prohibition was still in force. The whole European wine business was at a low ebb, and most restaurants in the English-speaking countries were terrible. The recent emergence of a powerful National Socialist party in Germany gave Europeans plenty of reason to worry about other things than the cooking time of vegetables or the best temperature at which to serve Beaujolais.

But André pointed out that "there never was, and never could be any man, woman or child who was not obliged to eat and drink every day." As for the economy, he argued that "unless something be done, done quickly and done well we are faced with the very real danger of

losing much, if not all, the amenities of a gracious way of living . . . we might quite possibly lose even the desire for the best." These were stirring sentiments, but I still find it impressive that within 3 months the new Society had 500 members. It also had some critics: the Manchester Guardian for example commented primly on André's initiative that "to discuss food with affection, at the right time and season, is not without its charm - whether it should be discussed in public and at the top of one's voice, particularly in a world where a large number of people cannot get enough of its simplest forms, often seems a little open to question."

André answered the question. He reminded the snipers that indigestion never did anyone any good, but a sense of well-being does. That an over-cooked cabbage costs more, not less, than one that isn't. That good cooking in the home is a recipe for contentment; and in restaurants it provides honest employment for farmers, fishermen, laundresses, silversmiths, glass-blowers, potters, and goodness knows how many more people - including chefs and waiters. That the appreciation of discriminating consumers is essential encouragement to these specialists to deliver the highest quality of which they are capable; and that we all have a duty to show our respect for wine by serving it carefully and drinking it with sensibility and appreciation. Above all, he maintained, wherever he travelled - and he would travel anywhere for our Society - that if its members would observe these principles, others would see their example and follow suit.

André's was not in essence a counsel of luxury, though he firmly believed that we should enjoy the very best whenever we have the chance. His avowed intention was to persuade people - starting with the members of our Society - to adopt "more sensible eating and drinking habits."

Well, the world is now much more nutrition-conscious than it was in 1933 - for that we can be thankful. Perhaps some of us err on the

side of over-consciousness. I think the fixation of many people about so-called "health" foods would have amused this man who, in his nineties, was still opening a bottle of champagne at eleven o'clock every morning - and who was able to say shortly before his death that he had "hardly a pain or an ache in 80 years."

So, have we set an example, and have others followed?

Well, for a start, there are now thousands of associations in the world devoted to gastronomic appreciation. Some are big, some small. Some local, some national. Some cater for exclusive groups of people, some are open to all comers. But pretty well all of them are based on the principle which André taught. You may think he would approve of that. (Occasionally, imposters have set out to deceive people into thinking they were the Wine & Food Society. André would not have liked that - but never mind, they have usually been short-lived.)

Then, a new generation of restaurant owners is trying - not always successfully, but trying, none the less - to serve us meals which respect the true qualities of good ingredients. Sometimes they lose their way - especially when they purport to follow the philosophy of the nouvelle cuisine without really understanding what it is all about. The other day in London I was served lobster with a salad composed entirely of rose petals - I suspect André would not have liked that much. I think he would have approved of the labour-saving devices, the techniques of food preservation, the microwave ovens. (Contrary to popular belief, he himself was a disastrous cook.) I doubt if he would have been pleased at some of the uses to which the gadgetry is put. It's one thing to make a sauce Béarnaise with a Cuisinart, another to buy it, ready-mixed and frozen solid, in a supermarket.

I think André would have been appalled at what are known as "bulk foods" - ready prepared sauces and garnishes, offered to the

innocent under the pretentious guise of grand names - which pervert good taste. These abominations appear today even in the most expensive places, and one is forced to suspect that exacting and knowledgeable customers are the last thing a great many of our restaurateurs want: there is, after all, greater profit to be made from those who will accept, without complaint, dé-frosted, re-heated, mass-produced parodies of classical cooking. However - thanks largely to the emergence of food critics, both amateur and professional standards generally are higher than they were, and one should beware of being over-cynical about the labour-saving techniques. André's friend, Professor Nicholas Kurti, in Oxford, has demonstrated that the microwave oven is capable of radically original cookery - how André would have loved his reversed Baked Alaska, with the meringue mixture cooked inside the ice-cream! The nouvelle cuisine, at its best, is a swing away from the sort of culinary pretentiousness which masks the true qualities of natural ingredients. In this it reflects what André's Society has been preaching for 50 years. It also exploits something that was dear to the prophet's heart - the beautiful colours of natural foods.

Our Founder was a pioneer who interested the media in food and drink to a degree never before known. The momentum continues, but some of the books and television nowadays would, I think, have appalled him - particularly that type of gastronomic "guide" which tells you everything about a restaurant except what the food tastes like. I think he would have been pleased with most of the hundred or so books published by this Society. (Modesty forbids me to say all!) He would be glad that the Society's Journal - in its various forms - has appeared regularly for 49 years and will shortly enter a second half-century in a new format, designed for the changing times in which we live.

On his travels - notably those to this American continent, to Australasia and to Africa - André took an intense interest in the emergent wine industries. He would surely be happy at the superb

bottles now coming from farmers in those continents, to whom he gave so much encouragement as well as practical advice; and he would indeed be proud that so many of these distinguished new generation wine makers are members of our Society. He might be less happy at some of the slightly defensive methods taken by the traditional wine regions he loved so much. I cannot think he would approve of "European Common Market wines" - a sort of vinicultural fiction, comprised by blending the produce of several countries and then bottling the mixture in the style of one of them. (The only bastard wine he approved of was Batard Montrachet!) I doubt if he would enthuse about the "new" Burgundy; or those "slightly smaller" bottle sizes which are designed to improve the sellers' profit by depriving us of just a few centilitres; or of the efforts of some members of the trade to persuade us to drink so much immature wine. What effect "wine boxes" would have had on his highly developed aesthetic appreciation, I shudder to think. And as a good champenois - and a thoroughly chauvinistic and healthily prejudiced one - I fear he would have hated the excellent sparkling wines now coming on to world markets from places far away from the Marne!

André had a great sense of humour. And one could never - even when he was frail and blind - think of him as an old man. I remember celebrating his 85th birthday with him at the White House Restaurant in London; the head waiter wished him many happy returns, and said he hoped to be able to renew that compliment on his 86th. André replied "You look a perfectly healthy young man." I see no reason why not." I think he would have been amused by the fast-food revolution, by the belief of certain French chefs that they have discovered the use of the best fresh ingredients in season - the "cuisine du marché" - when he was, 50 years ago, preaching so assiduously the importance of using produce at its peak. The fact that the chef has once again become a person of importance would have pleased ALS, who lived in an era between that of Carême and Soyer and our own age, when men like Bocuse, Chapelle and Girardet dare call restaurants by their own names. (Even his friend, the

great Fernand Point, never got round to that.) But the declining standards of waiting at table might have horrified him. In his time, the waiter and the sommelier were orchestrators - as vital to a fine dinner as a chef. Today, many of them behave as mere messengers - and consequently are treated as such. How he would have reacted to waiters dressed as pirates, or troubadors or Parisian gendarmes (all of which I have seen lately), I dread to think - let alone waitresses in shorts and see-through blouses. Perhaps I am running away with my imagination, though: André loved pretty women, and was as gallant as only an elderly Frenchman can be. He never could understand why some of our Branches confined their membership to his own gender. I remember him telling me he was always a bit scared of the Cunard liners because there were so many predatory ladies on board, and he was very susceptible. (He was 82 at the time.)

Three things I must assert - first, that our Founder would see, in the world today, greater than ever need for an international organization devoted to maintaining high standards of eating and drinking - and to bringing back some of the traditions of his time that we have so sadly lost. Then, he would have loved the adventurous spirit that is a mark of our Society - trying new foods, working out fresh ways of preparing old ones and sampling unfamiliar wines. And thirdly, that he would be proud to see this great Vancouver gathering of his loyal supporters and disciples from all over the world. If André were among us today - and I rather suspect that he is - he would find many changes in the quality of life as he knew it when he founded our Society in 1933. This has been a period of history when the preparation of food and service of wine in the home has passed from domestic servants to the consumers themselves, and when cheap comestibles have vanished. One might have expected standards in these circumstances to deteriorate, but they have not. What has perhaps come into its own is André's insistence that inexpensive foods are worthy of our attention as gourmets.

Publications of the Society like Potatoes (1943), Pottery (1946), Herbs, Spices and Flavourings (1970) and Eggs (1968), have played a significant part in this.

When we look back on the activities and events of the International Wine & Food Society during its history, there do seem to be many reasons why the Founder might approve our record. But is it perhaps the acid test to ask ourselves what would concern him now? The world is suffering from a great deal of bureaucratic control of food and drink - designed to monitor its chemical content, freshness, cleanliness, and so on; all very well in their way, but nothing to do with taste. No western government has a rational food policy: "butter mountains" go rancid, "apple pyramids" rot, and "wine lakes" sour, while millions of people remain undernourished. The economists tell us that the world is approaching an agricultural crisis - and starvation will increase. What, then, would our Founder think of the reduction in western countries of the area of land under cultivation? And might he not regard it as a duty of this Society to make some protest?

A great deal of political rubbish is talked about the need to regulate what people may eat and drink - all based on the assumption that governments know best what is good for us. The cults of instant food, fast food, health food and junk food are, for many of the untutored, becoming more important than insistence on good food. Standardization seems to be imposed in all the wrong places. We do not need a "standard chicken" or "standard cheese." Perhaps we do need standard sizes of bottle and wine glass?

So maybe we should go back to our beginnings. Let us recognize what needs attention if excellence in food and drink is to survive in the world, and use all the means we can to get it. And, while we are about it, let us - like dear old André - enjoy ourselves!

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