

*The André Simon Oration of the  
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## The Excitement of Wine

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André Simon, founder of the International Wine & Food Society, whose memory we honour today, was kind enough to write the preface of my first book on wine. Our friendship blossomed in 1963 during his first trip to Australia. I was one of his guides, in particular on a visit to the beautiful bountiful Hunter Valley. He may have been old and frail but his extraordinary knowledge, his elfin humour, above all his endearing spirit, transformed my duties into one of the most delightful and unforgettable experiences of my life. I ferried him to Mass on Sunday, and tucked him in at night. During his stay in Sydney, it was quite moving to see his child-like delight at his breakfasts in the garden of the beautiful old Kings Cross, now the foundation of a freeway.

We shared many a bottle then, and subsequently, and we got to know each other pretty well. Before leaving for the Hunter tour, my wife Joy warned him that I drove fast, something to do with conducting a surgical practice in Sydney and running a vineyard a hundred miles away. On our return he confided to her that: 'I was very frightened for a while, but I did not say a word, and then I really enjoyed it.' He became a devotee of Australian wines, and was a dear friend for the short period of his remaining life. I believe he would have approved of the conception and content of this address. He was a great philosopher with an open mind.

Joy, whom he adored, considers none of the great artists could have chosen a more appropriate face to personify the IWFS. It made you feel better just to meet him, and the happier to spend time with him. We recall

the '55 Pommery, one of his favourite champagnes, he shared with us at his apartment in 1968. We still feel the pathos of his last letter, shortly before he died, vision failed, with the warm words running off the typed page.

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I am continually amazed by the degree of scientific confirmation of a thesis that appeals to members of this Society, namely that the pleasure and excitement of attractive odours are nature's lure and bonus for the continuation of life, and we are now going to consider how wine is part of this pattern. It has been adapted from a chapter in my recent book.

As I was putting this itinerary together for a trip into the world of scents and sensuality, it struck me I might be doing for wine what Napoleon did for perfume. During the famous campaigns that left such an indelible impression on the psyche of Europe, the toilet water, eau-de-Cologne, formed a substantial part of his personal baggage. It had not long been created by Italian genius and marketed by German enterprise, but it was his lavish daily dousing that went far to establishing it as one of the most popular body fragrances in recorded history.

His other contribution was even more personal, and closer to the nub of this address. It derives from a quotation taken from a note he sent to Josephine at the conclusion of one successful campaign: 'Ne te lave pas, je reviens en trois jours.' *Je Reviens* has long been one of Worth's most admired perfumes, although what relationship it had to a consort three days unwashed is questionable. Even though he left her in order to breed a dynasty with a fertile partner, and was to die in exile on St Helena, his last words were of her, so it must have been a rather lingering fragrance.

As a preliminary, it may assist to draw your attention to a facet of existence that riveted many of us as children when we watched animals about the city or farm fulfilling a mating programme that was quite irresistible to the participants. It was obvious that the courtship began with odour signals, a lot of sniffing and snuffling going on.

The chemicals that switch on this programme are called pheromones. More scientifically, a pheromone is a volatile substance that provokes a response through smelling it. Many, but not all by any means, of those which have been studied are sexual in action, and I don't believe that any scientist can deny their role in the tapestry of human sexuality. Not all are attractant, e.g. the terpenes in orange peel repel some insects.

As I have travelled further on this strange journey, it has become

increasingly clear that they fall into two groups—those that exert their magic at a distance (e.g. several kilometres in the case of the female moth attractant) and those that only work at close range, almost at body contact, in the case of the male moth pheromone.

The most powerful human sexual pheromone is androstenone. It may seem like a mouthful now, but whoever mentioned cholesterol or monosodium glutamate twenty years ago? Androstenone will become a household word, just as they have. It is secreted by both male and female into hair follicles in the obvious places, although there is far more of it in the male. It is variously described as recalling musk, honey, urine, leather, stale clothes, one or more, or none of these, as at least a third of the population don't pick it up at all. Most women do. Dr Winifred Cutler of the Monell Chemical Senses Centre in Philadelphia calls it 'the raw fuel of libido' in both sexes.

Does wine really have a place in this saga? Let us begin at the beginning. Have you ever smelt grape flowers? A month or so after spring budburst the scent of the tiny flowers that make up the intending bunch is so delicious, that to walk through rows of vines on a still, warm day is a hint of swooning ecstasy, it is so poignant and of such breathtaking beauty. Floral perfumes are, of course, the reproductive fragrances of plants. There is more. The haunting perfume at this phase of the life of the grape at what is virtually its conception, is often recalled in the fragrance—so aptly named the bouquet—of a great and mature wine many years later.

The very act of tasting a wine can become the fountainhead of what Dr Morley Kare, director of Monell, calls a cascade of sensations and they are likely to trigger at least a dribble of what I have grouped as the 'Happy Hormones'. They are indeed the essence of excitement. I refer mainly to the beta-endorphins which have the potential to flood our bodies with pleasure when we do the right thing, be it eating, drinking, mating, listening to music, watching a great sunset, jogging, high-achieving, or whatever. This cascade can begin with the exciting colour of some wines, to be followed by the bouquet, then the taste; even on occasion, subliminal pain with the more potent wines.

Of course there is finally the direct effect of the absorbed alcohol on the brain itself. Small quantities of wine are exciting, mainly because of the alcohol-lessening inhibition. 'Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker' was the experience of the charming, tragic, all-wise Dorothy Parker.

Teetotallers move in a world of total certainty about the evil effects of demon drink. At a certain college at Oxford, a visitor when offered port in the senior common room after dinner, claimed indignantly: 'Why, I would rather commit adultery than take a glass of port.' The embarrassing silence was broken by the Master who said: 'And who wouldn't?'

Years ago, still innocent of the complexities and nuances of the excitement of wine, I came across the laboratory studies of William Masters and Virginia Johnson describing their observation of neck-blushing, pupil-dilation and nipple-erection, which have come to be recognized as some of the more obvious signs of sexual arousal in the human female.

Not long after that, imagine my perplexity to notice those very three signs in a lovely lady conveniently wearing a thin silk blouse when tasting an excellent Chardonnay. Scientists refer to this type of observation as random and uncontrolled. It nearly was.

Since that time, I have often noticed the same arresting reactions in those capable of such responses and have become convinced that it is not just the effect of the alcohol and certainly, in all modesty, not that of the observer. Chardonnay may have a suggestive yeasty note. A female co-judge in a recent international judging pointed out a musky tone of which I was unaware. I find it entrancing now that I have become a quasi-professional in this field, how women take me into their confidence, almost an honorary woman—a privilege and a great responsibility.

Many would agree that the most exciting wine is champagne. I think André did. He sold a lot of it. I wonder if the sexy odour of split yeast cells is an evolutionary reminder of a prodigious and highly efficient reproduction. It has to be much of the lure of champagne. When the wine's second ferment is exhausted the yeasts settle to the bottom of the bottle as lees, removed before the wine is sold some years later. The time the wine lives on the 'composting' yeast lees gives champagne its characteristic flavour, and a good deal of its charm. This plus the charge of excitement from the bubble-driven alcohol is a striking benefit of the marriage of the art of the winemaker to the science of yeast technology.

The cheesy lactic notes of champagne are not unlike Camembert and it is a matter of record how it got its aroma. Tradition has it that last century a famous widow in a small village in Normandy started that cheese style by rolling the cheese curds into little cakes with her feet. When I told this story to one of Australia's young cheesemakers, Richard Thomas, he recalled meeting a beautiful blonde in Paris, who was actually the great-, and I think another great-, granddaughter of the creator of the Camembert style: the family apparently still makes cheese there. However it may strike you, it is also a fact that cheesemakers of an earlier period were known to choose the best cheeses off the ripening racks when they smelt most like their wives. Reminiscing about the encounter with the attractive relative, Richard looked quite thoughtful at the mention of this fact. Legend suggests that the widow may have had other means of fashioning the cakes of cheese, and my mind flew to the girls who are said to roll the best Havana cigars on their inner thighs.

Merci, Marie Harel, we are all in your debt.

And what, you may well ask, has that got to do with the wine some of us gaily call 'Bubbles'? Just that I came by the following intelligence, it doesn't matter how. After some vigorous lovemaking, a bottle of champagne was popped, to brighten the lag phase. She noticed a frankly sexual smell at once. The rest is severely censored, but it went something like: 'It smells like you right now, darling.' 'Darling, I was just going to say the same thing about you.' The fascinating dispute ended as lovers usually manage to do, with the compromise that there was something in it for both, which is not always the case with odours that make such a clear sexual statement. At least one champagne house is well aware of the relationship. De Venoge Crémant Brut from Epemay in a striking full-page advertisement proclaims the single line: 'We'd like to describe the taste of this champagne but we don't know you well enough.'

You may be familiar with the smell of bean sprouts, e.g. when a container of them is opened, especially if it is a little stale. That is acetaldehyde. Great champagne and many sherries also have this character, which happens to be a close relative of IBA, another important human pheromone. Before moving on from champagne I will leave you with another question. The hints of fresh sweat and sex, mostly the middle range of fatty acids, also seem to be attractive to many people in several of the world's most delicious and expensive cheeses. I wonder if society will ever get around to discussing the former as it does the latter? The table conversation could be quite startling!

Other wines may possess a similar aura. Some great Rieslings and Sémillons occasionally have a 'sweaty' tone among the fragrances. Not the goatly underarm of a five-day unwashed labourer, but rather a freshly-bathed and excited female—or male, if you wish. It may not surprise you that the principal mid-cycle female pheromone is IVA, according to the suggestion of John Moore, formerly of UC at Berkeley.

Not everybody denies the attraction. The sweaty saddle note of some mature wines which used to be applauded by wine writers seems to have gone out of fashion now. I am never really surprised at anyone sniffing leather, which often has quite an androstenone note.

After the initial adventure with Chardonnay, I started looking for a similar response to Cabernet Sauvignon. Well I was making wines from both of those varieties wasn't I? I was not too deterred by the absence of any immediate and clearcut signs, particularly as such wine was served under conditions where more complete observation was not easy. But as I persevered things started to fall into place. Thus began the transition from droll observation to observable fact, the smile replaced by astonishment.

I must digress from wine for a moment with a few relevant ideas on

wood fragrances, particularly oak and cedar, because they all come together in a remarkable climax as something very close to androstenone, as I hope to illustrate. Let us take oak first. Every lady pig knows how the bouquet of the truffle, which flourishes on the roots of the oak tree, mimics the ultimate turn-on of her consort's breath. Androstenone again. And the ageing of wine in new oak barrels. How profoundly that changes the flavour of the wine. The aroma that does this is a lactone, in fact called the 'whiskey lactone' because some nations add it with an eyedropper to their product.

The fragrant cedar. Why did the longest-lived civilization in recorded history almost completely de-forest the Mediterranean of cedar to provide incense for religious use; to use the ravishing oil of cedar to anoint their bodies with something more than hygiene in mind; and send their kings off into the hereafter in boats made of the timber which has retained its fragrance shut up in airtight chambers in pyramids for more than five thousand years?

And do you know that blackcurrant syrup will oxidize to a cedary character, left neglected at the back of a refrigerator shelf, as I did some years ago. And what is the natural development of the blackcurrant, cassis, note of young Cabernet wine? Why cedar oil, cigar box, pencil shavings, call it what you will? So we have a double-whammy in great claret—firstly the varietal development of a cedar tone, then the added oak lactone fragrance, which results in a surfeit of androstenone character from both Cabernet and oak. How generous of nature.

And so to the pheromone potential of claret. Confirmation of my undisciplined hypotheses came during the research for scents and sensuality. Research is a little like pornography: it is hard to define but you know it when you see it.

In the course of writing the book, I had been sniffing the androstenone square in the 'scratch and sniff' supplement of the *National Geographic* magazine, September 1986. Next day, after about seven hours' tough writing, I rewarded myself with a half-bottle of '66 Grand-Puy-Lacoste. It has a more intense androstenone than the standard sample.

To avoid confusion let me point out there may be another and more resinous note in wine which arises in a different way, and it can be rather obvious. It may recall eucalyptus, pine, or redwood rather than the lovely fragrances of Cabernet we have mentioned. It becomes part of the total bouquet of the finished wine by a path which has not been suspected. At peak ripeness there is a waxy bloom on the skin of the grape and on hot days in late summer, if there are trees with volatile leaf oils in the vicinity the wax takes up the aroma and it may persist through to bottle and beyond. That is one further reason why some regional wines may have such a definite signature. (Bordeaux, Coonawarra, Napa, Hunter, etc.)



I recalled a hilarious evening with one particular Wine & Food Society Branch. We had a fabulous fillet of beef with a truffled Madeira demi-glaze, generously truffled at that, and served of course with an excellent Cabernet wine. Earlier I had smelt the androsthenone on entering the dining-room without too much idea whence it was coming from. Much later, at the dinner, some unusually uninhibited behaviour was becoming apparent. In the wee small hours of that evening I wondered about the residual effects of all those pheromones on those that seemed to have begun the race with a running start.

We have seen how time in new oak silhouettes the cedar profile of mature Cabernet wine. In my opinion it can also give other varieties, e.g. Shiraz and Pinot, a certain pheromonal lift. Please note that this differs from oak mousse, or moss, a lichen that is used to give a greenish and woody note to certain perfumes and liqueurs.

Wines of ripe Shiraz grapes from certain regions sometimes have a fragrance of blackberries. Are you aware of a musk note in very ripe blackberries? I first picked it up after smelling the musky 'White Linen' perfume on a lady standing next to me at a smorgasbord. Having only just tasted a blackberry liqueur from the Rhône valley, I was struck by a clear resemblance, confirmed by independent parties whom I always call on wherever possible to minimize the prospect that I have finally gone away with the fairies.

I don't find any pheromonal notes in the unwooded wines of the variety Pinot Noir, the heart and soul of great red burgundy. After the caress of new oak, they do of course pick up some of the sexy fragrances I have been referring to. But Cabernet wine is definitely pheromonal, even without oak. No wonder there is Pinot envy! Fear not, lovers of burgundy! The final oak-matured result can be fairly effective or else why would so many of the wines from special vineyards of Burgundy have names like the *lovers* of Chambolle-Musigny (Les Amoureuses) or the *illegitimate* children of Puligny- and Chassagne-Montrachet (Bâtard- and Bienvenues-Bâtard-Montrachet)? Or Clos de Tart.

So, in conclusion, can we put all this knowledge to good use? Chardonnay and champagne seem to be speedy and their efficiency is legendary. (To be taken before an affair, during an affair, after an affair, or instead of any affair.) The red wine appears to be more of a problem what with some delay in perfuming your skin. There is of course the immediate androsthenone lift, but socially this might not be an advantage. A regular intake of Cabernet seems to be the solution.

Pheromones in wine started as a joke but are now serious stuff. Enjoy their examples in the glasses in front of you. Think of all those happy hormones being released. Isn't nature marvellous? Our food and drink have all the elements to sustain and to inspire us to reproduce, or at least

be delighted to keep at it. *Perhaps you should yield to temptation at once, lest it leave you too soon.*

*Max Lake is the author of Scents and Sensuality (John Murray, London, 1989). This oration is based on a chapter from the book. (Copyright retained by author.)*