

Is Wine Art?

IS WINE THE ELIXIR OF LIFE? Some, myself included, think so, but whether you concur or not, a closer examination may be worthwhile. Although there are many students of high quality scotch, bourbon, rum, etc., thankfully, the lower alcohol level of wine permits one to indulge responsibly and still enjoy social settings whether at home or restaurants.

The French recently named wine “the social lubricant” and I think it apropos. With the level of economic, social, and familial stress in the world today, it is wonderful to have access to a fluid medium where at the most basic level it is simply an enjoyable beverage that allows one to relax. This artful medium progresses from the jug wines through a dizzying and constantly changing array of all types of wines culminating in its zenith with the great wines of the world. This journey from the basic through mid-range to the world’s greatest wines is not one that is done as a sprint but in fact a marathon of sorts.

One does not attempt to run 26.2 miles without much preparation and the same is true for this journey. Notwithstanding the need to build a construct of wine knowledge through reading the subject matter, there is no substitute for doing one’s homework. Given that everyone’s palate is different to some degree, it simply makes good sense to experiment on one’s own. Just as it is hard to imagine doing advanced algebra and calculus without learning basic mathematics, it is true that one needs a good foundation in wine to understand and appreciate the best wines.

The preparation starts with acquiring some knowledge “framework” within and around, which one can add newly acquired information and experiences. My favorite wine books include the following: *Modern Encyclopedia of Wine* by Hugh Johnson, *Vintage Timelines* by Jancis Robinson, *The New Wine Book* by Dennis Overstreet, *The Wine Bible* by Karen MacNeil,

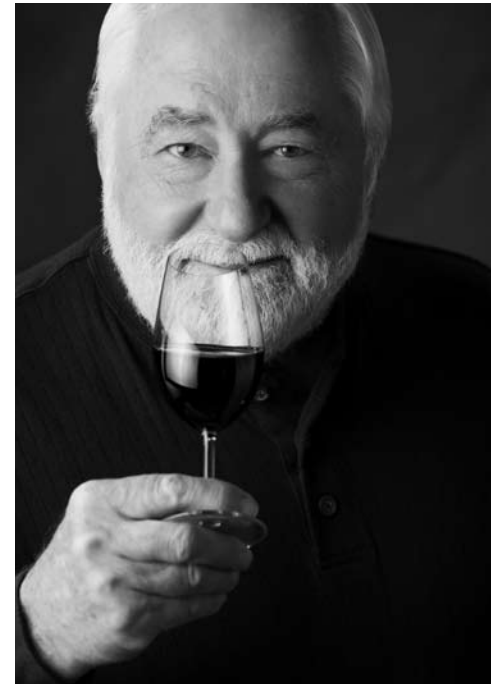
and *Vintage Wine* by Michael Broadbent.

I have recently been reflecting on my 45-year journey in this field. It essentially breaks down into a 10-year foundation in the basics (1964-1974) helped by living in Germany for 2.5 years and by the fact that there were few, if any, good beers available in the United States after my return. I started my first cellar in the mid-’70s and spent much time and money building upon my foundation with a heavy focus on U.S. wines. Moving to Chicago just as the 1982 Bordeaux were available as “futures,” I moved heavily into this area as well as Italian wines. I was fortunate to travel extensively to Europe after I had decided to focus my efforts there. Throughout most of my working career, my spending priorities permitted a liberal wine budget. The fact that my wife worked professionally and indulged me my passion was of great importance in building our cellar contents. Having arrived in this position, I have recently been reflecting on my good fortune and have come to these conclusions:

Almost none of us will ever be the best composer, musician, painter, artist, architect designer, etc. But in fact, many of us can enjoy the best of each of these professions by visiting art museums, symphonies, monuments, or buildings, or buying cars and houses. The very best of these costs significantly, but many people still find the economic wherewithal to experience the best. However, the least expensive medium to experience the “best of” is wine. Perhaps it is because once consumed, the economic value goes to zero, but relatively few people allow themselves to experience great wine. I am fortunate that I can experience this art form often and I challenge you to do it, at least occasionally.

While I enjoy visiting the Louvre, Prado, and Hermitage museums, watching performances of the Bolshoi and Kirkov, or going to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, it isn’t practical or affordable to do as often as I would like. However, just as a

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



Barrington resident Jim Bryant is pursuing his passion and love of wine as an international wine consultant. This follows a 30-year career in senior financial and general management positions at two Fortune 100 companies. He is the owner of James R. Bryant L.L.C.; contact him at profwino@comcast.net.

great recording can be satisfying, drinking the best wine allows association with and appreciation of genius. In addition, given the importance of great food to many of us, almost all types of food can be significantly enhanced when married with an excellent wine. The great news is that due to these tough economic times, while the greatest wines may still be very expensive, there has never been a time when very good to excellent wines have been so inexpensive.

Santé! U