

EAST COAST VINEYARD 2007 A.D.

Headache?

Nightmare?

Admittedly, a multi-trunk pruning system was not what I was accustomed to, nor had I ever come across such in a decade and a half of Médoc meandering. But here I was in southeastern Pennsylvania, and as I had learned years back on a winemaking mission to China, if the locals do something there is always a reason...

"Cold weather," came the answer.

'Oh,' I exclaimed, tightening the scarf around my neck on that brisk day in February and swinging my arms to and fro to pump more body heat into my down-garnered parka. Then, wistfully thinking back to those delicious summer days on my farm back in France when I'd tend my vines at the break of dawn and bathe in Atlantic Ocean waves after noon, I queried, 'You mean summers are not as hot as in Bordeaux?'

"Winter," came my host's laconic reply. Then, waxing loquacious, he added "and crown gall," then went back to his pruning.

'Well, I replied, 'the warrior kings of ancient Gaul also wore crowns, but it never affected viticultural practices. And it could get cold in the Médoc as well, I retorted. Sometimes the wind would blow westward out of Russia and bring the temperature way down to 0° or even -5° or -10°. And we have only *one* trunk per vine, which makes pruning and training and spraying and canopy management a whole lot more practicable.'

A short bi-cultural discussion ensued there on the Pennsylvania plains, and the epic decision was manfully taken to prune *à la Médocain*. One vine, one trunk, that's all.

Fortunately, before even one of those wiry trunks was wantonly guillotined my host asked with timid courageousness "Don't you fellows in Europe measure temperature different?"

Oh well. When in Rome...

Discussion and constructive reasoning between nations can work wonders. A two-trunk system was finally agreed upon, one for the bottom wire arms and one for the top-wire canes. The heavens could have been proud of the human race that day as the Old World conceded to leaving a renewal spur near the soil for a potential third trunk, whilst the New World promised to leave more buds on the bottom wire, thus tacitly though perhaps unknowingly acknowledging the

aesthetic preference of Grecian proportion over Hollywood movie star top heaviness. As well as being a way to avoid low wire degeneration.

While we were on the topic of buds, I thought I'd ask my host how many buds the government allowed him to leave on the vine that year.

All pruning stopped as I got a look and heard words which remain etched in my memory: "Sir, now you've been away a long time, but just take a good look over there," he said, pointing to the spot in front of the house where a beautiful red, white and blue lay flapping in the wind 'gainst azure sky so pure.

"I started this place from scratch," he continued. "Built my family's house with my own hands, and planted every bit of this vineyard as well. There ain't no government that gonna tell me how many buds to leave on *my* vines, you can bet on that!"

So back to pruning, myself carefully copying my colleague's bud count. It varied, I was pleased to see, according to the age and the relative vigor of the vine. This as in France. When my host noticed that I was indeed paying respectful attention to his established traditions, he said in part conciliatorily "Besides, these are hybrids and very productive."

Passport! I immediately thought of my passport, as I did years back when I first ventured over to France and worked in vines and wineries in order to acquire knowledge, this not always legally. It was important to always have my passport with me and count on the *gendarme's* goodwill towards America in case of a work permit inspection. And here I was pruning hybrids in the States. Just asking for trouble! Although my New England birth and breed would prevent me from being expelled from the U.S., I might have to pay a big fine along with the owner if the police ever discovered what type of vines I was pruning. I subsequently kept a low profile, especially whilst in the rows near the road. And then again, I could always play dumb.

Hybrids were illegal in Bordeaux...

After a short day's work my host and I went back to the house. Shimmying through the - ouch!! - electrified gate I learnt that in addition to having a vineyard the owner also raised deer, starlings and robins. Again, here was a system which we don't have in the Médoc. They all went very well together, my host explained, because in the Spring the deer herd has plenty of nice tender vine shoots to feed upon and in the Fall the birds can peck at the grape clusters, thereby fattening themselves up for winter while at the same time lessening the burden of harvest work for the farmer.

Hmmm...

Back at the house I was to discover that having a dairy cow was also part of the typical Eastern vinegrower's array. Now, the udder sure looked like an aluminum keg, and the milking was done by something more like a spout than a teat, but my host assured me that on the terrace was indeed a dairy cow which like all dairy cows needed to be milked regularly, and particularly after a hard

day's work. On tap was ale from America's oldest brewery, though bottles of a St. Louis lager were also available in the refrigerator.

So it was over a mug of beer or two that the Bud question was ever so diplomatically resuscitated. 'French history,' I explained, 'was marked by a certain faith which the peasant people had that the King would ultimately provide them with salvation against the numerous abuses of the local lords and barons. We know that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Similarly, oppression which comes from nearby is more horrible than that from far away. And the eternal power struggle between royalty and noblesse at times saw the former courting the people's favor. The expression '*voie royale*' (royal path or way), designating civil servant selection and career advancement by merit and not by birth, is a vestige of this sub-belief.'

"Bud?" asked my host. I was not sure if he was asking whether I wanted another beer or if he was referring to vines. To be covered on both accounts I proffered my emptied mug for refilling, replied 'No, Yuengling ale' and continued with my socio-viticultural discourse.

'So, in conclusion, French *vignerons*, as individualistic as they are, can be surprisingly acceptant of broad rules which come down from Paris and which are supposed to be for the common good. The rather constraining *appellation d'origine contrôlée* laws, born of an(other) over-production crisis at the beginning of the last century, have almost always been well looked upon by the mass of *vignerons*. Indeed, many a region's vinegrowers actually had to lobby and lobby hard to have their appellation officially created.

"AVA!" exclaimed my host.

Surprised more by this interjection of hailing approval than by the approximate knowledge of Latin, I, too, exclaimed 'Avé!'

'And along with the appellation laws that the vinegrowers themselves requested is the obligation of certain growing practices...'

Here I paused to listen, and when no growl came I mentioned that one of those obligations was the number of buds to leave on a vine, adding quickly that it was not actually the number of buds per vine that was involved, but the amount of subsequent wine that the *vigneron* would be allowed to commercialize a given year. And although meteorological characteristics of the *millesime* and the quality of the consequent wine were of course considered, the health of the market was as everywhere a major factor.

"Bud?" asked my host. I was not sure if he was asking if I wanted yet another beer or if he was referring to vines. To be covered on both accounts I proffered my emptied mug for refilling, replied 'No, Yuengling ale,' and continued with my socio-viticultural discourse.

'So with market conditions being at present disadvantageous to Bordeaux wines, and likely to remain so for the coming year, the vinegrowers know that there is little reason to leave extra buds which will impose extra harvest and

winemaking work only to have the wine in excess of that allowed shipped off to a distillery at a derisory price. Better it be to plan ahead, reduce the number of buds and, incidentally, increase the quality of the remaining wine.'

After a slight pause, I continued –

'But even without this consideration of a State body controlling our lives even more and dwindling our precious Freedom...'

My host's ears pricked up –

'... a similar policy of bud consideration could be used by an Eastern vineyard. Let's say, for instance, that you have one variety of grape the wine of which you can sell all you can get - perhaps it's an easy-drinking red, or a residual sugared blush. You might consider leaving more buds on its vines, having more clusters and making a slightly less concentrated wine in order to have the extra quantity. However, should you be targeting the highest quality possible for some special varietal, you'd probably want to reduce the number of buds and obtain a lower yield. And it's all very easy to calculate - just multiply the number of buds per vine left at pruning by the number of clusters per fruitful shoot, then by the average weight per cluster of that variety, then by the number of vines per acre. Divide the kilos obtained by 1.3 and you have the liter volume per acre of the promised wine. Add ten or fifteen per cent for security and as soon as March one can send out letters to all the clients indicating how much of the upcoming *millesime*'s wine each will be allowed to buy. Isn't that wonderful!'

My host replied "Wonderful it is!", inwardly overjoyed at having finally resolved the wine futures management problem which would surely plague him in the not-too-distant future.

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