

The Arrogant Cork

My dear friend, Harold has fallen in love again. Last year it was a smooth Merlot, than a sultry Cabernet. A few months later, he flipped over a hearty Burgundy from a region of France he and his wife, Sandra had just visited. He extolled its virtues to anyone within earshot. He invited me to lunch at a fancy New York restaurant and ordered a Beaujolais. He poured some wine into his glass, swooshed it around, took a sip, then paused.

“It’s bold yet refined,” he said. “It has backbone that defies imagination, a bouquet that teases the nostrils, a taste that trips lightly over the palate.”

He lowered his nose deeply inside the glass, took a sniff, followed by a leisurely mouthful. Then he threw his head back as though gargling with Listerine while I watched in amazement.

“Raw,” Harold said, “definitely raw.”

Was “raw” part of the wine vernacular? I was quite sure I had never heard wine described thusly.

“Raw as in a piece of sushi, Harold?” I asked.

“Raw as in harsh on my taste buds. Raw as in abrasive to my nasal passages, raw as in bitter to my tongue,” he said.

It was at that precise moment I understood that when it comes to wine, Harold doesn’t fool around. He means business, and it doesn’t stop there. He wanted to share his expertise with me, and I, being a grape enthusiast, agreed to be a willing subject.

At dinner with Harold and Sandra a few months ago, Mark and I surveyed the wine list, eager to begin my first lesson.

“We’ll commence with a glass of Chardonnay,” Harold said, “and move on from there.”

I could hardly wait to “gargle” as I lifted the glass and took a hearty slug.

“Hold it right there,” Harold admonished, “one doesn’t slurp their wine, one drizzles it along the rear of the palate.”

Uncertain of my palate’s geography, I swallowed a few drops, then began to cough furiously as the wine bypassed my palate altogether and aspirated into my windpipe. Finally, after catching my breath and sucking on a cough drop, I regained my composure.

“Easy does it,” Harold said. “No need to get excited.”

Then, he closed his eyes, inhaled the aroma, sipped cautiously and emitted a barrage of affectations which made us all feel inferior by comparison.

“Oakly yet buttery, tart but not sour, innocent yet worldly,” he said, looking into Sandra’s eyes as she sat there with only one possible thought in her mind: is this guy for real?

To further add to the confusion, Harold decided to educate us on the subject of corks.

“The cork is the master of the bottle,” he said. “A bad cork and the wine is destroyed. Before you drink a bottle of wine, you must inspect the cork carefully. A damp cardboard aroma indicates trouble. What you want is a cork with attitude, but not an arrogant cork. You want a cork that is moist but not moldy, wet but not drowned...a cork that is supple, but also easy to remove.”

“I prefer screw caps, myself,” my husband, Mark said, while Harold grew as pale as a dry Riesling.

I wanted a drink badly and was ecstatic when Harold ordered a Pinot Noir.

“Before we sample this grape,” he said, we must be on the lookout for tannin, a substance that is an important part of the way red wine tastes. The presence of too much tannin will leave your mouth as dry as a Republican politician.

He further went on to explain that one can actually feel tannin buildup on the back of the tongue and the inside of the cheeks. “Tannin can make you feel as hot as tamale,” he said.

I sipped the wine, periodically checking my cheeks which felt as cool as a chilled Rose’.

As the evening progresses and the wine flowed, I learned about bouquet, wine finish, ripeness and wine jargon. Instead of saying, “it’s awesome,” after sipping a Sauvignon Blanc, Harold encouraged us all to wax eloquent.

I swirled the wine around my mouth and with a rapturous look on my face, I began to emote. Harold hung on my every word.

“Startling, but not pretentious, reliable without being boring, wholesome, but surprisingly sensuous,” I said.

Harold applauded and told me I was a fast learner. For the rest of the meal, we discussed appropriate stemware, thermostatically-controlled wine cellars, types of corkscrews, and the language of wine labels. For dessert, he ordered champagne, so expensive I saw Mark wince.

As I sat there watching the tiny bubbles rise and tickle my nose, we punctuated each swallow with accolades. “Fruity but not brash,” I said, as Harold responded with “delicate but not distinct,” followed by Sandra’s comment: “golden but not glitzy.” We were all getting into the swing of things and could navigate our way through any wine list. Harold beamed. After all, it

wasn't the wine that mattered: it was the ability to bluff one's way through a meal that counted the most.

A few weeks later, Harold drove up to Connecticut to take Mark and me out to lunch. We drove to a country inn in Southbury. We ordered glasses of mineral water with slices of lemon. Harold took a sip.

"Pallid but not dull," he said.

"Watery yet refreshing," Mark chimed in.

"Even but not tedious," I said, as we lifted our glasses in a toast.

But, last week, one might say I had carried things too far. I ordered a diet Coke at the Sherwood diner.

"Flat and disturbingly bland," I told the waitress. "The color is off and the fizz is flagrantly absent."

"You've got to let it breathe, honey," she said.

Harold would have been impressed.