

Critical Drinking

The irrationality of all human endeavor

I spent 10 years getting a doctorate at UO, studying primarily the new field christened psycholinguistics, the psychology of language. I've spent nearly three decades since my degree reading avidly in tomes and academic journals, exploring the unfolding of new insights into human nature. I'm also mildly obsessed by human history, the actions and events our psychology has produced. After all these years and all this pondering, I guess I have to yield one major point to neocons and others convinced of our flawed nature: Pretty clearly, human beings are, by nature and design, certifiably nuts. Crazy. Bonkers. Permanently bent.

The case for this view was presented convincingly by the late, great Arthur Koestler in *The Ghost in the Machine*. Koestler reviewed the best available evidence in psychology and neuroscience, concluding that humans got bad brains.

The problem is not that old left brain/right brain bugaboo; instead, it's more like big brain/little brain, and the little brain's in charge. On the one hand, see, we have this really crafty cerebral cortex, a beautiful instrument that enables us to write grand symphonies, raise architectural marvels, unlock the secrets of the universe. This is the big brain, a logic machine more complex and creative than the best super-computer. This brain ought to be in charge, our in-house CEO. But it's not running the show.

The little brain is boss. Actually, there's a bunch of little brains — nasty little glands with their own agendas — so we get decisions by committee, until one little brain gets all Trumpy and bullies the whole operation into some batty behavior: road rage, drug addiction, falling in love or lust, racism, power mongering, fanaticism, suicide bombing, invading weak nations, voting Republican. How crazy are we? Obviously, crazier than we think.

The wine world is just as schizo as any other human activity, just as twisted and pixilated. On the one side, there is the ineffable beauty of viticulture itself, the careworn cultivation of vines, the husbanding of earth, sensitivity to sun, soil and ripening fruit. It's hard to escape the essential truth arrived at by the French *philosophe* Voltaire who wrote, as the final words of his novel *Candide*, "It's best that we cultivate our gardens."

But no, winemaking has its own forms of frenzy. For just one example, even after years of rigorous research, most wine producers still insist on closing their bottles of fine juice by using a chunk of tree bark (cork), thereby virtually guaranteeing huge numbers of cork-tainted wines, with the added virtue of giving consumers a container that's almost as challenging to open as, say, a new CD. This particular stupefaction is justified as a matter of "image." Mass marketers swear that wine buyers buy

the package, not its contents. And they might be right. Additional wineworld deliriums: most German wine labels, oak-saturated chardonnay, California wine naming (e.g., "chablis" or "burgundy"), white zinfandel or, even worse, white merlot. I could go on, but better to look on the brighter side, no? I could be loony but my higher brain likes to pretend that my glands can be pacified by periodic immersions in beauties. And we've found a few.

The first comes with thanks to Carey, wine-buyer for Lucky Noodle who braved market madness by listing **Bonny Doon 2004 Ca' del Solo Malvasia** (\$13). BD's owner, Randall Graham, is widely recognized as the bedbug of California wine, an iconoclast who insists on having fun with labels, for instance, while filling bottles with top-quality juice, wines with the pure flavors of their grapes, then losing his senses utterly by closing the bottles with a screwcap. Jonathan, our friendly and super-competent server, presented the bottle at the

table, then unscrewed the cap and poured. No ritual tasting, testing for cork-funk. We could concentrate on these pretty lime-citrus tingles, zippy acidity that amped up the flavors of sautéed calamari. Simple pleasure, no fuss or pretension. Is that nuts?

In my quixotic quest for tasty viognier at sane price-points, I've had some summer successes, but I'm mad for **Beauvignac 2004**

Viognier Vin de Pays d'Oc (\$8.50). This crisply dry white delivers lychee/quince flavors that just act up with all sorts of seafood and — call me crazy — picnic salads and Chinese stir-fries. When you're wine shopping, it's a good idea to periodically read the back label, check for the importer's name. This viognier was brought to us by Portland's Greg Zancanella, a guy I've long respected for his palate and honesty; if the back label reads "Zancanella Importing," chances are good the wine will be tasty and good value.

Another Portland-based importer with a record for intelligent wine buying is Casa Bruno. Two superb bargains from Bruno should include **Chateau de l'Aiguillette 2004 Muscadet Sevre et Maine** (\$9), charmingly fresh with zany citrus flavors at a reasonable price, a cozy companion for an escadrille with shellfish. Really rare is **Quinta das Setencostas 2004 Alenquer**, (\$9), a dry Portuguese blended white with pleasing character. Portugal is emerging from the shadows of its own traditions and beginning to show the promise of its soils and sun. These wines are worth searching for.

Final words: OK, we're all raving daffies (some more than others), but we're also capable of great kindness and rational decency. Besides, autumn is in the air and we can look forward to turning leaves, tangy air and pinot noir — time to go batshit on a Brobdinagian scale. **CW**



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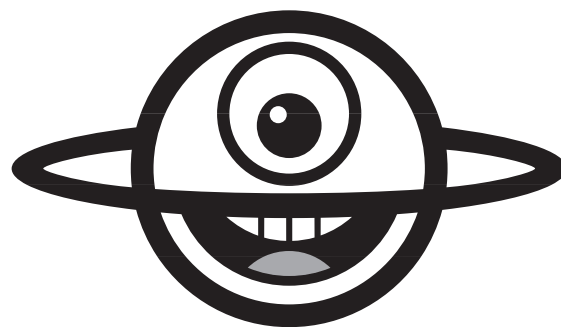
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