

WOMEN IN WINE

Women are vital to survival, and to wine

Years ago, staffers at *EW* were invited to Portland to sample the quality of some craft brews in Beer-vana. As a lark, clever staffers decided it might be fun to include on the trip — and into the story — a known “wine guy” and recognized beer-phobe, namely me.

Predictably enough, I was deeply impressed by flavors and textures in many of the beers. But when it came time to write my piece for the issue, I must’ve been inspired by Jonathan Swift’s great satire, “A Modest Proposal.”

You probably encountered Swift in school and might remember that he penned that deathless essay in response to the English Parliament’s endless dithering (and inaction) over the starvation of thousands of Irish children; his bitter satire suggested that instead of wasting all that protein — just burying all those little dead bodies — the English overlords, particularly the wealthy ruling classes, should simply buy the dressed carcasses, then cook and eat them.

Like all satires, Swift’s ran the risk of being misread as straight, a serious proposal. But common lore tells us that some MPs (members of Parliament) were met at their doors by angry wives, who had read the “Proposal” and told that they should return to their deliberations until they had solved the problem of those starving children — and incidentally find the author of the “Proposal” and swiftly hang him.

I knew the risks, but, so inspired, decided to try my hand at satire. So I keyed in an essay in which I “blamed” women for discovering beer; I thought readers would likely decode “blame” for its opposite, praise. See, I’m deeply troubled by the ways our cultures — East and West — have treated women. I can’t, even after years of studying history, begin to understand that awful accumulation of injustice, sometimes outright horror (burning “witches” at the stake).

Clearly, women have been vital to our survival, as a species and as civilization itself.

So, not only do I “blame” women for beer, I also blame them for food, clothing, shelter, nearly all the amenities of civilization — and wine. It was probably women who first “gathered” wild grapes; some grapes likely fermented: wine ensued. Women, too, probably worked clay into pots, the first wine containers. This history reaches back maybe 10,000 years, and nobody I’ve read has offered any clear notion of just when men began their domination of the whole wine enterprise, excluding women until recently; as an ironic note, the first woman degreed as a “master of wine” was chosen as late as 1970.

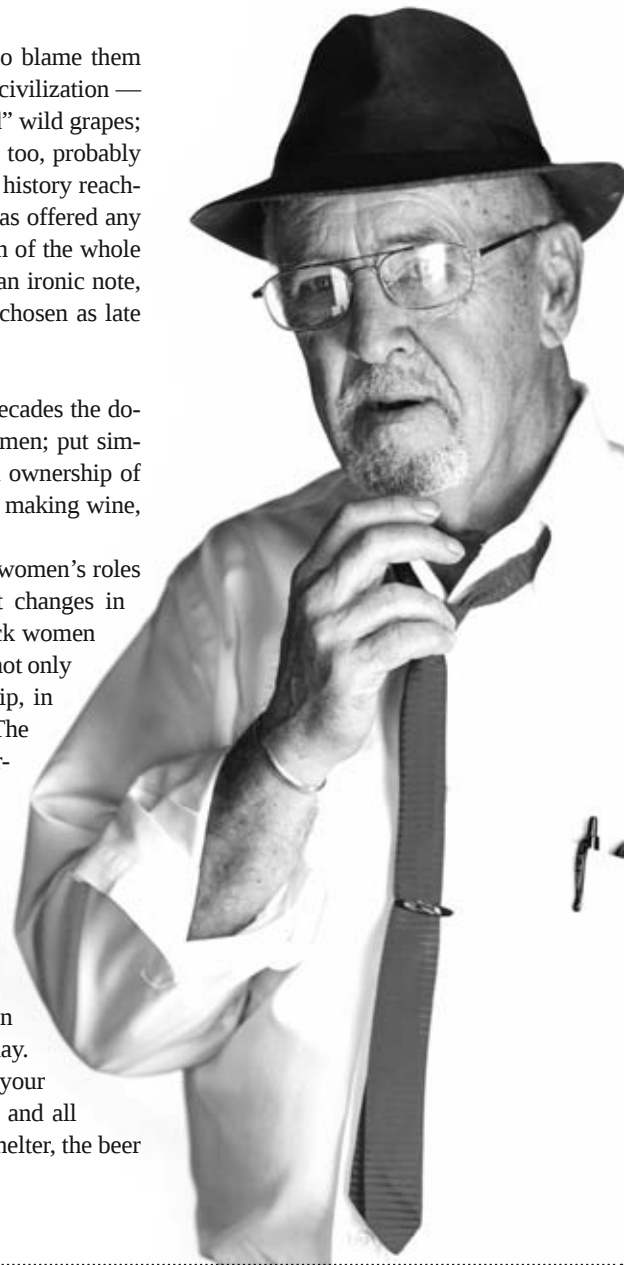
Absurd, no? Worthy of satire, yes.

For centuries an exclusive men’s club, in recent decades the domain of wine has been thoroughly penetrated by women; put simply, women are now doing everything in wine, from ownership of brands, to planting vines and managing vineyards, to making wine, to marketing and sales.

A little time surfing the web reveals the extent of women’s roles in wine. Perhaps the most exciting involves recent changes in South African wines where women — including black women (until recently, South Africa’s wines were dominated not only by men, but white men) — in positions of ownership, in winemaking, in all aspects of sales. No names here. The web now lists, variously, “The 10 [or 50] Most Powerful Women in Wine.” Silly stuff, that.

This kind of inanity proves — conclusively to my mind — that women are fully equal to (or sometimes better than) men in the world of wine, taking the silly with the sublime. Here, at least, progress has been made, and the changes are probably permanent, and altogether beneficial. Now, we can comfortably “blame” some women for the richly complex flavors in this or that pinot noir, or this or that dazzling chardonnay.

Savor the changes. Enjoy wine’s spring. Call your mother; she can surely bear the “blame.” Thank her and all her historical sisters — for the clothes, the food, the shelter, the beer — and the wine.



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