

Paris by the Glass

(Author's Note: The published version of this article had the more pointed political stuff edited out. Herewith, the article as I intended it.)

We don't need our fatuous Defense Secretary to remind us of the lines drawn between the Old and New Europe. The Great Divide is everywhere in evidence, and the lines are not as easily discerned as Mr. Rumsfeld would like to suggest. It's not just a matter of the old guard nations of Western Europe versus the upstart republics of the former Soviet empire. In Paris you can walk a few blocks from one wine bar to another, and the contrast couldn't be starker.

On a recent trip to France everyone I met asked me if I had seen two movies: *Sideways* and *Mondovino*. I had just rented *Sideways* the week before my trip. The French don't like it. They find it emotionally jejeune and enologically simplistic. *Mondovino* was released in the U.S. the week I left and though I had read about it in *The New York Times* last fall when it hit the screens of France, I hadn't gotten a chance to see it before I took off. The French love it the way they love the westerns of John Ford. You can spot the good guys in white hats (the little, independent *vignerons* of the French countryside) and the bad guys (the Roberts—Mondavi and Parker).

The other subject on everybody's lips was the referendum on the new European constitutional treaty scheduled for the Sunday following my return to the States. On the French TV stations I'd occasionally watch in my hotel room, the debate raged furiously. France or Europe? Global integration or nationalistic autonomy? And while the economic facts on the ground make much of the rhetoric moot, José Bové, the French sheep farmer who vandalized a McDonald's franchise in northern France a decade ago and has since become the most visible spokesman for the anti-globalization crowd, led a rally in Montpellier ten days after I was there, whipping his minions into a frenzy railing against the Euro-imperialists.

These may seem odd lead-ins for a column on Parisian wine bars. My response to you is simple: *au contraire*.

When I announced to Matheiu Bourgois, an old friend, my intention to make a survey of old and new wine bars upon my arrival in Paris, he insisted that our first stop be Lavinia. "You must see it," he said. "It is incredible!"

Bourgois wasn't wrong. I'm not sure what to call Lavinia. It's not a wine bar *per se*; it's a wine emporium, and its imperial ambitions are patent. Started in Madrid in 1999 by Thierry Servant and Pascal Chevrot, Lavinia expanded first to Barcelona in 2001. Now these two Frenchmen have repatriated and stormed the Bastille. Its 1,500 square meters of impeccably laid out space accordion over three floors under controlled lighting ("necessary to the proper conservation of wine"), in ideal humidity (70%), at the perfect temperature (14° C). "3,000 French wines, 2,000 wines of the world, 1,000 spirits," a brochure reads, all bowing down in homage (and, *bien sur*, to prevent oxidation) to Bacchus. The whole project is dedicated solely to "a perfect respect for wine."

And in so many ways it is perfect. The place is spotless, the help is knowledgeable and courteous, the selection stupefying. And so, there we were on a cool, wet Wednesday in May as if the artificially created circumstances of Lavinia's "veritable

universe of wine” mirrored the atmospheric conditions of the natural world outside its sliding glass doors. We took three stools at a high table and perched between the *bar à vins* and the *restaurant à vins* as the space filled with the young and chic fashionistas and day traders of the 1^{er} arrondissement.

A Vinsobres from Domaine Gramenon, its purple grenache bursting with fresh, ripe fruit and bright tannins, set off little beignets of tomato with arugula and croustades rubbed with olive oil, garlic and crushed tomatoes. We followed with glasses of Jean Foillard’s old-style unfiltered Côte de Py Morgon from 2003 that paired perfectly with platters of Jambon “5j” from Sanchez Romero Carvajal (22€) and a jambon Basquaise “Aldudes” (17€). You can have any bottle of wine in the store opened at your table at no additional charge, so the selection is seemingly limitless, while the menu, with a dozen appetizers and entrees ranging from meat to fish to a vegetarian selection, four entrees which Lavinia’s clientele has demanded and to which the kitchen has acceded, and a *côte de boeuf* and *côte de porc* suitable for sharing between two or three people, offers as many options as there are palates.

After this perfect, little starter we made our way to Juveniles, a place I had first visited a decade ago. It hasn’t changed much over the years. The tables—there aren’t more than a dozen—were still jammed in, the entryway crowded with cases of wine, the walls crammed with bottles. The menu had taken a decidedly international slant since my last visit and though I started with a nicely browned *brandade*, a hash made of salt cod puréed with potatoes and olive oil, I progressed to quail roasted “tandoor-style” while my companions ordered equally exotic and non-French dishes. I adore the Volnay and Meursault of Comte Lafon and so, was delighted when I spotted the 2002 Macon-Milly-Lamartine “Clos du Four” on the list. With a slight greenish tinge, its bright crisp flavors admirably negotiated the United Nations of menu offerings with which we covered our diminutive table.

It was a holiday weekend and Tim Johnston, the famous and famously irascible proprietor, was sitting with friends and family at an adjacent table. It is rare for a wine bar to draw children, but I always seem to see families in Juveniles, perhaps drawn by the name of the place or the kids’ drawings which grace the walls, a delightfully ironic fixture since the wine bar posts the *de rigeuer* sign which warns against the dangers of public drunkenness for the “*protections des mineurs*.” Recognizing my traveling companion, Jim Harrison, whose novels are better known in France than they are in America, Johnston poured us a sip of ’74 Bas-Armagnac made by François de Coutard at Château de Castandet. Sufficiently fortified for the walk home, we decided to put off our next stop until the following day but not before I had a chance to ask Johnston his opinion of Lavinia.

“If you’re looking for something in particular, there’s no place like it in Paris. But it has no soul.”

But I wanted “soul.” I go to Paris to nourish my spirit as much as my appetites, so the next day I took Harrison to Le Rubis.

Across the Place Vendome, not ten minutes’ walk from Lavinia but a world away. Le Rubis constitutes another and altogether different homage to wine. Here the bottles (nearly all the wine served is poured by the glass) are clustered in a bin tucked behind the zinc-topped bar. Denoted by nothing more than strip labels that designate their respective appellations (Chiroubles, Côte de Brouilly, Morgon), the list at Le Rubis offers the

village wines of Beaujolais and equally stolid and predictable exemplars from Chinon, Bourgeuil, and Saumur.

As we entered, the *patron* stood behind the bar dispensing small and even smaller glasses of the stuff while his wife prepared their dozen tables for the lunch rush. Prohibited from taking a seat until the appointed hour, we quaffed thimblefuls of Brouilly while Harrison told stories of his boyhood on a farm in Northern Michigan. From the look of incredulity on the *patron's* face, I could tell that he had never before met an American whose grandma had pickled her own herring or whose family took particular pride in their homemade headcheese.

The rooms of Le Rubis—one downstairs and another up an impossibly steep and narrow staircase—are simple and timeless. We navigated the staircase and took a table. The menu, like the humorous posters and antique signage that grace the walls and that don't appear to have changed in the twenty-five years they've owned it, seem from another age: Tripe sausage (*andouillette*), stuffed pork trotters (*pied de porc farci*), filets of herring (I thought Harrison was going to swoon in a fit of ecstasy) and a salad made of cured beef snout (*museau de boeuf*). Nothing international going on here.

I settled on the *rillettes maison* and a *jarret aux lentilles*, a pork hock served on a bed of the tiny and firmly textured lentils from Puy. Harrison couldn't resist the herring salad and the *museau de boeuf* and grew teary over both. He drowned his nostalgic reverie with a *pichet* of Côte de Brouilly, his favorite, while I continued to explore the list with glasses of Bourgeuil and Chinon. Though we were more than satisfied by the first two courses, cheese and dessert proved irresistible and as Jim savored wedges of Camembert and St.-Nectaire and Cantal, I returned to my own childhood over pear clafouti.

By the time we were done (we had been walking all morning and required early sustenance), the place was packed, the twenty tables upstairs where we sat having filled as swiftly with regulars as the tony tables at Lavinia, and the one older woman who waits on the room bustled from table to table, describing daily specials, clearing plates, and taking orders. She worked the room—not designed for the claustrophobic—with manic efficiency, greeting and nodding and calling across the room and over her shoulder.

The effect couldn't have been more different from the impeccably uniformed, and uniformly young, corps of waiters who serve Lavinia's upscale clientele. At Le Rubis, matrons wade into their ham hocks and blood sausage with old-fashioned relish and rapacious intensity. A businessman who inquires, "What wine do you have?" is met by the baffled amusement of the waitress who simply points to the blackboard list. Although there is indeed a selection of well-chosen Bordeaux and Burgundy, it's rare that anyone ventures beyond the confines of the *vins-à-propriété*, wines sourced directly from chosen producers, that serve to define the passionate attention of the owners.

Le Rubis and Lavinia are the antipodes, the poles of New and Old World sensibility that compose the axis on which Mondo Vino currently spins. One doesn't require our condescending and chauvinistic Secretary of Defense to draw a line in the sand to discern the bipolar disparities between these two versions of a passion for wine. The more salient question is: do they conflict with each other? Are they antithetical or do they, in fact, complement each other?

Time rushes on. There's no turning back the clock. It all depends on what you're searching for. The fact is, both realities exist contemporaneously. As in all matters

vinous, the best course of action is to suit yourself.

Lavinia is a fine experience, but it's replete with all the anonymity of a major brand. You go expecting a certain standard and you seek a consummate, and commensurate, experience whether you're at the Lavinia in Barcelona or Paris or New York (oh, yes, New York is next). Forget your embarrassment at speaking mediocre French and don't break into the ridiculous patois of pigeon-French and Spanglish that some Americans believe, in error, to be instantly comprehensible to any foreigner. The staff at Lavinia is multi-lingual and will immediately put you at ease.

This is no less the case at Juveniles or the fancier and legendary Willi's Wine Bar. On a shopping expedition to rue Fauborg St.-Honoré I stopped into Willi's for a quick sip and was delighted to find the 2003 *blanc* from Domaine Tempier. Tempier is known for their luscious reds (see my column in this issue), but their white is a rarity and was a treat to discover open by the glass. It is light and lovely and put me in the perfect mood to explore the shelves of the legendary wine shop, Caves Legrand, now celebrating its 125th anniversary. Speaking of the Old Europe.

Forgive me, but I go to France to be in France. I travel to have a transforming experience, to restore my sense of humanity while in momentary and self-imposed exile from what my friend Harrison calls the contemporary version of the Roman Empire. If I'm looking for the odd bottle of vieux Armagnac or a rare bottle of Cuban rum, I'll head straight for Lavinia. But for the lunch of champions, for the bonhomie of meeting strangers at the next table and enjoying a sip of something *typique* to accompany a *petite tranche*, I'll hit my old stomping grounds and remain content.

Because, after all, being happy is what being in Paris is all about.

Paris wine bars mentioned in this article:

Juveniles 47, rue de Richelieu, 75001 Paris (tel. 01 42 97 46 49)

Lavinia 3-5 bd de la Madeleine, 75001 Paris (tel. 01 42 97 20 20)

Le Rubis 10, rue Marché Saint-Honoré, 75001 Paris (tel. 01 42 61 03 34)

Willi's Wine Bar 13, rue des Petits Champs, 75001 Paris (tel. 01 42 61 05 09)

Caves Legrand 1, rue de la Banque, 75002 Paris (tel. 01 42 60 07 12)