

Chapter 3: The Discourse of Wine

When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

I hang around with lots of people that love to talk about wine. We talk about it when we are drinking it, buying it, perusing wine lists, visiting wineries, dining in restaurants, or enjoying a good meal at home. Some other friends of mine think we talk too much about wine, that we obsess over the most minute details of every wine to the boredom of everyone at the table, and this may be true. The secret is to know when to share excruciatingly detailed information about the potential of terrior and the use of malolactic fermentation and its effects on a wine, and when to just say, "This wine tastes great! Can I have some more, please?"

In the past three years, I have read over one hundred books on wine and poured over numerous blogs, newsletters, and websites focusing on the wine profession in preparation for writing this book. During this time, I have come to believe how people talk about wine is a complex, ever-changing form of discourse that is formed in social and cultural contexts and is used to distinguish oneself as a member of a certain community of people. This *discourse of wine* is as much a social and cultural phenomenon as it is a simple lexicon of terms randomly chosen to talk about wine.

How people talk about wine greatly depends on how much they know about wine and their previous experiences with it. It also depends on their reasons for talking about various

wines, with whom they are talking, and in what settings and contexts they are having these conversations. It also depends on our *wine identities*, the ways we position ourselves in the wine community, how we think about wine, what purposes it fulfills for us, and the expectations we set for ourselves. The ways in which we talk about wine signals our membership in a certain discourse community, but it can also be used to exclude others from becoming members of that same community. How we talk about wine can be as inviting, as it is off-putting.

Some wine writers have used the terms *winespeak*, *oinoglossia*, and *vinobabble* to describe the wide variety of scientific and esoteric languages associated with how people talk about wine. Other writers have been more forthright and suggested the way people talk about wine is pure bullshit. Other critics have even condemned particular ways of talking as pointless uses of abstract modifiers that have little basis in reality.

The connection between wine and language, or between a specified reality and whether individuals can access this objective reality through language, is a point of contention in the wine writing community. Whether there is an objective reality of the taste of a wine that is accessible through scientific methods or double-blinded tastings, or many realities aligned with the subjectivities of individual experiences, is the subject of a later chapter. For now, let's focus on how we affect and are affected by how we talk about wine.

I have purposefully selected the term *discourse of wine* rather than *winespeak*, *vinobabble*, or any of the other terms used by wine critics to indicate how we talk, act, think, and write about wine. I do this because I want to go beyond how we use language, oral or written, to also include the ways in which people act, live, dress, and think about wine. The

term *discourse of wine* is used to suggest how we talk about wine has more to do with various psychological, cultural, social, and economic influences than about the actual characteristics of the wine in our glasses.

Let me begin by briefly explaining how the concept *discourse of wine* came about and some of the foundational theories I have drawn upon in its creation. As a literacy researcher, I have read and researched the ways people speak in a variety of educational settings, in particular elementary classrooms, for over twenty years. For this book, I am drawing upon well-known theories from a variety of academic disciplines to understand what these theories reveal about the ways in which we talk and write about wine.

According to educational scholar James Paul Gee, a Discourse is a way of acting, being, dressing, and communicating that evolves in cultural, political, historical, and social contexts. Gee distinguishes his definition of the concept of discourse by using a *big D*, rather than using the term discourse with a *small d* which he suggests focuses primarily on discourse as simply a way of using language. The multiple Discourses (with a big D) in which we inhabit throughout our lives are founded upon the needs, desires, interests, and workings of particular groups of people.

We inhabit many different Discourses throughout our lives, from the primary discourses we use to communicate with our families, to the specified ways of talking and acting that help us join particular communities. We talk in certain ways, and utilize specific vocabularies, at our jobs, sporting events, Grateful Dead concerts, university classes, and, of course, at wine tastings and other wine related events.

Connecting Gee's social theory to the wine profession means that a *discourse of wine* is

the process of learning to talk, act, dress, and communicate like a particular type of wine drinker, collector, critic, or expert. It is about how one becomes a member of a particular *community of practice*, defined as a group of people connected through shared interests and activities working towards mutually satisfying goals and purposes. In this case, the goal may well be the proliferation and avocation of wine consumption, production, appreciation, or critical review. There are numerous communities of practice associated with the wine industry including winemakers, sommeliers, restaurateurs, distributors, and enthusiastic consumers. Each of these communities has their own ways of acting, talking, and thinking about wine.

Silverstein argues that while the language of science attempts to define the properties of a wine, the acts of tasting and writing about wine signals the prestigious properties of the wine and the connoisseur *at the same time*. Wines that are described as well-bred, subtle, balanced, intriguing, and of great finesse may say more about the taster than the taste. In other words, how individuals speak about wine says as much about the characteristics of an individual as it does about the qualities of a wine.

Winespeak: New Brilliance or Old Bullshit?

Let me continue this discussion with an example that I have constructed based on my readings of various wine writers since starting the research for this book. For the past three years, I have taken copious notes from the various novels, magazine articles, books, blogs, and websites I have been reading that involve famous wine writers and critics. In reviewing these notes, it has become obvious to me that certain wine critics talk about their expertise and experiences with wine in similar ways. I have come to the conclusion that these stories shared by wine critics have a particular symmetry, a certain trajectory that when boiled down to its

essence goes something like this:

I am an old, rather wealthy white man and I have been places and tasted wines that many of you have not tasted or will never get to taste. You won't even catch a glimpse of some of the rare bottles of wine I have seen, except in magazines. I was just at (insert name of prestigious vineyard or winery here) where I was lucky enough to be invited by (insert name of famous, yet hard to reach, vintner here) to sample some wines from a vintage that definitely won't be available to the general public... and it changed my life!

I have a discerning palate, beyond the sensitivity of most typical mouth-breathing wine drinkers. You will never acquire a palate like mine no matter the duration of your studying or the amount of wine you consume. Where your acumen for tasting is derived from limited experiences with mediocre wines, mine is passed down directly from God. I have been blessed with a glorious tongue and a remarkable nose, both of which I have insured with Lloyds of London for gobs of money. Please, take a moment to Bathe in My Magnificence!

Now this fictionalized narrative may seem a bit harsh, an overly critical way to talk about a topic I have come to love so deeply, but this isn't far from the truth based on things I have read. Remember, one of the major intentions of this book is to analyze and digest the ways we talk about wine, and to poke a bit of fun at the world of wine from time to time. This fictionalized narrative is an amalgam of the ways many of the top critics and sommeliers often talk about their wine experiences. It signals membership in a specific wine community, that of

the old traditional, well-connected, probably rich, usually of European descent, somewhat snooty, wine professional. You could certainly associate particular ways of dressing, talking, and acting with these people and could probably imagine some other not so desirable characteristics.

Over the past few years, I have collected numerous examples of what I call *Bathe in My Magnificence* stories. Some of these examples are even book length diatribes. These stories are used by people in the wine profession to set their experiences apart from the average wine drinker's experiences and to signal their membership in an exclusive wine community. This way of talking may not be intended as elitist; but make no mistake, this way of talking is designed to signal one's membership in an exclusive wine community, and may be a primary reason many contemporary wine writers have called the whole wine enterprise into question.

Traditionalist, Scientist or the Hipster Generation

Before I begin this section, it is important to state at the outset that I don't think hipsters are evil, that traditionalists know everything, and scientists have access to some array of objective knowledge that should inform every aspect of the wine world. I have used the terms Traditionalist, Scientist, and Hipster Generation as the proverbial "strawman," as prototypical examples of an actually widely diverse group of people to metaphorically stand up and knock down in equal measure. I want to use the prototypes to make the case for trends and perspectives that currently pervade the wine profession.

I don't want to come across as suggesting that millennials are the red-headed stepchildren of the wine profession, and as soon as we stomp out these young unqualified bloggers we can get back to the way things were. Cue Barbara Streisand. In fact, millennials are

just as diverse a group as any of the other two groups, having disagreements about wine writing and offering diverse opinions about most debates in the wine community. Millennials are young, opinionated, technologically-connected, possibly socially awkward, and often times broke. And, did I mention young? They have their own forms of discourse of wine, which includes different ways of talking and acting from the Traditionalist and the Scientist, but that doesn't make them the enemy.

On the other hand, I don't want to suggest Traditionalists have cornered the market on knowledge and young wine drinkers should bow before their magnificence. In the name of transparency, I am a rather progressive college professor that has carved out a decent career in academia by studying and coming to know deeply about a few subjects. I am a young, baby boomer and try every day to understand the other perspectives that show up at either my faculty meetings or arrive each semester in my undergraduate classes. I believe that one of the biggest tensions in the world of wine writing is the level of legitimacy concerning the way critics speak and write about wine from all of these perspectives, and it is from this point of departure that I begin.

From the *Traditionalist* perspective, there is the belief that wine experts have had superior experiences with wine, invoke more finely-tuned sensory apparatus, and have compiled a bank of wine memories more extensive than the average wine drinker, and therefore, should be respected for their level of expertise.

From the *Scientist* perspective, scholars in a variety of fields, for example economics, linguistics, psychology, and advertising have conducted and published rigorous research examining in minute detail the physiochemical elements of wine and the associated metaphors,

verbs, and other linguistic units of analysis that make up their wine reports. The academic community associated with wine includes people with oenology degrees from institutes like the University of Bordeaux and the UC Davis Department of Viticulture and Enology. The scientists' perspective relies on the scientifically based experiments, methods, and instruments to analyze and reveal the true nature of the elements in a glass of wine.

From the perspective of the *Hipster Generation*, wine tasting should be a democratic process where everyone's tastes are recognized as equal to everyone else's. Although, everyone cannot be a columnist for *Decanter* or *Wine Spectator* magazines, everyone can start a blog and write about their experiences with wine, offer ratings, write tasting notes, and make wine recommendations. And, it is the belief of many members of the Hipster Generation that the reviews on these digital platforms, regardless of the experiences or expertise of the writer should be taken as seriously as the traditional reviews.

The differences between these communities or perspectives are often amplified by social media and wine journalists. Some basic distinctions might be that traditionalist wine writers began work in the print age and the members of the hipster generation are primarily digital natives or close to it. Differences in age and life experiences among baby boomers, working scientists, and millennials add to these differences. Though none of these groups are homogenous, speaking with a singular voice or set of preferences, there are distinctions that play out in the world of wine writing.

From the traditionalist perspective, wine critics are expected to have an extensive range and depth of experiences with expensive and moderately priced wines and have developed a specific lexicon of accepted wine terms before being able to speak intelligently about wine.

Many of these writers and experts hold oenology degrees, tasting awards, or various forms of recognition from certifying bodies, like the Court of Master Sommeliers and the Wine and Spirits Education Trust. Their discourse of wine includes age-worn terms like nose, palate, structure, bouquet, finish, acidity, balanced, complexity, and age-ability. These terms are used by writers and experts to signal a level of mastery within a particular discourse of wine.

For the uninitiated, there are glossaries available in wine books and on websites that can help the average wine drinker understand what these terms mean and to use them fluently at wine events. There are many books on the market that suggest they can teach the average person how to sound like a wine expert in a very short time. These authors tout their ability to help you sound smart when in a restaurant ordering wine or talking with friends at a wine tasting. These books remind me of the “How to Sound like a Harvard Graduate” software programs that are advertised in magazines one would find in the pocket of an airline seat. In one example, the author of the book *WineSpeak: A Vinous thesaurus of (gasp) 36,975 Wine Tasting Descriptors*, has catalogued over 36,000 terms one can use to talk about wine. Yikes!

From the Scientist perspective, academics from established educational institutions author journal articles with titles like, *Winespeak: Ontologies and Construals in Use and Meaning-Making*, *On the Ubiquity of Personification Schemas in Winespeak*, and *A Semiotic Analysis of the Multimodal Aspects of Red Wine Labels*. You have to admit, no one does jargon better than academics! We have to ask ourselves whether these articles say anything of importance to the average wine drinker, or is this just another genre of writing, just another form of discourse that signals membership in yet another community of practice, specifically the academic wine community.

To give you an example of this form of writing, here is an example from an academic article published in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* entitled, “*Old Wine, New Ethnographic Lexicography.*” In referring to the social stratification of terms used by connoisseurs and how they differ from scientific language, the linguist Michael Silverstein suggests, “while some aspects of wine events mimic the paradigmatic model of standardized terminologies... they also involve an almost eucharistic reflexive moment in which the ability to recognize and deploy socially stratified denotational terms of the wine, indexes a similar degree of social distinction to the speaker.” Now that is some serious winespeak!

Other wine writers, primarily from what I have termed the *Hipster Generation*, have not been so encouraging or supportive of the whole traditional or scientific wine writing communities. Hardly a week goes by when someone online doesn’t attack the way people talk about wine, casting dispersions on the esoteric winespeak that dominates the wine industry, or burning a particular wine writer or scientist in effigy on a wine blog. What I mean by the *Hipster Generation*, or commonly referred to as Millennials or Generation X or Z or whatever, is just another generation shaped by the cultural, economic, historic, and technological forces in the same manner that shaped the *Traditionalist* or *Scientist* perspectives.

Various disagreements among the *Traditionalists*, the *Scientists*, and the *Hipster Generation* might come from a social media blogger insinuating members of the old guard are out-of-touch with the reality of contemporary wine drinkers, from a traditionalist wine writer decrying the unedited blog as the primary cause of the death of the wine writing industry, or the scientist declaring that none of these opinions about a wine are based on evidence gleaned through scientific experiments. In addition, writers may be heard thundering on about the

impossibility of an evidentiary-based notion of terrior affecting the taste of a wine, or certified sommeliers arguing about the best way to get their guests to understand how a Chablis offers a hint of minerality.

The Semiotics of Wine

Semiotics is the study of signs. Not like billboards, traffic signs, or movie posters, but things that stand for something, to someone, in some capacity. For instance, words, gestures, images, and other forms of representation and communication that mean something to someone in some particular way is the focus of the field of semiotics. I have ventured into the world of semiotics throughout my academic career and believe wine can be conceptualized as a sign in several enlightening ways. For example, collecting or drinking expensive wines can serve as a sign of wealth and social status. Drinking natural wines can be seen as a sign of an environmentally conscious wine drinker or as a member of the hipster generation demonstrating their ability to keep up with changing trends. All of these things mean something to us as wine enthusiasts in some particular way, so they serve as signs.

Paul Manning, in his wonderfully complex academic monologue, *Semiotics of Drink and Drinking*, suggests a both/and perspective that is most suitable for our consideration of wine and signs. He asserts wine and other drinks, as a phenomenon of material culture, are both ordered by people into cultural systems, and act to order people into various cultural systems or as I have referred to these systems, Discourses. These cultural systems or Discourses order experiences into structures that help us make sense of them. For instance, when we consider wine, we don't consider it as an isolated phenomena, we consider it in relation to other drinks,

to other types of wine, and more specifically by varietal, region, and producer. Wine has distinctive properties that distinguish it from other beverages, alcoholic and non-alcoholic.

Certain people, wine experts, bloggers, and other types of critics, have become recognized for the ways they write and talk about wine and are subsequently privileged with a certain level of social status. This is how experts become recognized as experts. So what comes first, the sensory experience or the way of talking about these experiences? It's probably both/and as Manning suggested. Our ways of talking and our ways of thinking about wine come together and inhabit, interfere, and affect one another. The more wine we experience, the more we know about wine, which in turn affects the way we talk, critique, and taste other wines. It changes what we see as our wine identity. As Immanuel Kant asserted, we are not blank slates upon which experience is directly impressed, nor are we purely rational beings that learn things separate from empirical experiences. The same holds true for the way we understand, experience, and talk about wine.

The field of semiotics would suggest that wine is not just a beverage, but a social construct that comes loaded with all types of cultural baggage and meanings. The wines we buy at a store, collect in our wine cellars, the fact we even have a wine cellar, all mean something to ourselves and to others in and out of particular wine communities. For many generations, owning and drinking certain expensive and rare wines has been seen as a status symbol, suggesting some people have refined tastes, extravagant life styles, and live better lives than the rest of us. In the same way, drinking cheap red wine from a jug bought at Walmart signals something very different and serves as a sign of a different type of wine drinker. It's more than

just the wine in our glass sometimes; the glasses we use, the wines we buy, the places we shop for wine, and how we talk about wine all serve as a sign of our times, status, and culture.

Moving Forward

A point made again and again from the traditionalists' perspective is that an established and successful wine critic provides a trusted service to customers to keep them informed about what wines are available, what wines should be considered prototypical expressions of particular regions, varietals, and producers, and what wines offer the best value for their price. These critics also provide a service to wineries and producers by rating their wines and allowing the wineries to use their evaluations as marketing tools. It would be hard to argue that wines that score well, don't sell well.

From a traditionalist perspective, the lack of oversight and editorial discretion has allowed the wine writing world to expand unchecked and it has been suggested this lack of oversight has degraded the quality of the wine writing available. It is easy to believe in order to protect the integrity of the traditional wine writer, taking aim at younger, possibly less-experienced wine writers spewing out poorly informed blogs posts and poorly written wine reviews without proper credentials challenges the status quo and must be called out for their blatant ineptitude. So, in many traditional wine writers' opinions, the digital age has not created a more democratic wine world, but a vast array of mediocre writing and thinking about wine.

Jonathan Nossiter, in his controversial book *Liquid Memory* suggested whether you get your reviews from a traditional critic or a digital platform, "when you rely on others to largely determine your tastes, you are undermining your own liberty." That seems a bit drastic. The

point he is trying to make is that taste is subservient to power, that people with more social capital often determine the tastes of others. Nossiter suggested when we agree with others about which wines are of high quality we are suppressing our own tastes and abandon our democratic right to like what you like. He shares the belief with some members of the *Hipster Generation* that most winespeak is not designed to enlighten, rather it is intended to exclude, bully, and belittle. He suggested winespeak has a strong resemblance to George Orwell's vision of willfully abusive inversion of language in totalitarian regimes. Another example of the types of hyperbole that have invaded the wine writing wars these days.

Bloggers and wine writers, for example Marissa Ross, often refer to the traditionalists as an *elitist* camp of wine writers and critics. In her book, *Wine. All the Time*, she seems to serve up the traditionalists and the scientists as straw men to knock down in the name of hipster purity. The assumption is that a small group of predominantly old, white men have come to endorse a particular body of knowledge that must be learned, and have established barriers for entry that keep people from enjoying wine as they might otherwise. Ashley Ragovin, in an article published on *Life & Thyme*, entitled, "A Down and Dirty Guide to Wine," asserts that wine has been over-intellectualized and codified by the elite, though she doesn't go on to identify exactly who these elitists camps might include exactly. She suggests, "if you prefer falling in love with wine over acing tests... this guide's for you."

Personally, I don't believe my studying for wine certificates in any way diminished my love of wine, nor do I understand why she constructed a dichotomy between studying and enjoyment. There seems no logical reason to suggest studying wine and loving wine are mutually exclusive. I would further suggest, that "climbing the ranks of wine academia" isn't

necessarily a bad thing. It depends on how one uses the wine knowledge they have acquired.

Oftentimes, membership in a particular wine community is established by denigrating members of another wine community. We construct our own identities by declaring who we are not, as much as who we are. Each of the diverse discourse communities or perspectives approach wine in unique ways, with their separate, unspoken rules for talking and writing about wine. As the debates rage on, a wine enthusiast has to find a way to navigate the often petty, if not downright mean-spirited positions and arguments offered from all sides of the fence. I suggest taking every wine review with a grain of salt, search out a few writers that you enjoy reading and trust in their knowledge and expertise, taste lots and lots of wine and try writing some notes for yourself, and don't let the arguments make you jaded about the various discourses of wine.

So What?

As wine enthusiasts, we need to know when to talk about wine in excruciatingly minute detail and when to just shut up and enjoy the glass of wine in front of you. Not everyone wants to do a blind tasting of single-vineyard cabernets, nor do they wonder what the best vintage of Bordeaux was, or even how malolactic fermentation and the toasting of oak barrels affect the profile of an American Chardonnay. As wine enthusiasts, we need to envision ourselves as *ambassadors* to the world of wine, not as *gatekeepers*, inviting other people to discover new wines for themselves, and guiding people to reflect on their own palate and taste preferences. Once people know more about what they like, and develop a vocabulary to describe it, they will be better positioned to buy or order wines they will enjoy.

Your taste in wine becomes an essential part of your identity, which in turn becomes

your compass for navigating the various discourses of wine. The judgments of wine critics and experts should be taken as just that, personal judgments, not definitive evaluations. Although many wine experts' opinions are grounded in extensive experiences and are, hopefully, well-thought out reviews of particular wines based on considered reflection and sensory attention, they are still only someone's opinions. And, as wine enthusiasts, we get to decide whether we align with any of these perspectives or reject all of them.

Jonathan Nossiter believes there are no rules or shortcuts to the acquisition of taste in relation to any subject of value and complexity. In order to develop one's taste in wine, one must spend lots of time drinking, considering, and discussing wine. Decrying the academic jargon of the scientist and the elitist tendencies of the traditionalist, wine enthusiasts must be aware of the defensive snobbery and power structures that obstruct the discovery of one's own taste, while simultaneously developing one's own wine preferences and taste.

The debates among the traditionalists, the scientists, and the hipster generation has very little bearing on our day to day wine drinking lives, though it is often amusing to read the latest tirade in the wine wars. Wine enthusiasts need to be able to talk about wine without alienating people by sharing what they know. Knowledge should not be used to bully people. I have found it helpful to ask some of my friends if they would like to hear more about a particular wine we are drinking, a new wine region, or my favorite new wines. If so, I love sharing a few thoughts. If not, I move along and talk about their kids and the weather.

Other friends I have are as obsessive, I mean enthusiastic, as I am and we look forward to our wine gatherings and wine trips to talk ad nauseum about the tannins we feel on our palate, whether a wine has been over-oaked, or if a certain vintage can hold a candle to the

last. In these contexts, you can truly share and expand your discourse of wine and use it to enhance every future wine drinking experience. I am a member of several wine communities, each one different in unique ways of acting, talking, and drinking wine.

I suggest we ignore certain wine writers and experts, from any of the three perspectives delineated above, that simply make a living by denigrating other wine drinkers or types of wine rather than serving as ambassadors to the world of wine. No one usually thinks you are a wine snob if they know more than you do. If you know more about wine than the people you are talking to, find ways to share your knowledge without alienating your friends in the process. There are times to be a little bit pompous, and times to be humble. The trick is to know which occasion calls for which discourse of wine.

Whether you are a traditionalist, an academic, a scientist, a novice wine drinker, or a member of the hipster generation, my suggestion would be to decide how much you want to know about a particular wine, wine in general, or a wine region based on your present needs. If you are taking a trip to Napa or Bordeaux, bone up on the regions and wineries you might visit and the variety of wines made there. Read about the history of the region. Take a look at a map or two. A little knowledge goes a long way in enhancing one's experiences. If you are going to a wine tasting, read up a bit on the etiquette for that type of event and possibly try a few of the wines that are going to be presented before you get there. Don't be afraid to learn something new, whether the information comes from a book, a class, a blog, a wine bottle, or simply by tasting wine with your friends and paying attention. Your learning will not interfere with your developing appreciation of wine, I promise.