

Fine

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B O R D E A U X



WHAT IS FINE WINE?

Text: Stuart George

Supermarkets define fine wine by price: Anything and everything above £10 or so, is on the shelving section labelled as “fine wines”, opposite the sub-£10 stuff. In my local supermarket, it’s about 30 wines out of 650 in total, so about 4.6% of all wines sold here.



The supermarket sells a well-known Marlborough sauvignon blanc brand at £21, ergo it is a fine wine. It has an “iconic” (= well-designed and eye-catching) label and, in its way, is an historic winery – it kick-started the Kiwi sauvignon industry. But it’s not, in my opinion, a fine wine. It’s made in vast quantities – but so are certain Champagne brands that are considered to be “fine”. Crucially, the quality is not that great. It’s a decent drink but there are better wines available at that price level and in relative terms it’s nothing special. Absolute, as opposed to relative, quality is innate to fine wine.

The “fine wine” that insalubrious pubs tout on banners is nothing of the sort. “Fine” here means “cheap and cheerful”, which is certainly not an aspect of fine wine as I understand it.

In his 1833 *Journal of a Tour Through Some of the Vineyards of Spain and France*, James Busby referred to “fine” wine as being good enough to drink neat in a proper glass, without water or any other additives, as distinct to wine drunk from tumblers and mixed with water.

The early Master of Wine exams were focused on, as the Institute of Masters of Wine saw it, classic fine wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne principally, with some interest in Alsace, Germany, Port, Spain, and Tokaji. Fine wine was defined by where it came from – Meursault produces fine wines, the Maipo Valley doesn’t – which is still an important aspect but, as with price, is not definitive. There are always winemakers in a supposedly fine wine-producing area that are an embarrassment to their more accomplished neighbours, just as there are outliers (in the Malcolm Gladwell sense) in less than stellar regions that go way beyond what might reasonably be expected of them.

I have five defining factors that can help decide if a wine is fine or not.

PRICE

Fine wine is usually, but not necessarily, highly-priced – but an expensive wine is not necessarily a fine wine.

High prices often get paid for wines that are fashionable, or rare, or both, regardless of quality. Price is certainly a factor in defining fine wine – it’s improbable that a fine wine would be on the sub-£10 shelves in a supermarket or anywhere else – though it is not unequivocal.

But...

A fine wine would typically increase in value as it ages – the wine becomes better and more complex and the amount of bottles in the market decreases – hence the so-called “investment grade” wines that are, by extension, fine wines.

QUALITY

This is subjective, though we can assume a more or less objective consensus among critics and consumers of what is good and what is not.

Define “good”: Length, balance, smoothness (= “elegance”), complexity (= smells of other things than grapes).

One might add what the French call “typicité” – how representative an example of its given type a wine is. Syrah from the northern Rhône has a particular style and taste; Syrah (aka Shiraz) from the Barossa Valley has a different but equally valid presence.

But...

A wine can be atypical and still of high enough quality to be a fine wine – for example, the 1990s vintages of the late Denis Mortet in Gevrey-Chambertin were atypically opulent for red burgundy but they were bloody good and nobody doubted that they were fine wines.

AGE-WORTHINESS

Fine wines can age in the bottle and keep improving for a very long time; wines that are not fine wines don’t.





Therefore, Fino sherry, which is aged for up to ten years in solera casks, but once bottled must be drunk as soon as possible, is discounted (even if with a heavy heart). However, an exception can be made for Sherries from very old soleras because their quality can be so exceptional.

Ageing in wood is a feature of most fine wines but it's the ability to age in bottle that is crucial. (As much as it is so widely used by wine-writers, "ageability" is not a word in the Oxford English Dictionary.)

TRACK RECORD

This is what football (= soccer) fans snootily call "history" (how many trophies won over how long a period) and what employers pompously call "credentials" (qualifications, experience, and accomplishments over an extended period).

In vinous terms, this equates to many years (and the more the better) of producing outstanding wine.

Château Haut-Brion, for instance, was enjoyed (according to his diary) by Samuel Pepys on Friday 10th April 1663 and has been producing great wine since at least the sixteenth century.

But...

There are wines that are relatively new to the market and are generally accepted by critics and consumers as fine wines. For example, Screaming Eagle's first vintage was 1992. Insisting on, say, a minimum 100-vintages would be iniquitous. Quality and age-worthiness are more important.

PROVENANCE

This is usually defined as where and how a fine wine has been stored since its release into the market – its history of ownership – and is crucial for older wines. This is why it is so important to disclose as much information as is available on the provenance of the wine. However, I define "provenance" as the place of origin of a wine – and the smaller and better-specified the better.

Fine wine customarily has a clearly defined and usually relatively small source of grapes, with single vineyard Premier Cru and Grand Cru burgundy the apotheosis of provenance.

But...

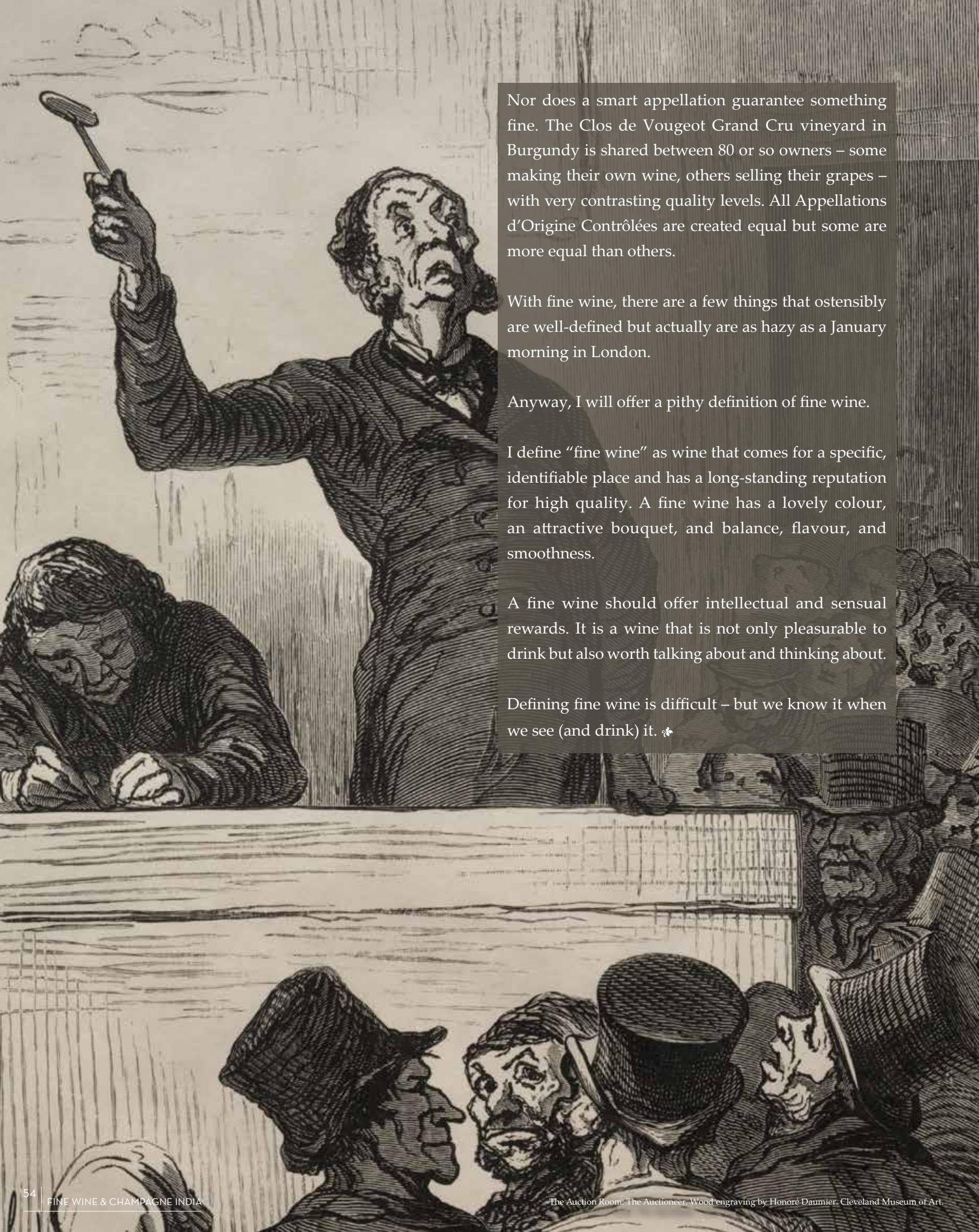
Consider Penfolds' Grange – by general consensus the greatest wine of Australia – which has always been a blend of two or more South Australian wine regions. The 2005, for example, was a blend of Shiraz and Cabernet Sauvignon from the Barossa Valley, McLaren Vale, and Coonawarra. McLaren Vale and the Barossa are well over 200 miles from Coonawarra, which is about the distance that Bordeaux is from Carcassonne. The notion of a fine wine being made from grapes that are separated by hundreds of miles would be anathema to winemakers in Europe's strictly (and legally) defined classic (fine wine) regions.

But...

In 2006, Château Palmer bottled its "Historical XIXth Century Blend" as (if you please) an homage to how Bordeaux wine was sometimes made in the nineteenth century – with a good dollop of ripe Syrah grapes from the Rhône. Legally speaking, this Palmer was a humble Vin de France (formerly the Vin de Table appellation) – the lowest level of French wine – which puts it on the same level as a supermarket's £5 Merlot-Grenache blend. Does a Vin de France become a fine wine because it has a distinguished estate's name on the label? Well, yes it can because it is reasonable to assume that Palmer, with at least 200 years of winemaking experience, knows what it is doing.

But...

A blue-chip label can sometimes – though admittedly very rarely these days – offer something substandard. Château Margaux's 1965 vintage was so execrable that it was blended with the (so so) 1964 and (appalling) 1963 in an effort to produce something drinkable and sellable as a non-millésime cuvée. It's Margaux – but not as we know it.



Nor does a smart appellation guarantee something fine. The Clos de Vougeot Grand Cru vineyard in Burgundy is shared between 80 or so owners – some making their own wine, others selling their grapes – with very contrasting quality levels. All Appellations d’Origine Contrôlées are created equal but some are more equal than others.

With fine wine, there are a few things that ostensibly are well-defined but actually are as hazy as a January morning in London.

Anyway, I will offer a pithy definition of fine wine.

I define “fine wine” as wine that comes for a specific, identifiable place and has a long-standing reputation for high quality. A fine wine has a lovely colour, an attractive bouquet, and balance, flavour, and smoothness.

A fine wine should offer intellectual and sensual rewards. It is a wine that is not only pleasurable to drink but also worth talking about and thinking about.

Defining fine wine is difficult – but we know it when we see (and drink) it. ♣

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