Aging Champagne

In *WFW* 26 (pp.28–29), Terje Meling makes the non-point:

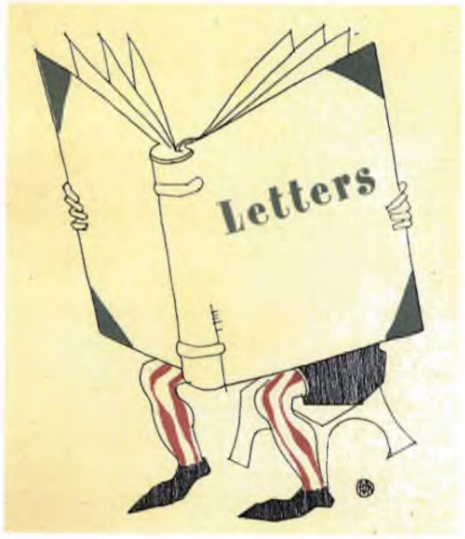
In "Aging Gracefully," Tom Stevenson makes the claim that lower *dosage* levels will reduce the life span of a bottle of Champagne. But there is no conclusive research on this subject—very little research at all, in fact—which reduces Mr Stevenson's chain of arguments to: "Almost 30 years of tasting and comparing tens of thousands of Champagnes tells me this is so."

This is a non-point for the following reasons.

(a) I never used the term "life span."

(b) My column made a clear distinction between aging or longevity (which may be either positive or negative) and aging gracefully (which is exclusively positive).

(c) My precise claim was that "A *dosage* of 6g or more has a positive, smoothing effect on the aromatic development of Champagne; but below this level, the lower the *dosage*, the more coarse and aldehydic a Champagne's evolution is following the oxidative impact of disgorgement."



(d) I was aware of the lack of research. Indeed, my column pointed out the danger of the current trend to decrease *dosage* levels amid such scientific ignorance, stating: "It is madness that this industry believes, but does not know how or why, sugar affects the postdisgorgement development of its own wine. There are quite a few papers on the effect of sugar on volatile aromas in foodstuffs, but either the sugar levels or the viscosity is too high to be applicable."

(e) Mr Meling conveniently reduced my "chain of arguments" to my own experience, but the full sentence he quoted from coupled my view with that of a senior research scientist: "Almost 30 years of tasting and comparing tens of thousands of Champagnes tells me that it does, and the greatest expert I know on the chemistry of Champagne, Bertrand Robillard, agrees with me, but when pressed on actual research, he confessed, 'I've never read of any experiments on the influence of sugar on aromas, but I have noticed this effect. I know that some people consider it to be a fact, and we can imagine that some aldehydes could be sensitive to this phenomenon.'" So while it is true that my "chain of arguments" boiled down to experience, that experience is shared by Robillard, the director of R&D at the Institut Oenologique de Champagne and, indeed, many *chefs de caves* and enologists in Champagne (though by no means all of them).

Mr Meling asserts that the preservative effect of sugar is not present in Champagne, adding, "I don't suppose that Mr Stevenson maintains any such idea about sugar." This is something we agree on, and I touch on it in my Champagne opinion piece in *Wine Report 2009*, where I state: "We wine hacks talk blithely about sugar's general preservative qualities, but at concentrations found in Champagne, it really has no preservative property at all. So it is not that. Sugars have several alcohol or hydroxyl groups that could, I suppose, react with the carbonyl group of acetaldehyde, and sugars can react with amino acids, potentially forming heterocycle compounds, which could also bind acetaldehyde. But do these things happen in Champagne, and if they do, would they be sufficient to reduce aldehydic aromas and enable Champagne to age gracefully?"

Mr Meling then moves on to sulfur, low levels of which he believes to be the indirect reason why I connect sugar with longevity. I agree that the lower the *dosage*, the lower the level of sulfur added in general, and that low levels of sulfur are responsible for a more oxidative aging process. I would even say that if we were to apportion blame, low levels of sulfur are probably much bigger culprits of overtly oxidative aging than low levels of *dosage*. But I do not think that sulfur is the only causal effect. As Robillard told me when I questioned him about the effect of low or no *dosage*, "A lot of people who make a low-*dosage* or no-*dosage* Champagne do not add SO_2 at the time of disgorgement, and these wines show a high oxydability level [and yes], sugar is a good compound for screening some aromas." It was only when I asked him for research papers to back this up, that he confessed, "I've never read of any experiments on the influence of sugar on aromas, but I have noticed this effect. I know that some people consider it to be a fact, and we can imagine that some aldehydes could be sensitive to this phenomenon."

It seems to me that Mr Meling has misrepresented the claims made in my first column to use as an excuse to introduce his "case for decoupling longevity and quality in the assessment of wine." He needed no such excuse. He makes an interesting case for not aging wine in the second half of his letter, and this would have been enjoyable on its own, even if I disagree with much of it.

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