

Exhibition and Film Reviews

Author, Title	Reviewer
The Smithsonian National Museum of American History <i>Wine for the Table: The Smithsonian National Museum of American History's Wine Exhibition</i>	Stephen Chaikind
Jason Wise (Director) <i>Somm</i>	Robert N. Stavins

THE SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY, *Wine for the Table: The Smithsonian National Museum of American History's Wine Exhibition*. Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center, Washington, DC.

A wonderful photograph at the newly opened wine exhibition in Washington DC's Smithsonian National Museum of American History shows Julia Child, circa 1970, standing behind a table covered with half a dozen or so bottles of wine, long loaves of French bread, and plates of cheese and hors d'oeuvres. Child is holding a glass of wine at eye level with an expression of analytical judgment on her face. The labels on the bottles were pasted over with apparently handwritten ones saying, in large letters, "Cabernet Sauvignon," "Médoc Red Bordeaux," "Pinot Noir," "Burgundy 1967," and "Pinot Chardonnay California 1967," among others. In this scene from her famous television show, *The French Chef*, Child is teaching Americans how to throw a wine and cheese party.

The photo is particularly apropos of the museum's newly renovated exhibition, "Food: Transforming the American Table, 1950–2000," of which wine is a section. Child's depiction of wine as an integral part of a meal coincided well with the resurgence of quality wine production in the United States during that period and likely did a great deal to encourage its consumer demand as well. That the wine exhibit is just down the hall from the section with the entire kitchen that Child used on her show helps integrate wine as a burgeoning part of American culture.

Living up to its reputation as America's attic, the museum presents an impressive display of artifacts, along with detailed descriptions of post-Prohibition wine

production, technology, innovation, and consumer acceptance—all topics germane to wine economics research. Cramming much information into its modest space, the exhibition is organized by themes of advances in viticulture, enology, marketing, and lifestyle, tracing the emergence of American wine from the end of Prohibition to today. “[I]n the second half of the twentieth century,” the exhibition’s introduction notes, “a community of California dreamers would spark a revolution in a bottle that not only realized Jefferson’s vision [of growing wine grapes in America], but changed the entire world of wine.”

The Paris wine tasting in 1976, immortalized in George Taber’s *Time* magazine article and subsequent book *Judgment of Paris*, is seen as a seminal event in the acceptance of American wine. Hence it should be no surprise that the exhibition includes bottles of the two winners of that tasting, the 1973 Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars’ Cabernet Sauvignon and Château Montelena’s Chardonnay from the same year. The labels on these bottles are in good shape, the foil remains, and they appear to be filled with the original wine. An earlier photograph from the 1938 California State Fair, contributed by the University of California at Davis, also emphasizes the importance for the California wine market of wine tastings and competitions.

Changing consumer demand, and the response to it by producers, is a theme repeated throughout the exhibition. An early advertisement focused on America’s initial taste for wine is for a generic “Sauterne,” explaining that “Sauterne, one of the fine wines of California, is a delicious, white table wine.” Another magazine ad by Gallo from 1965 takes consumers on an international wine tour; for France, it suggested “Gallo Vin Rosé of California,” for Germany “Gallo Rhine Garten,” and for Italy “Gallo Chianti of California.” All could be purchased for “[o]nly 72¢ to 93¢ a fifth depending on state taxes.”¹ Another display describes a batch of wine in which the yeast died prematurely, leading to the production of a sweet, pinkish white Zinfandel, which Sutter Home decided to try to sell as a test of the market. The Smithsonian has a bottle from an early release of this wine under its original name, Oeil de Perdrix—a name that had to be changed based on the rules of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. The wine was renamed White Zinfandel, and bumper stickers popped up proclaiming that “Life Is Hell, Without White Zinfandel.” As tastes evolved, though, more traditional dry Zinfandel also was produced, and both are still on the market.

The march of time in production methods in both farming and winemaking is documented in the exhibition. One sequence, for example, shows a box of sulfur strips for cleaning barrels sitting next to a 1964 wine bottled in a reused ShopRite Cherry Soda bottle, along with the requisite old wooden wine press. Mechanizing the harvest (for better or worse) was well under way by the 1970s; we can see a copy of one of the original patents for a harvesting machine. The role of universities and researchers in producing better and more stable wines is recognized, prompting

¹ Approximately \$5.30 to \$6.80 in 2012 dollars.

André Tchelistcheff to exclaim: “What we did in forty years, it can be accomplished normally in Europe in four or five centuries.”

After Americans discovered wine, it was inevitable that they would get into their cars and visit wine country. The wine tourism business began to grow, led in large part by the new winery and tasting rooms constructed by Robert Mondavi in Napa Valley. Signage welcoming visitors, wine-themed t-shirts, ads for limousine tours, and posters for wine festivals all are on display. Wine tourism is playing an increasingly important role in the survival of small wineries as well as in regional economic growth.

The Smithsonian also began a wine oral history project in 1997, preserving a record of the modern winemaking process, along with the people, events, and archival documents significant in the growth of the American wine industry. The “Wine for the Table” section of this exhibition includes a series of video clips from these oral histories showing the winemaking process from the bud to the bottle at Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars. These videos are narrated, entirely in their own words, by those performing the work in the vineyard, lab, crush pad, press, and cellar. The winery’s proprietor, Warren Winiarski, talks about challenges in the vineyard, for example, while a budder, Jesus Valdez, discusses and demonstrates both the difficulty and satisfaction of grafting a new varietal onto existing rootstock. Interviews with many others across the wider wine community cover topics such as economic and financial aspects of winemaking, entrepreneurship, auctions, vineyard management, wine collecting, wine writing, and even food and wine pairings.² Oral histories will be available in the museum’s newly renovated Archives.

Wine’s ubiquitous presence in American life and culture is emphasized by the fact that wine is now produced in all 50 states. In the “Return to Virginia” section of the exhibition, that state’s production is used as an example of this expansion. Virginian wines are highlighted not only because of the state’s growing reputation for producing quality wines but also because of the role played by Thomas Jefferson and other Virginians in the history of wine in America. That visitors to the American History museum can drive an hour or two from the exhibition and visit many outstanding wineries—and taste wines made from the native American (and Virginian) Norton grape—is an added bonus. A brief history of this grape and the efforts to revive it by those at the Chrysalis and Horton vineyards in Virginia is part of this display. But the exhibition’s curators did not forget to mention production in other states as well especially those in historically important Missouri, New York, Maryland, Oregon, and Washington.

²A summary of these oral histories was provided in a private communication by Paula Johnson, curator in the Division of Work & Industry, National Museum of American History and the exhibition’s project director.

This exhibition is scheduled to continue for several years. While not as expansive as the displays at the now-defunct Copia Center in Napa Valley (Copia had a Julia Child restaurant rather than her entire kitchen—and Child’s pots and pans, formerly at Copia, now are part of Julia’s kitchen in this exhibition), it is as interesting and informative as Copia and other wine museums, such as the Musée du Vin in Paris. More information about the entire exhibition is available at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/food-the-exhibition>. And at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, unlike other museums, admission is always free.

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JASON WISE (Director), *Somm*, written by Jason Wise. First Run Features, 2013, 94 minutes.

There is no point in hiding the headline: *Somm*, a new film written and directed by Jason Wise, is the best movie about the world of wine since *Sideways*. One was a work of fiction, and the other is a documentary, but both beautifully capture the passion that characterizes so many wine people – whether amateurs who love drinking wine (Miles and Maya in *Sideways*), or professionals who love producing and serving it (the sommeliers, chefs, and wine makers who populate *Somm*). Both films made me laugh; and both films made me cry. With *Somm*, the production values are so high, the cinematography so beautiful, and the music so evocative that you will forget at times that this is a documentary.

Somm is slang for sommelier, the wine professional typically found in fine restaurants. The sommelier - or wine director - is responsible for all aspects of wine service, with particular expertise in wine and food pairing. But some of the most important responsibilities of the best sommeliers are not in the front of the house, but behind the scenes: wine list development, wine procurement, storage, and cellar rotation, as well as staff training. In the film’s introduction, Chef Michael Mina describes sommeliers as “the new rock-stars of the industry.”

The storyline follows a group of four thirty-something men, three of whom live with their respective wives and girlfriends in San Francisco, and are working as sommeliers in various establishments: Brian McClintic, an affable former baseball player and screenwriter; DLynn Proctor, an intense and self-confident professional; Dustin Wilson, a young man who exudes modesty and warmth, and moved from Montagna at The Little Nell in Aspen to RN74 in San Francisco, with its Burgundy rich wine list; and Ian Cauble, whose life has been dedicated to wine since college, is