

RANDALL MILLER (Director), *Bottle Shock*, Screenplay by Jody Savin and Randall Miller. Freestyle Releasing, 2008, 110 minutes.

“Wine is sunlight, held together by water.” Galileo Galilei (as quoted early in the movie by wine merchant Steven Spurrier).

In a slightly different spirit, I would note that “This film is hokum, held together by history and scenery.” That’s not intended as a pan, because hold together it does, despite its obvious flaws: I give it a “thumbs up,” or perhaps a raised glass, maybe an “87” on the Parker scale. It has much to offer to film lovers and wine lovers alike, especially those who have visited the Napa Valley or should, and I can also recommend it for its droll and insightful depiction of the infancy of California’s artisan wine industry.

The film is a largely fictionalized account of the events leading up to one Napa winery’s participation in the “Judgment of Paris” in 1976, an event well-known to readers of this journal: a blind taste test pitting renowned French wines against the best of upstart Northern California, judged by French wine professionals in Paris and resulting in victories for the California entries in the white and red categories. The focus is on Chateau Montelena, an old Napa vineyard that was acquired in 1972 by former lawyer Jim Barrett; the winery’s 1973 Chardonnay placed first in the Judgment. The broader backdrop is Napa’s emerging wine industry, propelled by immigrants and wine-loving urban refugees like Barrett and Warren Winiarski of Stag’s Leap Winery, a former lecturer in liberal arts at the University of Chicago whose 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon won among reds.

Barrett’s entrepreneurial struggles leading up to the competition form the basis for the plot, which is kicked up a notch by a dash of father/son conflict and a hottie in short-shorts who forms the leggy hypotenuse of a love triangle. Played effectively by Bill Pullman, Barrett is appropriately down-to-earth, albeit volatile and insecure about his career switch, an insecurity fueled in part by the marriage of his ex-wife to his former law partner. He works through all this by quoting Hemingway and periodically flooring his son Bo (Chris Pine) in a makeshift boxing ring; fortunately, Bo generally seems stoned enough not to feel it. Aimless party boy Bo is balanced off by Gustavo Brambila (Freddy Rodriguez), wine savant son of Mexican immigrants who helps keep Chateau Montelena afloat while developing his own vintage on the side. Add to the mix “Sam” (Rachael Taylor), a female intern from UC Davis who transfixes a gaggle of winery workers by hosing down some equipment in a sheer blouse, Daisy Dukes, and stylish cowboy boots, and voila, you’ve got entertainment! Sam first falls into Gustavo’s arms—in the movie’s most annoying line, she describes him as a “renegade who worships the sanctity of the vine”—before yielding to her greater visual congruity with Bo Barrett.

This is standard fare, barely serviceable. Fortunately, the real movie arrives early in the form of Steven Spurrier (Alan Rickman), a British wine merchant based in Paris who is persuaded by his American expat friend Maurice (an oddly twee Dennis Farina) that a contest between French and American wines, in the bicentennial year of 1976, would

create excellent publicity for Spurrier's business. Rickman hits the right sardonic notes as an amusing British prig with a faintly curled lip but a good heart and a mind that eventually is pried open. I especially enjoyed the scenes of him driving around Napa in a rented Gremlin, gulping guacamole offered by salt-of-the-earth winemakers and slowly coming to the realization that the locals were on to something.

Except for Sam and Maurice, these are all real people, but the movie plays fast and loose with many key historical matters. The head winemaker at Chateau Montelena, Mike Grgich, an immigrant with a colorful background of his own, is not a character in this film, although a fellow in Grgich's trademark beret appears fleetingly and wordlessly in a few scenes. Spurrier's business partner at the time, Patricia Gallagher, also is omitted from the film; a spirited female character probably would have been more interesting as a foil than Mr. Farina's Maurice (I half-hoped that Jim Barrett would meet Maurice and break his nose, much like John Travolta did to Mr. Farina in "Get Shorty"). And the actor who appears briefly as George Taber, the sole journalist who was at the competition, is badly miscast; having seen Taber in person recently, at an event organized by an editor of this journal, I can attest that he is a more distinguished-looking and voluble fellow today than the portly and taciturn portrayal of him 32 years younger. But it's hard to imagine an entertaining movie based on real events that showed enough fidelity to personas and details to satisfy actual participants or people with an educated interest; it would be a documentary at best and a boring documentary at worst. (That's a cautionary statement for the producers of another movie about the "Judgment" that's currently in development.)

And the movie does extremely well in integrating a key element of Napa winemaking history: a relatively new technology of production that was especially effective at preventing the incursion of oxygen during processing. The use of this technology underlies the movie's title as well as its dramatic climax, in which the entire warehouse of Barrett's Chardonnay turns a toasty (and temporary) brown, causing him to decide to return to his law job. The actual historical fact of brown wine is a matter of dispute between Jim Barrett and his winemaker at the time, Mike Grgich. However, the depiction in the movie is an important and satisfying creative link, even if the specifics, which involve an emergency consultation with a UC Davis enology professor (a surprising Brad Whitford, looking earthy), Bo and Sam's frantic car ride and breakdown that culminate in Sam baring her breasts to a cop, and the active luggage support of nearly everybody flying on a plane to Paris, lie far outside the realm of historical plausibility. I don't much care that these hijinks are historically inaccurate, because they work well in the service of dramatic tension and comic effect.

Moreover, "Bottle Shock" is a lovely movie to watch, and the filming of Napa and Sonoma is a major draw. I was entranced from the opening flyover shots of acre after acre of sun-dappled vineyards. Subsequent scenes accurately render the local beauty and climate, where clear blue skies and comfortable temperatures prevail for most of the year; I give the movie a "93" on the Parker scale as an advertisement for Napa tourism.

I especially enjoyed the depiction of Calistoga, near Chateau Montelena in the northern end, as the Valley's working class bar town. Having stayed in cheap motels in Calistoga in recent years, sharing the hot spring pools with working-class immigrant Russian and Latino families, I can vouch firsthand for the town's diverse roots. Although wealthy visitors routinely drop \$500 on a half-day spa visit there, it still retains much of the same cranky charm reflected in Eliza Dushku's tough yet delectable bar operator ("Joe" – why do these women have male names?), who responds to Spurrier's wonderment at the quality of the local wines with "What did you expect? Thunderbird?"

Speaking of cranky characters, movies about wine are now doomed to suffer comparisons with that other recent wine movie, "Sideways." The only real link between that movie and "Bottle Shock," other than wine country scenery, is an emphasis on the connection between the characteristics of wine grapes and the main characters. In "Sideways," Miles was fragile and thin-skinned like Pinot but supposedly complex and able to mature and ripen under special circumstances, which unfortunately were not in evidence in the movie. In "Bottle Shock," Jim Barrett and Sam discuss the need for wine grapes to be shocked or stressed, since "comfortable" grapes produce bad wine (Jim is a very uncomfortable grape). But in a seemingly intentional swipe against "Sideways," and in full character, Jim's reply to Sam's observation that "hardship produces enlightenment" is a curt "for a grape!"

Amusing moments like this are sufficiently ample, and the movie is bouncy enough, that I can recommend it to most movie goers, including teetotalers and those who lack an interest in the historical specifics. I doubt any of you will savor this movie like a 1973 Stag's Leap Cab, but it's likely to leave you with the pleased, languorous feeling that envelopes me after downing a bottle of a respectable, modestly priced Cab on a warm Napa evening. Indeed, after returning home from the movie in the early evening, my wife and I opened just such a bottle and spoke fondly of past and future visits to Calistoga. Now there's an idea . . .

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Note: The views expressed in this review are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Federal Reserve System or its Board of Governors. I thank my wife Ellen Hanak for sharing her insights on the movie, along with California and French wines.