

grown in each region. For each country, it has notes on several of its wines. The notes are more extensive for some of the countries than for others. They are especially extensive for France, giving as much space to each of its wine regions as several of the other countries; there are also extensive notes for Italy, Spain, and the United States.

My only criticism of the book, which is picky, is its title. If one just came across the book while browsing and looked at its title, one might think the book was an effort to dissuade people from drinking wine. The subtitle—"A Master Guide"—belies that interpretation but could easily go unnoticed since it is in a much smaller font. The authors operate an online website and store with the same name, so perhaps naming the book after the website is an effort to publicize the store. Not surprisingly, one can buy the book at the store.

Readers of this journal may want this book for themselves, particularly for its material on less well-known wines and grapes, or as a gift for a friend or colleague who is less knowledgeable about wine but interested in learning more.

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GERARD BASSET. *Tasting Victory: The Life and Wines of the World's Favourite Sommelier*. London, Unbound, 2020, 256 pp., ISBN 978-1-78352-861-5 (ebook), \$17.99.

The publisher of this book is the first crowdfunded publisher in existence.<sup>1</sup> How this works is that they place books they believe are worthy on their website and invite people to pledge funding in return for small rewards—free and/or signed copies of the book, your name printed in the book as a supporter, etc. At the time of writing this review, the publisher was celebrating 10 years of existence, with 476 published books and about half that number of active projects.

According to the publication *Drinks International*, crowdfunding for Gerard Basset's memoirs was spearheaded by Jancis Robinson, and the target was to raise some £14,000.<sup>2</sup> The exercise was obviously successful because it raised more than twice this amount before the book was published in early 2020. It is now out of

<sup>1</sup><https://unbound.com/>

<sup>2</sup>[https://drinksint.com/news/fullstory.php/aid/8142/Gerard\\_Basset\\_dies.html](https://drinksint.com/news/fullstory.php/aid/8142/Gerard_Basset_dies.html)

print, so prospective readers must access the ebook version,<sup>3</sup> which, it turns out, is well worth reading, even for those of us who prefer to hold a real book in our hands.

Why do people write autobiographies or memoirs? Arthur Koestler (2019, pp. 37–39) asked himself this question in the first volume of his own autobiography:

“I believe that people write autobiographies for two main reasons. The first may be called the ‘Chronicler’s urge.’ The second may be called the ‘*Ecce Homo* motive.’ Both impulses spring from the same source...: the desire to share one’s experiences with others... The Chronicler’s urge expresses the need for the sharing of experience related to external events. The *Ecce Homo* motive expresses the same need with regard to internal events...”

Thus the business of writing autobiography is full of pitfalls. On the one hand, we have the starchy chronicle of the stuffed shirt; on the other, the embarrassing nakedness of the exhibitionist ... Apart from these two extremes there are various other snares which even competent craftsmen are rarely able to avoid. The most common of these is what one might call the ‘Nostalgic Fallacy.’...

Next among the snares is the ‘Dull Dog Fallacy’... [which] requires that the first person singular... should always appear as a shy, restrained, reserved, colourless individual...”

Of course, none of these faults need much explanation to anyone who has read even the best of autobiographies! So how do the memoirs of Gerard Basset (1957–2019), the world’s favourite sommelier, stack up against these criteria?

I first turn to some facts about his life.

Gerard’s mother was a good cook, and in his early career, it seemed more probable that he would end up being a food expert than a wine expert—especially because his parents knew little about wine and he grew up without ever drinking any—quite an achievement for someone who grew up in *la France profonde*! Gerard left school at the age of 16 but ended up as a Master of Wine and a Master Sommelier, with an MBA and an MSc degree, and was a recipient of the OBE—more letters behind his name than most, as Jancis Robinson pointed out in her tribute.<sup>4</sup> In the process of getting there, he held down a very wide range of jobs, all of them part of a search for whom he wanted to become. These included a shop assistant, factory worker, candy maker, delivery assistant and waiter in a restaurant. Some of these were short-lived, others lasted for a few years, but all seem to have contributed to his future success in one way or another.

For example, his early passions were cycling, watching, and playing football, and it was the latter that took him to the United Kingdom (Glasgow) for the first time. His second soccer trip was to Liverpool. His view of the English before the Liverpool trip:

“Liverpool itself didn’t excite me much and nor did the English – my impression was that they were all strange. They drove on the wrong side of the road, had a boring cuisine, loved tea

<sup>3</sup> <https://unbound.com/books/?q=tasting%20victory>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.circleofwinewriters.org/gerard-basset-a-tribute-to-the-worlds-favourite-sommelier/>.

instead of coffee, drank beer at room temperature and had policemen known as ‘Bobby’ who wore funny hats. And they still had royalty, whereas in France we had been a republic for a long time. To top off the list of peculiarities, it always rained in England, or so I believed.

I wasn’t totally anti-English, as I liked watching *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*, and some of their pop music artists were OK, but overall, I thought they were eccentric.” (p. 14)

Back in France and without much direction in life, he realized that he liked Britain, so saved up to buy a one-way ticket to the United Kingdom (in August 1979, i.e., at the very start of the Thatcher era). Down on his luck in London, he realized that the reason he liked the English was that he had had such good experiences in Liverpool. As a result, he headed north to a summer job as a kitchen porter in an Isle of Man hotel. In his words, “Being a kitchen porter meant getting intimate with the dishwasher.” His culinary experience was summed up as follows:

“The food was extremely basic. The dinner menu had a choice of three starters, one of which was orange juice, which I found surprising. The main course was even simpler, because there was only one, which changed every day for a week and then came around again. The desserts were also very restricted.

The break in routine came on Thursday nights – curry nights. On my first Thursday, the head chef served the curry on rice that he’d coloured bright red. The next Thursday, he’d chosen bright yellow. After I told him that my football team, Saint-Etienne, played in green, he made green rice the following week, in my honour.” (p. 21)

Before this UK trip, he took a three-day excursion to New York. He has this to say about New York’s cuisine:

“But what I particularly remember was the New York-style breakfast: bacon and eggs in a style called ‘over easy’, meaning cooked lightly on both sides, with grits, made from corn maize. And lashings of coffee.” (p. 19)

He had saved up more than enough for four months in England, so apart from the short trip to New York, he also did a week-long excursion to Leningrad and Moscow (this was the late 1970s). He had nothing to say about Russian cuisine!

After eight months in the United Kingdom, he returned to France and treated himself to a meal at Paul Bocuse’s restaurant outside Lyon to experience what a customer experienced in a Michelin three-star restaurant. This was followed by a state-sponsored cooking course, a job at a one-star Michelin restaurant, an unsuccessful excursion to Paris, and then back to the same hotel in the south of England (the Crown Hotel in Lyndhurst, in the New Forest area of the south of England). The hotel had changed owners during that time, and the new owners appointed a restaurant manager, who in turn wanted a sommelier—and that is how he ended up in the profession that was to become his passion of the rest of his career. This also marks the first substantive mention of wine in his memoirs—almost 50 pages into the book.

The New Forest area is also where he met his wife, Nina, and where he spent most of the rest of his life when not traveling, something he did extensively.

After the Crown Hotel, Gerard moved to Chewton Glen Hotel in nearby Hampshire, and this became the launching pad for the two marks of his success: his fame and fortune. The former came from his willingness to subject himself to the rigors of a whole host of wine tasting and sommelier competitions, and the latter from the joint venture that he and the Chewton Glen restaurant manager, Robin Hutson, launched: in 1994, the two of them started a chain of luxury boutique hotels with other shareholders, with the first Hotel Du Vin opening in Winchester, culminating in a chain of seven hotels, which they sold a decade later. In the process, he turned an initial investment of £25,000 into £2.5 million!

There are three aspects to his subsequent career: another hotel venture, more competitions and prizes, and extensive travel all over the world on different aspects of the wine business. A year after the sale of the hotel group, he and his wife opened the TerraVina Hotel in Lyndhurst, a venture that lasted 10 years and started and ended less successfully than expected. It would be fair to summarize the darker side of this venture as consisting of problems with staff, builders, bankers, accountants, lawyers, and Brexit, roughly in that order. No real surprise there! After a decade of this, he and his wife reinvented and renamed the hotel, turning it into a boutique B&B called Spot in the Woods. At the same time, he was busy collecting initials to add to his name, a process that culminated in the title “Best Sommelier in the World” in 2010 after being runner up on three occasions, as well as in his MW, MS, MBA, and MSc qualifications.

Unfortunately, this is where the one weakness of this book is most visible: too much detailed description of one business venture after another and of one competition after another and too little about his work in the world of wine writ large. One wonders if these rather pedestrian passages would not have benefited from the firm hand of a competent editor.

Yet this is a minor quibble. The book ends as it began, putting the author’s wonderful optimism, obvious penchant for hard work, and deep appreciation of friends and family at the forefront of a story that is well worth telling.

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