

David Kennard (Director): *John Cleese's Wine for the Confused*

Written by David Kennard and John Cleese. Produced by Victoria Simpson. Distributed by InCA Productions, 2004, 42 min. [https://youtu.be/sHnz6KoYw_A].

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Johnny Carson, the king of late-night, once said that the secret to good comedy is the audience's empathy. "If [the audience] likes the performer, then you've got 80% of it made" (Carson, 2001). Such is the case with *Wine for the Confused*. A charming introduction to the favorite beverage of this *Journal*, this documentary is presented by John Cleese, known to many as the Comic Messiah himself. The film provides an extended overview of the essential elements of wine production and wine consumption, from the perspective of a viewer who is intrigued, but perhaps intimidated, by the wine world's massive scale.

Note that the film was released in 2004, and so this is a belated review. Unlike fine wine, few films were made to survive extended aging. One cannot help but wonder whether a film production that is nearly two decades old would still hold up well in the light of today. *Wine for the Confused* proves to be a pleasant surprise. At its core, a well-rounded and scientifically sensible program supports the documentary, like a solid tannin structure carries a bottle through the years. Cleese's understated and effortless comedic touch supplies the piercing acidity needed to maintain freshness and a degree of light-heartedness. Some distinctively tertiary notes remind you of the film's age: its warm and embracing ambient lighting and the retro digital technologies depicted therein pin its bottling date to the turn of the century. So long as one is prepared to tolerate these few remnants from the past, they can be appreciated.

The film opens with Cleese narrating a flamboyant parody of Greek mythology, a segment that the viewer might mistake for a Monty Python sketch. A group of actors, enrobed in white and crowned with floral wreaths, succumb without resistance to the gluttonous indulgence of engorged grapes. After wine is declared the "nectar of the gods," Cleese quickly puts a stop to it, throwing the DVD (note the tertiary note!) out the window and calling it "awful snobbery." Then, Cleese turns to the audience and confesses that he, too, is frightened about the complicated wine world and seeks to better understand his preferences. "Don't let anyone tell you what wine you should like," Cleese says, a theme that the film repeatedly underscores.

The scientific content of the documentary is structured around six grape varieties, historically the French "noble" grapes: Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon. These grape varieties serve as hooks, providing the threads of a systematic discussion of multiple aspects of viticulture and winemaking that are essential to defining a wine's style. To showcase these varieties, Cleese visits

three wineries located on the Central Coast of California and speaks to the vintners. Two grapes are presented at each winery through the tasting of (primarily) single varietal wines. Each grape varietal highlights a salient characteristic of the resulting wine. Piecing these characteristics together, a general and complete sketch of a wine emerges.

Our first stop is at the Gainey vineyard in the Santa Ynez Valley for a tasting of their Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc. Here, Riesling becomes the cue to a discussion about residual sugar, whereas Sauvignon Blanc is about acidity. Acknowledging that the off-dry and sweet styles of Riesling are a thing of the past, the winemaker Kirby Anderson pours our host a glass of its dry, modern interpretation. Then, he takes us to the winery's backstage, where we see the huge stainless steel vessel in which the bubbly yeasts carry out the fermentation.

After hearing Cleese marvel at the concentrated flavors of a few water-stressed Sauvignon Blanc grapes that he inconspicuously picked off the vine, we head to the Byron Winery in the Santa Maria Valley. Here, the two Burgundian varieties, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, take center stage. Through Chardonnay, we are introduced to oak and to malolactic fermentation, through which many Chardonnays, especially the quintessentially Californian ones, gain their toasty and buttery flavors. Winemaker Ken Brown professes his love of Pinot Noir, enumerating its complex aromatic profile coupled with its fragile nature to become a great challenge for the winemaker.

Our last stop is the Foxen Winery, where we are invited to a picnic chat with winemakers Bill Wathen and Dick Doré to learn about tannin, climate, and *terroir*. Here, we understand that grapes need sufficient heat to ripen and to overcome the green flavors, while sitting next to a lush eucalyptus tree, itself an unmistakable staple of a new world *terroir* that from time to time betrays the origin of the bold red wine in our glass.

The documentary endorses a perspective that is firmly viewer-centered. The film is interlaced with a variety of social situations in which the viewer might encounter the subject of wine. Cleese picks the brains of two sommeliers on how to order wine at a fine dining restaurant, inquires with a wine shop owner on how to buy wine with the best quality-price ratio, and puts up a demonstration of wine service at a family dinner. But most entertaining of all is a festive backyard tasting party, where Cleese's main goal is to stimulate his guests to describe the pleasant sensory experiences they are having from the wines, with all the vocabulary they can mobilize. Cleese is seen conversing with his guests, encouraging them to use descriptors to define the aromatic and flavor profiles of the wine. He pleads that they convey these preferences the next time the need arises for a wine purchase at a store or a restaurant.

But the fun does not end there. Surely, a host as mischievous as Cleese would attempt to humble his visitors with a few tricks. Indeed, his dozen or so guests are wholly confused about whether the same blind wine is red or white, otherwise known as the Davis test (Trillin, 2002). A few rank a cheap bottle (\$5) as the most expensive showing of the day (\$200). All this is meant to demonstrate that the wine world *can* be disorientating. Yet, one need not be afraid or ashamed. After all, the enjoyment of wine is a subjective and personal experience.

Between a crash course on oenology and a practical consumer guide, the film strikes a cheerful balance with its rich and approachable content. But if the goal is to inform as much as to entertain, for it to remain scientifically rigorous is perhaps too much to ask. We occasionally hear suggestions that could be misconstrued if one

pauses to think. For example, when discussing the concept of residual sugar in Riesling, we are told that sweet wines can be produced by stopping the fermentation early. While that is true of wines of other grape varieties, it is not the most notable method through which sweet Rieslings are produced around the world. When introducing Cabernet Sauvignon, Cleese associates it with Bordeaux but without recognition of Merlot, a variety that appears earlier in the film and contributes 66% of Bordeaux's red grape plantings, three times larger than Cabernet's 22% share (CIVB, 2020).

Throughout the film, Cleese is just another confused wine consumer. But as our host, he is daring. He asks the questions that we want answered but are afraid to ask the sommelier or the shop owner. Double role-playing with a straight face, he acts out the inner anxiety that many viewers have experienced, such as when presented with a nearly incomprehensible wine list at an expensive restaurant. But perhaps Cleese is not really confused. This is revealed by his professed passion for white burgundy, which he discovered while filming *The Holy Grail* in cold, wet Scotland, and by the story of his sharing an off-dry Riesling with the Queen over lunch at Buckingham Palace. Nevertheless, with a performance as endearing and relatable as Cleese's, one could hardly sense deceit.

Wine for the Confused was filmed in one of the prized wine regions in the United States. It was aired to U.S. audiences through the Food Network. Over the past 18 years, wine consumption in the United States has seen a steady increase, from 24.75 million hectolitres (mhl) in 2004 to 33 mhl in 2020 (OIV, 2021). During this time, the United States surpassed France and Italy to become the country with the largest annual wine consumption (OIV, 2022).

While nearly two decades have passed, audiences today can benefit from a solid introductory documentary such as this one. Before the era of smartphones, the scores and notes of wine critics swayed consumers' purchases. Today, the myriad of crowd-sourced wine rating apps, such as Vivino, CellarTracker, and others, have democratized wine scoring but, in the process, have exerted an arguably greater influence on our decision-making. Cleese's message, which he emphasizes forcefully in the film, that "don't let anyone tell you what wine you should like," stands true and clear. The better alternative, suggested by Cleese, is to recognize one's preferences by pinpointing them and voicing them without fear or shame. It takes a bit of learning, plus a lot of practice.

References

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