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A RESTAURATEUR'S VIEW
THOUGHTS ON THE WORLD OF VQA WINE

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I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO PRESENT THE RESTAURATEUR'S POINT OF VIEW ON THE WORLD OF VQA WINE BASED ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE; FOR THOSE OF YOU UNFAMILIAR WITH ME, ALLOW ME TO START BY OUTLINING WHAT MY EXPERIENCE IS.

I WAS BORN IN NEW YORK CITY AND HAD THE GREAT FORTUNE TO BE BROUGHT UP IN A HOUSEHOLD IN WHICH WINE WAS OFTEN SERVED WITH TWO MEALS PER DAY. I HAD AN EARLY INTEREST IN FOOD AND COOKED MY FIRST FAMILY MEAL AT AGE 5. AT 18, I WAS WORKING AS A SOUS CHEF. IN GENERAL, I LEARNED EARLY ON THAT FOOD AND WINE WERE ASSOCIATED WITH HOSPITALITY, SOCIABILITY AND FUN.

I SET OFF FOR THE U.K. IN 1968, CONTINUED MY TRAINING THERE IN BOTH KITCHEN AND FRONT OF HOUSE AND CAME TO CANADA IN 1979, IMMEDIATELY OPENING A RESTAURANT, CALLED JOE ALLEN, ON WHAT WAS AN UNKNOWN JOHN STREET. PARENTHETICALLY, YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED TO KNOW THAT IN THOSE DAYS - AND I BELIEVE IT WAS ONLY THE PREVIOUS YEAR THAT BEVERAGE ALCOHOL HAD BEEN PERMITTED TO BE SERVED ON SUNDAYS WITHOUT A MEAL - IN THE QUADRANT BOUNDED BY UNIVERSITY AVENUE TO THE EAST, SPADINA TO THE WEST, KING ON THE SOUTH AND QUEEN STREET TO THE NORTH WERE TO BE FOUND ONLY 2 LICENSED ESTABLISHMENTS. I BECAME THE THIRD. TODAY, THERE ARE AT LEAST 100 BETWEEN THOSE 4 STREETS.

I WENT ON TO OPEN AN ITALIAN RESTAURANT, ORSO, WHERE WE PUT TOGETHER AN OUTSTANDING ALL-ITALIAN WINE LIST, AT THE EXCITING TIME OF 1985 WHEN THE REVOLUTION IN ITALIAN WINEMAKING WAS JUST BECOMING KNOWN. I OPENED ALLEN'S IN 1987, BECAME THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE COMPANY THAT OPERATED WINSTON'S AND THE TRILLIUM AT ONTARIO PLACE, OPENED WITH DORA KEOGH THE WONDERFUL PUB BEARING HER NAME IN 1997 AND P.J. O'BRIEN IN 1998 AND ALSO FOUNDED AND RAN THE ITALIAN WINE AGENCY, WHICH IMPORTED LITTLE-KNOWN WINES OF GREAT QUALITY AND WAS A PRINCIPAL OF KERLOCH ASSOCIATES, A SINGLE MALT AGENCY.

THAT IS MY PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND; NOW TO MY VIEW OF THE WORLD OF VQA WINE.

AND I AM IMMERSED IN THAT WORLD. ALLEN'S HAS SERVED VQA WINES SINCE OPENING IN 1987; WE HAVE BEEN 100% VQA, WITH A LIST OF NEVER FEWER THAN 55 WINES, SINCE 2001.

I TALK ABOUT THE VQA WORLD CONSTANTLY; JUST RECENTLY, I WAS SPOUTING OFF IN THE PRESENCE OF OUR ESTEEMED COLLEAGUE, PAUL DE CAMPO OF HENRY OF PELHAM, WHEN PAUL PUT TO ME THE QUESTION, "WHAT DOES YOUR WINERY LOOK LIKE?"

ANSWERING THAT QUESTION, I THINK, GIVES A SUITABLE FRAMEWORK IN WHICH TO RAISE A FEW POINTS CONCERNING WINERIES' CURRENT PRACTICE.

MY WINERY IS NOT BIG, WITH ANNUAL PRODUCTION BETWEEN 6 AND 15 THOUSAND CASES. I AM NOT CONVINCED THAT WINES OF REAL QUALITY - OF TERROIR QUALITY AS OPPOSED TO VARIETAL QUALITY - ARE EASILY MADE BY ONE WINERY IN MUCH GREATER QUANTITY.

THIS ISSUE OF TERROIR OR CHARACTER WINES VERSUS VARIETAL WINES IS FUNDAMENTAL.

I THINK TOO MANY WINERIES ARE MAKING TWO MANY WINES, OFTEN MAKING A WINE FROM EVERY VARIETAL THAT CAN BE GROWN IN OUR REGION TO BUILD A "PORTFOLIO". THIS PORTFOLIO, I ASSUME, IS TO PROVIDE ONE-STOP-SHOPPING FOR THE LICENCEE, WINERY CUSTOMER, LIQUOR BOARD. THE ANSWER TO THE WINEMAKER'S QUESTION, "WHAT DO YOU LIKE" IS THEN "WE'VE GOT IT".

BUT THESE BROAD PORTFOLIOS BRING CONSIDERABLE PERIL. WITH EVERYONE SELLING - OR OFFERING FOR SALE- THE SAME VARIETALS, THE PURCHASE COMES TO DEPEND ON JUST 2 PRINCIPAL CRITERIA - QUALITY AND PRICE.

THESE, I WOULD ARGUE, ARE TOUGH CRITERIA ON WHICH TO COMPETE. YOU HAVE TO BE BETTER OR CHEAPER OR EVEN BETTER <u>AND</u> CHEAPER TO WIN.

NOW THE RESTAURANT AND WINEMAKING INDUSTRIES, I CAN HERE INTERJECT, HAVE MANY SIMILARITIES. WE BOTH APPEAL TO TASTE, DEPEND FOR SUCCESS ON CUSTOMER SENSORY SATISFACTION BUT ARE VERY SUSCEPTIBLE TO CRITICS' OPINIONS, ARE BOTH BEHOLDEN TO THE REGULATIONS AND PRACTICES OF THE AGCO AND LCBO, AND, I AM SORRY TO SAY, ARE OFTEN UNDERCAPITALIZED. THIS LAST MAKES US

ILL-PREPARED FOR CATASTROPHIC SITUATIONS BEYOND OUR CONTROL - IN THE WINERIES' CASE, MOSTLY WEATHER-DRIVEN; IN THE CASE OF MY INDUSTRY, HEALTH-RELATED, LIKE SARS OR SHELLFISH TOXICITY. AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, I THINK, BOTH WINEMAKERS AND RESTAURANT OPERATORS ARE MOTIVATED BY PASSION AND COMMITMENT AND NOT BY THE CHANCE OF MAJOR FINANCIAL REWARD OR SOCIAL POSITION.

AND BOTH ARE HIGHLY COMPETITIVE INDUSTRIES. BUT RATHER THAN CHOOSING TO COMPETE LARGELY ON PRICE AND QUALITY, WHICH, AS I HAVE SAID, THE VARIETAL PORTFOLIO MUST, IN RESTAURANTS WE BRING INDIVIDUALITY OR UNIQUENESS TO THE FORE AND HOPE TO BE RECOGNIZED FOR DOING WHAT NO COMPETITOR DOES.

MY WINERY IS NOT BIG. I CAN THEREFORE SPECIALIZE. IN SPECIALIZING, I CAN GROW MY OWN GRAPES AND ONLY THOSE GRAPES TO WHICH MY LAND IS BEST SUITED. SORRY TO SAY, BUT CONTRACT GROWING BRINGS A COMPROMISE EVIDENT IN THE BOTTLE, WITH A BLAND SAMENESS IN MANY NIAGARA VARIETAL WINES.

IF UNIQUENESS IS DESIRED, WE CAN EMPHASIZE LOCAL PERSONALITY, ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING TERROIR. WE CAN GROW ALL OUR OWN GRAPES, YES, BUT ONLY THOSE OR EVEN THAT VARIETY BEST SUITED TO MY SOIL, MICROCLIMATE AND PERSONAL TASTE. BUT SINGLE VARIETAL WINES WITH TERROIR PERSONALITY ARE NOT THE EASIEST WAY TO ACHIEVE UNIQUENESS.
BLENDING IS.

MY WINERY MAKES BLENDED WINES. I PERSONALLY THINK THAT BLENDED WINES ARE OFTEN MORE INTERESTING THAN SINGLE GRAPE WINES AND THEY CAN CERTAINLY BE MORE DISTINCTIVE. I WOULD, FROM THE GRAPES TO WHICH MY LAND IS BEST SUITED, MAKE A BLENDED RED AND A BLENDED WHITE. EACH WOULD HAVE A PROPRIETARY NAME, EACH WOULD HAVE A PERSONALITY AND EACH WOULD CHANGE WITH THE VINTAGE, IN COMPOSITION, CHARACTER AND TASTE. THE NAME, HOWEVER, WOULD REMAIN THE SAME. HE OR SHE WHO SEEKS CONSISTENCY IN MAKING VINTAGE WINES MIGHT FIND GREATER SATISFACTION IN THE MANUFACTURE OF BEER OR SPIRITS.

MY WINERY WOULD MAKE, TO A LESSER DEGREE, VARIETAL WINES, BUT ONLY FROM THE ONE OR TWO GRAPES I FELT REPRESENTED MY LAND AND PERSONAL TASTE BEST. I WOULD MAKE A "NORMALE" EVERY YEAR, ACCEPTING ITS VINTAGE CHARACTER AND ALSO IT FLUCTUATIONS IN PRODUCTION VOLUME. CONSIDERATIONS OF 'SHELF-SPACE" OR PLACEMENT ON A RESTAURANT WINELIST WOULD NOT LEAD ME TO PURCHASE GRAPES OR OTHERWISE BOOST PRODUCTION IN LESS FAVORABLE YEARS. AND ON THAT TOPIC, LET ME EXPRESS THE OPINION

THAT THE MARKETING OF “PRODUCT OF CANADA” WINES IS A DISASTROUS IDEA IN THE LONG TERM. CUSTOMERS ARE JUSTIFIABLY CONFUSED AS TO WHAT OUR WINE IS AND WHAT ITS CHARACTER MIGHT BE, AND THE MAJOR RETAILER IS NOT MUCH HELP - AT ALL 3 LCBO STORES I VISITED YESTERDAY, VQA AND “PRODUCT OF CANADA” WINES STOOD SIDE-BY-SIDE IN BOTH THE VQA AND “CANADA” AREAS.

AS WELL AS “NORMALE”, I WOULD MAKE OCCASIONALLY A “RISERVA”, AND WHAT MADE THE WINES DIFFERENT WOULD BE MADE PLAIN IN MY LITERATURE AND LABELING. AND I TEND TO THINK THAT “RISERVA” WOULD MEAN SPECIALLY SELECTED GRAPES IN YEARS IN WHICH I COULD ACHIEVE 1 ADDITIONAL PERCENTAGE POINT OF ALCOHOL IN THE VINEYARD, NOT IN THE CELLAR, FOLLOWED BY EXTRA AGEING. THE ELABORATION OF VQA WINES CALLED RESERVE, SPECIAL RESERVE, VINTNERS RESERVE, FAMILY RESERVE AND SO ON, WITH NO INDICATION AS TO WHAT THESE TERMS MEAN, IS A MARKETING MISTAKE.

SO MY WINERY IS SMALL, GROWS ITS OWN GRAPES, MAKES UNIQUE WINES AND FOCUSES ON BLENDED WINE.
NOW, HOW DO I SELL?

WELL, BECAUSE OF MY LOWISH VOLUME I DO NOT NEED THE BIG BOY DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL. YES, IT’S NICE TO HAVE THAT INJECTION OF CASH IN FEBRUARY, NICE TO HAVE ACCESS TO SUDBURY AND BEYOND, BUT IT IS SADLY THE CASE THAT THERE EXISTS A PREJUDICE THAT SAYS, “IF IT’S ON THE GENERAL LIST, IT CAN’T BE ANY GOOD”. THESE CONSUMERS WANT TO DRINK WINES THAT THEY THINK ONLY THEY KNOW ABOUT. AND BECAUSE MY WINES ARE UNIQUE, PRICE IS NOT THE ISSUE THAT IT IS IN THE CHOOSE ME OFF THE SHELF CONTEST. MY WINERY CONCENTRATES ON RESTAURANT SALES, WITH A MIX OF 50% LICENCEE, 30% WINERY, 10% HOME DELIVERY AND 10% VINTAGES IF THEY WILL HAVE ME.

PERHAPS IT IS JUST DUE TO PERSONAL INTEREST, BUT I LIKE TO THINK THAT RESTAURANTS ARE ABSOLUTELY VITAL TO GETTING A BRAND BUILT, AN IMAGE MADE, A BUZZ GOING. RESTAURANTS ARE WINEMAKERS’ GREAT PARTNERS IN INTRODUCING WINES TO QUALIFIED BUYERS AND HAVE AN ENORMOUS INTEREST IN PROPER HANDLING AND CAREFUL SERVICE. A RESTAURATEUR IS A FAR MORE MOTIVATED SALESPERSON THAN A SHELF-DEPENDENT RETAILER CAN BE.

MY WINERY SEES OPINION-MAKING RESTAURANTS AS STRATEGIC PARTNERS. I KEEP THE RESTAURATEURS INFORMED OF MY NEWS, PERSONNEL CHANGES, EQUIPMENT PURCHASES; I INVITE THEM TO MY FACILITY EVERY GROWING SEASON FOR VINEYARD TOURS AND EVERY WINTER FOR BARREL TASTINGS; OF COURSE, I BRING MY MARKET-READY

PRODUCTS TO THEM FOR TASTING. I PATRONIZE EXCLUSIVELY THOSE RESTAURANTS WHICH CARRY MY WINES.

NOW MY WINERY IS IMAGINARY; YOURS IS REAL. YOU WORK IN A HIDEOUSLY TOUGH MARKET PLACE WITH GREAT COMMERCIAL PRESSURE. BUT WITH A GREATER DEGREE OF SPECIALIZATION, A CONCENTRATION ON CREATING UNIQUE, PROPRIETARY WINES, THE CONFIDENCE TO FOREGO THE VARIETAL PORTFOLIO AND THE GENERAL LIST AND A GREATER RELIANCE ON YOUR RESTAURANT PARTNERS , MY VIEW IS THAT SUCCESS, AT LEAST FOR THE SMALLER WINERIES, MIGHT BE MORE EASILY ACHIEVED.

AND AS SUCCESS IS ACHIEVED, I ADVISE JANCIS ROBINSON TO GET BACK TO HER DESK. THE SELF-CONFIDENT ONTARIO VQA WINE INDUSTRY DESERVES A RE-EDIT!!