

Athenaeum Paper
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Mark Schweizer

Learned and distinguished gentleman of the Athenaeum Society.

I don't remember the rules for the order of presentation of papers. It may be that I am first and should be second, or second and should be first. Either way, as I stand here before you this evening, I am reminded of a song, the final line of which goes... and so remember that the lead elephant...has by far the best view.

It's a beautiful evening. You're in New York City on vacation with your wife visiting your wife's college roommate and her banker husband, a couple who have lived there all their adult lives. You are all on the way to the opera to see Pavarotti in what may be his last season at the Met. Sure, you know he's a has-been and takes all his big arias down a step - but hey - thanks to Logan and the Athenaeum Society, you KNOW opera, and although you'd rather have a lobotomy with Tilley's jokes as the anesthetic than suffer through four hours of people screaming at you in a foreign language, it seems that protocol and your wife demand that you endure this with all possible grace and taste. She even bought you a tuxedo for the occasion - something you will probably never wear again, but, who knows.

Your foursome has made reservations at a restaurant for an early supper before the show. You're amazed to find so many people at the restaurant at five o'clock, but you keep telling yourself, "this is New York after all." The main dining room is packed, but thanks to a hundred dollar bill which you see your host slip the maitre d', you are seated promptly at a prominent table by the window where you can look out over the "city that never sleeps".

You sit at the table, slightly self conscious about your attire, until you notice how many other men are wearing tuxedos at five in the evening. Then you realize that all of them have theater plans for the evening - many of them for the opera which is just a short walk from the restaurant. You hear your host say to the waiter "I'll take the bill, please," and you hear your own voice saying, as if an alien being has briefly inhabited your body "Then I'll get the wine." Your host nods approvingly and you glance at your wife only to see all the blood drain from her face as she looks at you in horror. Suddenly, as the waiter hands you the wine list, you realize what you've done. You glance down the left side of the list.... Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir..and you begin to feel a trickle of sweat down the back of your neck. Three people at the table and the smiling waiter are now waiting for your decision. Your eyes dart to the right hand column - the prices - and you figure, correctly, I might add, that you'll go ahead and get the most expensive bottle, thus escaping the snare which you've created for yourself. It is the last correct decision you'll make all evening.

With a quick glance you see that the wine you have chosen is \$175. Chateau Lafite-Rothschild '61. That's not so bad you think. You've at least heard of that one. And

after all, you're not paying for the dinner. Then, luckily, you read the fine print below the price. Per Glass. It has now been a full two minutes and the waiter has a forced smile on his face. "Shall I come back?" he says in that New York way of polite disdain. Suddenly you spot something on the menu which you may have had before. It wasn't so bad, as you remember. And only \$45 - a mid range price. You check. Yes. Per bottle. "We'll have that a bottle of this." You smile and point to the menu not daring to try to pronounce the French... or is it German? No, you remember, probably French. A nice French wine. You relax, breathing easier, the pressure momentarily relieved.

"Ah." says the waiter. "A wonderful and bold choice. Montrachet White Burgundy, 1983. Very good, sir. I presume then, you'll all be having the Kalamari Rosco as the entrée".

"Kalarmari Rosco"? you think. "What the heck is that"? But again you hear the alien voice speak up. "Yes, of course."

You look at your wife and see a slight twitch has developed at the side of her mouth. Your host is still smiling but his eyes are hard. Your host's wife says "I just *adore* Kalamari Rosco" but I've never had it this far out of season. Baby squid is usually a summer dish when it's caught fresh.

You change the subject immediately, desperately talking about William's theory about how everything relates to Hopkinsville. You don't understand it exactly, but you think you can remember enough to make conversation. Your hosts look at you blankly. Then, at your side, the waiter appears and places the bottle to your right. You look up and he's gone, apparently to another table.

The panic sets in. What do you do? The bottle of wine which you ordered is on the table and three people seem to be waiting on you expectantly. You reach into your pocket and pull out your Swiss army knife - the one your son got you for Christmas. You remember that it may have a cork-screw. You run your hand across the closed knife under the table and feel the bump-bump-bump of the ridges as your fingers run across the correct tool. You pull it out triumphantly and to your wife's horror, screw it into the cork. You give it a pull, but it's stuck tight. You take it off the table and hold it by your side pulling hard on the cork. Nothing. Then, in one last desperate attempt, you stand, put the bottle of wine between your legs and, in silhouette against the lights of the Big Apple, a picture which the other diners will never forget - you give several more tugs on the bottle before you feel a hand on your arm. It's the waiter.

He sits you down and removes the bottle from between your legs, his hand lingering perhaps a little longer than you think is proper. He removes the Swiss army knife from the top of the bottle and hands it back to you. You notice he's wearing gloves. Then, deftly, he takes out his own corkscrew and has the cork removed in a matter of seconds with no apparent effort. He hands you the cork. Somewhere in the back of your clouded mind you remember that you're supposed to sniff it. "What for?" you

think as you take a whiff. "That will be fine", you say, handing the cork across the table to your wife like some sort of door prize and you see her stuff it into her purse.

The waiter pours four glasses and you hear your host say "This wine has cork it." He's holding the glass up, looking at it in the light, his little finger slightly askew.

"Sorry sir", says the waiter, looking directly at you. "I don't know how *that* could have happened. I'll get you another bottle".

"Never mind" says your host. "We'll have a bottle of the *David Bruce Bordeaux* - anything but a 77 - and four orders of the roast duckling.

"Very good, sir", says the waiter, turning smartly toward the kitchen.

You notice that your wife's makeup is beginning to run as she and her friend leave to powder their noses leaving you to make conversation with the banker as the other patrons begin to point in your direction. New Yorkers are not known for their forgiveness.

Could this fiasco have been prevented? Of course it could. Many of you are beer drinkers. What you like about beer is that you basically just drink it, then you order another one. You don't sniff at it, or hold it up to the light and slosh it around, and above all you don't drone on and on about it, the way people do with wine.. Your beer drinker tends to be a straightforward, decent, friendly, down-to-earth person who enjoys talking about the importance of relief pitching, whereas your serious wine fancier tends to be an insufferable snot. Never-the-less, having heard the by-laws from Hal during last month's meeting, it is clear that the purpose of these papers is to inform and educate as well as to entertain. Therefore, members of the Athenaeum Society, I present to you "The Art of Wine Snobbery".

I'd like to tell you first what this paper is not. It is not a discussion of wines, their merits, the difference between a Chardonnay and a Chablis or anything remotely associated with the art and science of oenology. It is a paper, pure and simple, about snobbery. Form over function...the art of the con. This is not a paper on appreciating wine - there are hundreds of books written on the subject - each more boring than the last. This is a paper on the slosh and sniff approach to impressing people.

Wine snobbery is part showmanship, part knowledge and part bluff. It's knowing what to say and do and when to say and do it. There is a mystique about drinking wine and there is something elite about people who know or pretend to know something about it. Their friends always secretly envy them and wine snobs, sensing that this posture commands a certain respect, seek to secure this privileged status. It is a perfect posture for the Athenaeum member. Or anyone running for the State Senate. So, now to the details.

There is no statement that will admit you to the fraternity of wine snobbery faster than "clearing the palate". It is the password. Clearing the palate is what one does in order to best determine the quality of the wine. Specifically, one chews on a corner of bread which absorbs foreign flavors on the tongue. Probably it is the curious

phraseology that makes it so snobbish but it is also the notion that it must be done. After all, you don't clear your palate for beer and ribs. But if you want to be a wine snob, you have to go around clearing your palate all the time; that's all there is to it. There are only two things to clear your palate with, water and bread. Bread is so much more snobbish because it makes it apparent what you're doing. If you use water, someone could think you are merely thirsty. And since one does not announce that one is clearing one's palate, it must, never the less, be made fairly obvious.

You are at a pleasant French restaurant and you order a bottle Chateau Meyney 1975. The captain uncorks the bottle with considerable fanfare and some movements not generally observed outside the American Ballet Theater. He places the cork in front of you. Do you smell it, squeeze it, read it, or ignore it? Well, apparently you don't ignore it because otherwise why did he put it there? That leaves three choices. There are various reasons why you don't smell it, the first and most obvious one being: why smell it if you're about to taste it? And unless the wine has turned to vinegar you can't tell anything by smelling the cork. The cork is ugly, the gesture is ugly, and the whole idea borders on vulgar. It simply is not for the Athenaeum member. Do not for a moment suppose that sniffing the cork is one of those elegant and knowledgeable demonstrations that indicate some standing in the wine snobbery community.

You don't squeeze the cork for the same reason you don't smell it. You can't judge the wine. It is true that a dried out cork can spoil the wine, but squeezing it will not tell you so.

You can read a cork, if you've got good eyes, but I have enough trouble reading the menu. Some vintages have their names burned into the cork, but unless you suspect fraud, there's no reason to bother.

So...Since there is nothing sensible to do with the cork, we do nothing. If the captain delays pouring, waiting for you to do something with the cork, simply push it aside with one finger and glare at him. He will take the hint. The truth is, he doesn't know what to do with it either. Presenting the cork is wine nonsense invented by wine captains and sommeliers. The wine snob - need not confront the captain over the cork ceremony, but neither should he participate. Indeed, a mild show of disdain seems obligatory.

There is much controversy among wine snobs about whether a red wine needs to be opened in advance of serving so the wine can be exposed to air. This is called "letting the wine breathe". We will avoid the merits of each position since we are not interested in being right, but only in being snobbish. There is considerable snobbery in each position and the best route to instant recognition is to contradict whatever the waiter or wine captain does. If the captain brings the bottle but doesn't uncork it, you tell him "I think you ought to let it breathe a bit." If the captain uncorks it and says, "I think it ought to breathe a while. I'll serve it in a few minutes." You answer politely (but with an edge of condescension), "Why don't you pour it now. It will open up in

the glass." Opening up is what a red wine does when exposed to air. It's not a bad phrase to use, being regarded by true snobs as a legitimate part of the vocabulary.

After the wine has been poured, you are ready for the next step. How do you hold the glass? If you answered "in either hand," they're holding a stool for you at Ferrell's. Holding the bowl between the thumb and forefinger is considered indecent in any state except Alabama. You risk unsightly fingerprints on the bowl and the warmth of your fingers may change the temperature of the wine. But that's not the point. It is not refined and a certain refinement is a concern of the Athenaeum member. You may cup the bowl in your hand but only if the wine is served too cold. In such event it demonstrates a discerning palate and an uncompromising approach. Red wine is often served too cold...but here you'd better know what you're doing because cupping the bowl is usually an unannounced insult to the server, whether it be a restaurant or a dinner party.

You can hold the glass by the base between the thumb and forefinger and still control the wine, but this takes a lot of practice. Still, it is the most elegant approach and if you can do it is immediately recognized as status in the wine community. Holding the glass by the stem, however, is the surest and best way to hold a wine glass. It combines taste and elegance and keeps your fingers away from the wine. You may allow the little finger to drift if you so desire.

Hold the wine up to eye level, tilt it precisely 37 degrees away from you, and look at it. Make sure beforehand the glass is not too full or the gesture will be ruined along with your self esteem. Wine connoisseurs are looking for color, bubbles and clarity but this really doesn't apply to us. We just like the effect.

After you have decided on your grip and looked at the wine carefully, it is time for the swirl and sniff. *Please* practice this at home before hand so you don't end up throwing the wine all over the table. The idea is to get the wine moving to aerate the wine so that it releases its volatile compounds - that is, it's smells and aromas. The way the wine clings to the glass and trickles down may tell you something., but probably not. A wine that trickles back slowly and in distinct streams has "legs" and may be high in alcohol, sugar or both. It may be a good sign, it may be bad. Either way, it is important to comment on it.

Put your nose down to the glass and sniff. Then give your glass a second swirl, put your nose farther into it and sniff more deeply.

Wine has its own vocabulary and this is invaluable to the wine snob. While you might smell a rose or describe the scent of perfume, you don't do either with a glass of wine. Wine has bouquet. In extremely snobbish surroundings wine has a *nose*, although that is really the language of the inner chamber. The experienced wine snob, having carried on about the bouquet, proceeds to announce certain characteristics. It is urgently important to learn which characteristics are acceptable and which are not.

For instance, if you think a wine's bouquet resembles - shall we say? - weasel urine, you are better off keeping your opinion to yourself.

Wines, generally, are thought to resemble the aromas of flowers, herbs, spices or wood, the best of all being violets. You are sure to be regarded as a first class wine snob if you detect the aroma of violets in a red wine. If you don't, black currants, cedar and vanilla are acceptable, in that order. Naturally you make much of this, exhibiting considerable excitement and, of course, conviction. Conviction above all else; after all, who can contradict you. The best they can say is that they do not smell violets, at which time it will be apparent that their experience is limited and they will feel appropriately humiliated.

Take a small sip and look thoughtful. As the resident wine snob, you will be expected to make a comment. It is hard to describe the taste of wine and harder yet to be snobbish about it, but there are a few rules to follow. If a descriptive word can be used for food, do not use it for wine. Roast beef is "delicious". Wine is "circumspect". One of the good words for wine is "big". This may come as a surprise since big is a rather inelegant word but it has caught the wine drinkers fancy, and whenever a strong red wine is served, you can automatically describe it as big and be certain to hold your own at any table. White wines can also be big but you can get into trouble here because the judgment is more subtle and requires more training. Don't be caught!

If *big* is taken, you can retreat to *body*. The words are almost interchangeable. You can thus join the other wine snob at the table and lord it over the others. A bit trickier, but loads more fun is to describe the wine in human adjectives. When doing this the snob need only know what adjectives are acceptable. For example you might say: "A prudent wine. Rather diffident and evasive, but quite prudent". OR...A good-humored wine, benevolent and cheerful - slightly obscene perhaps, but none the less good-humored. OR...It's lucid, yes, but almost Episcopalian in its predictability.

Somewhere it is written that sending back the bottle is the grand gesture of wine snobbery. Actually, it's the grand gesture of silliness, and the reason is not difficult to understand. All kinds of show-offs send back a perfectly good bottle of wine for no other reason than to appear knowledgeable. If it's a bad bottle, you'll know it immediately. It will resemble bad salad dressing. It is far better and shows more taste to have it replaced discretely. Use your own judgement here but don't overstep your bounds.

The cornerstones of snobbery have one consistent quality: age. Credentials are built upon old wealth, old rank and old family. Nothing new has ever won respect. Certainly, the new California vintages have won time and again in blind taste tests. It doesn't matter. You order a 1981 California Chardonnay - an exceptional year from an exceptional vineyard. The captain pours a bit and you try it. It's quite lovely. Nevertheless, that is not your response. To concede that anything not much older than two decades is to misunderstand entirely the concepts of wine snobbery. The

indicated response is to sigh and to suggest, "What a pity to drink it now; it is only a child."

These then are the two main tenants of wine snobbery - showmanship and bluff. The third is knowledge. Yes, there is a basic knowledge of wines that must be obtained to pull it all off. It would behoove us to know the difference between reds and whites and why rosé is not an acceptable alternative at *any* table. It may taste good but the wine snob will never order it in a restaurant. If you feel you must drink rose or blush, please do so in the privacy of your own home where you won't be an embarrassment.

It is also advantageous to learn what wines to marry to which food. Generally speaking, the heavier the dish, the heavier the wine which may be ordered, the object being that the wine will not overpower the dish, but rather enhance it. So, a red wine with roast beef, a white with fish, etc. But this, of course, is not the point. There are no rules for this and the wine snob will occasionally order a white Riesling with a rack of lamb just to raise a few eyebrows. Whatever you order, you may do so with conviction and make no apologies.

You have to learn to pronounce French or at least fake it. The best thing to do here, other than taking a diction class, is to garner what you can from the Inspector Clouseau movies. Zee treek eez to keep your leeps puhrsed and yeer palate quite hah. I wood lahk a bottle of Chateauneuf-du-Pape, 1982. Any of the Pink Panther movies can serve as models for correct wine ordering.

Finally, if you can memorize the starting lineups of every UK basketball team to make the final four, you can certainly make it a point to memorize the rainfall charts for the Loire Valley for every year between 1952 and 1990 and recite them at the appropriate time. The distinction to be gained is well worth the effort. This is true even if you don't care for wine. *It doesn't matter.* Whether you like it or not, like opera, wine sometimes must be endured for the sake of appearances.

So the next time you have a glass of wine, turn to the person next to you and describe it as you would describe your wife. No, not "austere and flinty as a Presbyterian minister." But rather as...spirited and charming, an elegant nose...shy at first, but then somewhat daring...with great legs.