

Out of the strong

Tim James



My religious education was of a slight and unenthusiastic Anglican kind, or perhaps I was dull or resistant. It took a while, and literary experience, anyway, before I realized the biblical origins (in the story of Samson) of the mysterious words on my childhood's handsome tin of Lyle's Golden Syrup: "Out of the strong came forth sweetness," with its picture of bees buzzing around the lion carcass in which was, presumably, their hive.

The idea that bees might be spontaneously generated from decaying flesh—initially as worms—was, I believe, widely held in the ancient and less ancient worlds. The syrup tin's image seemed bizarre but lingered less stickily than the words and their paradox of power in origin and consequential charm. In wine, the concept still fascinates me—perhaps at least partly because I live in and know best a comparatively harsh and hot wine country that traditionally somewhat abased itself for missing the wine world's cool-climate ideal. This bit of climatic regret neatly slotted into cultural cringe. It implied that the landscapes of these wine lands at the foot of Africa might be gratifyingly dramatic but inevitably shrink to inadequacy when tourism stands back for the enophile and they're contrasted with the benignly insipid, magically generative topography of Bordeaux or Burgundy.

Strength, implacable sunlight, rocks, and drought on the one hand; delicacy, elegance, and finesse on the other. It's just a decade or two since I believed they must be alternatives—and since most New World viticulturists and winemakers anxiously wondered if they could squeeze into the right category on the Winkler scale according to the "heat summation method."

Back in old Europe, the Douro Valley could probably most fittingly share with Lyle's Golden Syrup the words from Samson's riddle, with Port as the

sweetness and the severe terraces of the Cima Corgo as "the strong" from which it derives. The intensely sweet *vins doux naturels* called "jerepigo" and "muscadell" from the bleakly arid Klein Karoo in South Africa could also adopt the words as a slogan. But my fascination extrapolates and abstracts, and I'm thinking now more of elegance, refinement, and suchlike than of sweetness as such: Port and very definitely jerepigo are not delicate, though the former frequently achieves finesse, and the latter does so occasionally. Generally, the red table wines from those areas, made from the same grapes as the sweet wines, are not particularly elegant.

Seeing and understanding

I have wondered, in fact, if it is white wines more than red that can emerge from harsh places expressing delicacy (albeit often a forceful delicacy, if that's not itself a contradiction). In rugged Andalusia is what I will always remember as one of the most dramatic—and wonderfully unlikely—wine landscapes I have seen. It was Jesús Barquín, the Sherry man, who directed me there, not far from Granada, to the steep slopes and high, isolated vineyards of the Sierra Nevada whence Horacio Calvente draws Moscatel for his beautiful Guindalera—a wine that perfectly fits my Samson-derived criteria regarding origin and presence.

It's Guindalera's resolute dryness and modest alcohol that provide a clue that human choices (as well as factors like the cooling altitude in this case) make a crucial difference. Up the Iberian peninsula, in Priorat, few wines meet the criteria (more do from higher-lying Monsant), but the lighter, elegant reds and whites made by Terroir al Límit show that earlier picking can work magic in this sort of environment. Inland from the Mediterranean littoral—France, Italy, Greece, and beyond, all the way to the

Judean Hills—there must be more elegant, fresh wines coming off dry, stony hillsides than I, certainly, know. Perhaps enough that I shouldn't be so thrilled when I come across them from there or elsewhere, when they seem such a paradoxical miracle of natural and agricultural achievement.

With no wines do I feel it more vital to reject the notion that "it's only what's in the bottle that counts." Wine's sensual offering is subtler and richer when one can picture its origins. I got inklings of love for Mosel Riesling almost before tasting it, reading Hugh Johnson's description of wines "clean as steel, with the evocative qualities of remembered scents or distant music," but I started approaching understanding only when I gazed from the bridge at Bernkastel, almost aghast at those verticalities of slaty vineyard.

Marvelous contradictions

Of course, the Winkler scale and other predictive tools remain relevant, particularly when selecting grape varieties. Viticulturists and winemakers (other than Dirk Niepoort) will balk at Riesling in the Douro or Cabernet Franc in Andalusia. Not all fine South African white wine comes from extreme vineyards, but some—especially Chenin Blanc—does. Anyone who knew Chenin only from the equable Loire Valley would easily doubt that there could be finesse (equivalent though different) from a harsh, hot, dry mountain inland from the southern Atlantic. It was doubted here, too, until someone with imagination tried.

And it's pleasingly and even amusingly appropriate that some of the most steely refined of these Cape wines are made by enormous men! Forget about the stony hot hillsides, and look at burly rugby-playing Samsons like David Sadie, Donovan Rall, and Lukas van Loggerenberg. The marvelous contradiction multiplies.