

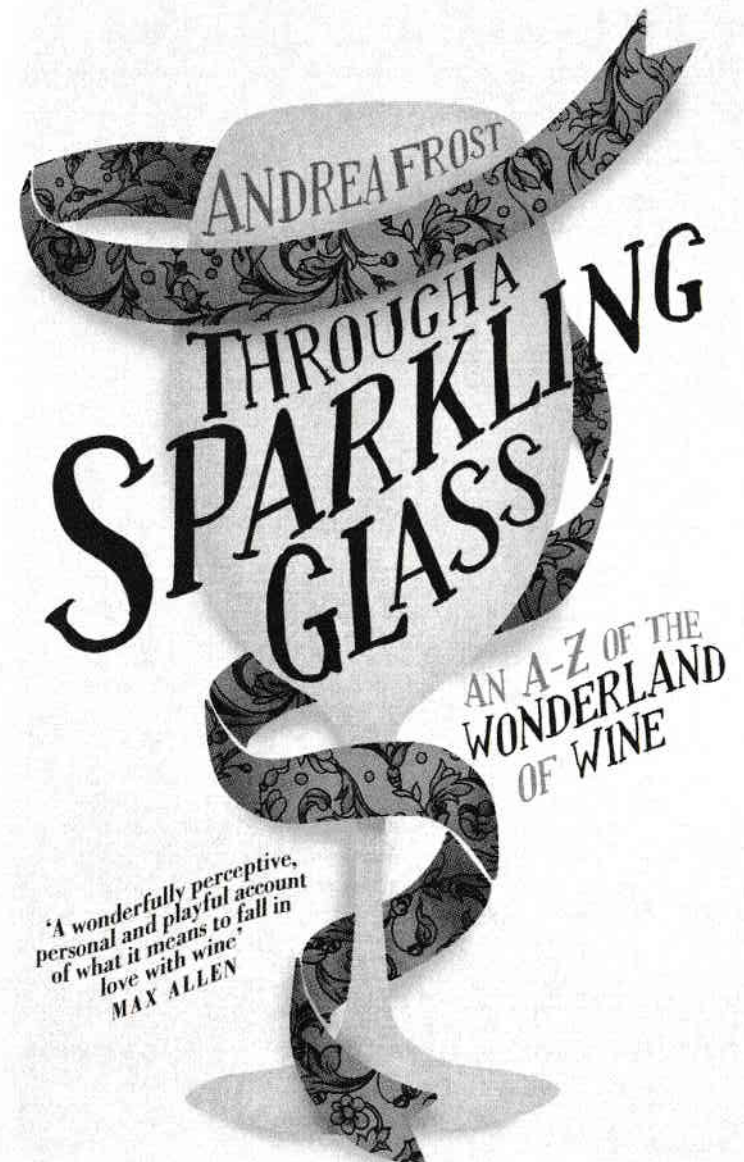


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THE AUTHOR

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*'There is communion of more than
our bodies when bread is broken
and wine drunk.'*

—M.F.K. Fisher



A GLASS OF WINE

There is a line in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where Huck says, 'Soon as it was night out we shoved; when we got her out to about the middle we let her alone, and let her float wherever the current wanted her to; then we lit the pipes, and dangled our legs in the water, and talked about all kinds of things.' There are other sensory and gastronomic moments that should be appreciated like the way Huck sees the smoking of a pipe: to have a cup of tea is as much about the break and a quiet moment of peace or conversation; fish and chips on the beach, a domestic adventure to fan the flames of your spirited side; and a beer at the pub equals loyalty, camaraderie and ritual. When I think about a glass of wine I don't think of it as a drink, but a small and precious event, usually transitioning me to another moment more cohesive to sensual pleasures – eating, socialising, nothing – than if I were not having it. Whether it's a small and happy event or a loud and convivial one, never is it *just* a glass of wine.

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A LESSON ON CORKED WINE

I'm strangely happy when I find people who don't know what corked wine is. Not because I can roll my eyes and bore them witless, but because it's refreshing to remember that most normal people enjoy wine with a healthy but basic level of knowledge. It's like finding a family who grew up without TV that reminds us how blissful ignorance can be.

Recently I was having lunch with three men from the fat-cat end of town who insisted that the wine at our table was corked because it had some cork in it. 'Actually, that's not quite right,' I tried.

'Yeah, that bit there means it's corked.'

'No, it doesn't.'

'Yes, look closely, see that bit,' one of them said, pointing to a speck of cork bobbing in the deep, dark, inky shiraz.

'No, that's *cork*, not *corked* wine.'

It went on until they remembered they were in a dining room, not a boardroom. Out of options, they asked, 'Well, what is corked wine?'

So I told them all about a little thing called TCA, the tiny compound that gets into corks and, when the corks are put into bottles of perfectly crafted wine, infuses the wine with a taint that ruins the winemaker's faultless work. I explained how TCA can be difficult to detect, especially in heavier red wines whose robustness can weather small amounts, but how it very easily upsets white wines, infusing them with the awful smell of mould in even minute amounts. Rather than realising the wine is corked, you might just think the wine is not much chop and never buy it again. I also explained the value of screwcaps on wine, and that many

of the best producers in the world are now turning to them and have been for years ...

Oh, and I politely suggested that if they really were relying on the sound of a popping cork for romance, then they might want to invest in a few more tricks. Let's face it, the pop only lasts a second, and the work is often done by someone else.

A few nights later I opened a bottle of *sancerre*, an unopened left-over from a dinner party. Instead of finding the racy, leaner style of *sauvignon blanc* made in the region, I got wafts of mildew. It was corked. I put it aside and twisted the lid on a *rosé* instead. As I was enjoying the wine, a friend walked through the front door. Before I knew it, he had helped himself to the *sancerre*, taken a gulp, looked curiously at it, then at me and asked with importance and emphasis, 'What am I drinking?'

So I started to tell him all about a little thing called TCA ...

'I LOVE it!'

Oh.

'Where's it from?' he asked, looking at his glass from underneath as if the answer might be written there.

'Well it's from a region in France ... but um, it's also ...'



HOW TO TELL IF YOUR WINE IS CORKED

If your wine is corked it will smell mouldy or musty and, in heavily tainted wines, quite unattractive. The first thing to go in a tainted wine is the fruit or perfume, so a wine that is quite lifeless and dull might also be corked, even if it doesn't smell overtly mouldy or musty. If you are unsure, ask your waiter or sommelier – they should replace your wine with a fresh bottle. Twist-top closures, like what you'd find on a bottle of olive oil or balsamic vinegar, are used as an alternative to cork to eliminate cork taint. They are widely used in Australia and New Zealand, and to some extent in America – but less so in Europe, where tradition rules.

'Awesome, that's what it is.'

A curious position indeed.

I could have continued, explaining it was corked and not good, but who am I to tell a man that he's not enjoying himself when he evidently is? Surely one of the points of wine is its subjectiveness? What I think is a good drink may be someone else's vinous nightmare, but that shouldn't undermine my pleasure. Anyway, it's not like I poured it for him.

I know, I know, I can see the other side of the argument sitting earnestly on my shoulder, wagging its finger and shaking its head, asking about my responsibility and duty to inform. How is anyone supposed to learn if no-one guides them?

My friend continued, 'This wine is just gorgeous, I'm trying to think what it tastes like ...'

I poured him another glass and let him hang in his bubble a while longer.

'Bliss?' I suggested.

A LOVELY CUVÉE

Everyone seems to know their favourite style of champagne. It wasn't until – and because – I was nearing my trip to Champagne that someone asked me to declare mine.

'I don't know,' I said.

'But you must have a favourite.'

I said again that I didn't.

'Come on, your favourite style, what is it?'

It's terrible, this adult version of peer pressure. I was tempted to blurt out a big name – I mean, I did go to the Mumm tent at the Grand Prix once and I totally loved that. But I stuck to the truth: 'No, I really don't have one.'

'Oooh, controversial.'

Really?

I wasn't trying to be; but I did begin to wonder how it was that I got to this point in life having achieved so many other things, yet failed to know my favourite champagne style. Was this serious?

So when I got to Champagne without any champagne preferences, I was determined to develop some.



'Each cuvée we make is a different person with its very own different character.'

I was with a fifth-generation Champenoise. (The Champenoise like to anthropomorphise their wines. I found it both charming and helpful.) Using the cuvée-as-a-character idea, we focused on three wines – the traditional champagne, the champagne blanc de blancs and the champagne blanc de noirs.

'This person is a good balance of the terroir,' she said of the first, the traditional champagne, made from pinot noir and chardonnay. 'It is not a slick guy from the city, nor a farmer from the vines, but a good balance of both.'

I know this guy, I thought. Solid, family man, gentrified farmer,

LBRIS

A ROSÉ BY ANY OTHER WAY

There are two ways to make champagne in a rosé style. 'Rosé d'assemblage' is to add a tiny amount of red wine – like adding a dash of red cordial to water to get a pink drink – to the white wine before continuing on with the normal champagne-making process. This typically makes a lighter style rosé champagne. Champagne is the only region in France that allows rosé to be made in this way. The other way, known as 'rosé de saignée' is where red grapes are crushed, the juice left to extract only a small amount of colour from the skins (the longer the contact the stronger the colour extracted) before being bled off and used to make champagne.

per cent pinot noir grapes, the variety which gives the champagne fullness, richness, strength and power. 'This is the tough guy, the powerful guy, but he is not just one-dimensional, not like a football player who is only about strength. He is strong, but he can also move. A dancer.'

Well, yes, I thought, noting the fuller pinot noir aromas and the rich and opulent palate – the power. As I tasted I noticed something else, something more fluid, attractive. Without thinking I

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knows how to fix a fence and decant a wine. Sure, I get this. I took another sip. I liked him, but he was never going to be my favourite.

Next up was the blanc de blancs champagne, made from 100 per cent chardonnay grapes. 'This is a female,' she said, lifting her nose from the flute. 'Yes, definitely a feminine character with lots of finesse and elegance.'

Why yes, this champagne *did* taste feminine. All light and lovely, with wafts of white flowers and honey, a lick of minerality and a long and lovely length. Finesse and elegance: I could do that. Maybe I was a blanc de blancs girl. Perhaps I could do favourites after all. Besides, this was a delightful wine.

Finally, we tasted the blanc de noirs grand cru, the wine made with 100

said, 'It's still a very elegant style.'

'Yes! You see? The dancer.'

I was all over this.

She went a step further, saying she could also use her intimate knowledge of the cuvées to pick wine for guests, even those she didn't know. A sort of oenological character profiling.

'We can tell just by looking at people what sort of cuvée they will be,' she said. 'If we have a worker with dust on his boots—'

Before she could finish, I said, 'The traditional.'

'Trés bien.'

I was so with her. I couldn't wait to hear what she thought my new favourite wine, the blanc de blancs, said about me.

'This,' she said, giggling, pointing to the blanc de blancs, 'this we always know to pour for the girl who turns up with the big blonde hair, the high heels and lots of make-up.'

Oh.

Like I said, who needs favourites anyway?

✦ TASTING NOTES ✦

✦ There are three grape varieties that can be used to make champagne, two of which are red. These are chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier.

✦ Blanc de blancs: This 'white of whites' is champagne made from chardonnay only. Because of this, blanc de blancs are typically finer and more delicate – perfect aperitif wines.

✦ Blanc de noirs: 'White of blacks', this refers to champagne made only from pinot noir, pinot meunier or a blend of the two grapes, making a fuller style of champagne.

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✱ Adding a strawberry to a glass of champagne is about as complementary as throwing a pink dye bomb into the Trevi Fountain. It is not meant to be. If you are after aromas of strawberry, or the nod to romance you think it represents, order rosé champagne and knock 'em dead with some early Sadé.

A MINERALITY LESSON

It was a breakthrough moment – not only for its simplicity, but because it was one of those times when you finally understand the series of small and surprising events, some of which must have seemed quite unfortunate at the time, that helped to make something so wonderful.

I was in Champagne learning about the sequence of natural events that make champagne taste as it does.

We had driven up and parked on a hill above the village of Villers-Marmery, with a clear view across the valley floor. Behind us was the Montagne de Reims, the mountain range that gives its name to the mostly pinot noir-growing region of Champagne. The lush forest that rides the spine of the range is a cluster of beech, oak and walnut trees that is home to deer, boar, foxes and rabbits. The forest is also home to bunkers and bloodshed from the human wars that came before. It was early October, and the treetops were turning from lush dark greens to deep rusts and ember reds, like a stovetop element slowly heating up before our eyes. Underfoot, between the rows of vines, licks of white chalk peppered the uneven ground.



A MINERAL CONTROVERSY

Minerality and similar terms have been used to describe wines such as champagne and chablis for some decades. Recently the term has been used with more regularity throughout the wine-tasting world, and this has caused some controversy. The issue up for contention is whether or not you can taste mineral notes from stones or minerals in the ground that have been extracted by the vines and, ultimately, have made it into your glass of wine. This has caused all sorts of discussion, but when you think about it, it makes more sense that we might taste minerals than banana, pineapple, coffee, matchsticks and gunflint.

'There are five things that make up terroir,' I was told, my guide looking at my notebook, waiting for me to write before he handed them over. I obeyed. 'Soil, subsoil, altitude, exposure and gradient. Change one, you change the terroir.'

With nature as his classroom and a combination of figures drawn in the ground, fistfuls of crumbling dirt and arm-sweeping gestures to the hills and valleys as his teaching materials, my guide explained how Champagne – the place – works.

He explained that an inland sea covered the area 70 million years ago. When it dried up 20 million years later, it left behind the crushed remains of the belemnite crustaceans that had flourished in the sea. He said that, when compressed, the shellfish remains formed a layer of chalk a few hundred metres below a covering of topsoil. Twenty million years ago, an earthquake shook the land so ferociously that it broke up the chalky seabed and pushed it up above ground, like the steps of an escalator rising out of the flat, still with the layer of soil on top. Another earthquake 10 million years later pushed the hills we were standing on even higher, filling in the gaps between the steps with slopes of white chalk. This explains why – when you look at Champagne now