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# THE CONVIVIALITY OF HARVEST

Reality or marketing myth?

**Katrina Alloway** heads to the Loire in search of answers

Harvest is a time of bucolic, bacchanalian bliss—or so every wine company, marketing board, and tourist organization would have us believe. The implicit promise is that by buying into the dream and drinking a bottle of their delicious wine, we too can participate, albeit vicariously, in this moment of fecundity and celebration.

Yet the wine industry is facing the same problems that grip every other part of agriculture: a limited legal workforce prepared to work long, physically tough hours for the minimum wage; debates over man versus machine; and for many an end result that sells for less than the cost of production. There's a hard edge to agriculture these days that those pictures of laughing grape pickers don't show.

So is the whole idea of “the conviviality of harvest” mere spin? Are we being conned into believing that those involved actually find pleasure in their work, when really it is a time of hard, mechanized, soulless labor? Is it really this grim? Talk to wine producers. While protesting how tough harvest is, they will often smile and, with a twinkle in their eye, confess to having met their partners at this time of year.

So what is the truth? I enjoy drinking wine, but like most of us, I am increasingly aware of the human cost of all comestibles and want to enjoy my evening glass (or two or three) in good conscience. Goethe's observation that “it is not matter that counts but the gesture behind it” seemed particularly apt in this context and prompted me to ask whether “the conviviality

of harvest” is a marketing myth, or whether it really adds something to the intrinsic value of wine. I wanted an answer. So I set up harvesting stints in the Loire Valley and headed off. It was time to get my hands dirty.

I am not remotely suggesting that two weeks picking in the Loire was an adequate basis for a comprehensive, investigative report into the conditions of global viticultural employment. What I wanted was an understanding of “the gesture behind” harvest and whether the notion of “conviviality” still exists.

I confess to being anxious. Would I be physically tough enough to work long days in the fields? Would I know what to do? And what would I find? Would the working conditions be so grim that I would never be able to enjoy wine with integrity again? Or might I, perhaps, even enjoy myself and enjoy wine even more?

## **A domestic workforce**

Why the Loire? I have a soft spot for Cabernet Franc, Chenin Blanc, and Sauvignon Blanc (they flatter my cooking). Moreover, there's a lot of hand-harvesting there, and much as I would have enjoyed driving a large harvest machine, I doubt I would have found a winery that would let me loose on one.

The first thing that surprised me when I arrived at Chinon producer Baudry-Dutour at 8 o'clock on a Monday morning was that all the other harvesters were French. Seasonal fruit pickers in the UK these days tend to be Eastern European or, to





our shame, those with dubious work permits. “We just wouldn’t get away with that,” says Jean-Max Manceau, president of Syndicat Chinon. “There are just too many spot checks.”

After some initial instructions, everyone piled into vans, and we headed off into the vineyards. Here we picked up secateurs and a bucket, and I squatted in front of my first vine. “Hand selection” is the crux of good picking and something of a fine-wine mantra; only the good fruit must be kept, and anything rotten, unripe, or raisined must be thrown on the ground. I look at the vine and wondered what to select? One bunch of Cabernet Franc looked beautiful—even-sized grapes with a deep blue hue—but another bunch had a distinctly pinkish tinge, and another was slightly shriveled. Should I reject them? Wasting food goes against the grain, but then so does bad wine. I felt ridiculously inadequate and pestered my fellow pickers for advice till Manceau said, “Stop asking questions and start tasting.” So I started tasting a berry from questionable bunches and quickly realized why anything unripe with a sour flavor or rotten with a bitter taste had to be discarded.

After a while I learned how to select without tasting, but my admiration for people who pick botrytis-affected fruit destined for sweet wines grew tenfold. Unlike us, they are not working with uniform ripeness but rather differing degrees within a bunch, and they will probably have to revisit each vine several times to pick grapes at the optimum time. This makes understanding what to pick, and what not to pick, so much more complicated.

It was exclusively Cabernet Franc in this vineyard, Clos des Pins, on the hill above the town of Chinon. It was a beautiful place to be. Recently purchased by Baudry-Dutour, it has the potential to produce high-quality wine. (One to look out for in a couple of years.) The morning passed quickly, as the team worked fast and together, passing full buckets of grapes across the rows of vines to be emptied into the tractor-trailer. The atmosphere was cheerful and hardworking. Perhaps the loudest group was a gang of local mothers. “We just do the harvest for some extra money,” said Julia, in between cracking jokes with her two sidekicks. “At least it makes a change from doing the ironing,” she added with a laugh.

When the light rain that was falling all morning turned into a thunderstorm, everyone returned to the vans to wait it out. At 3pm the decision was made to give up. (Despite the short day, wages were not docked.) But by now the ground had turned to mud, and there was much laughter and sliding about until the vehicles were eventually pushed on to terra firma. I was filthy and wet through, but it was a good start, and Baudry-Dutour Clos des Pins 2007 will always be a special wine for me.

In many ways, the high spirits of this first day set the tone for the rest of the harvest, though thankfully the weather cleared up, and there was beautiful autumn sun for the next two weeks.

For the vigneron, this joie de vivre was due at least in part to the low expectations caused by the bad weather in August. But autumn sun had ripened the fruit, and it was being picked with a respectable average of 213g of sugar per liter, meaning

12.7% alcohol by volume in the finished wine and acidity at 4.78 per liter. “The wines have lots of aroma and are very fresh and fruity. This is not a tannic year, but it is a good one,” explained Manceau.

Yet during the terrible summer, a failed crop had seemed a very real possibility. Modern vigneron may have many techniques to help them make decent wine in poor vintages, but they can no more make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear than their ancestors could. Small surprise, then, that many experience the same highs and lows that Sir James George Frazer described in *The Golden Bough*, his study of Ancient Greece:

*He [the Greek] fashioned for himself a train of gods and goddesses of spirits and elves, out of the shifting panorama of the seasons, and followed the annual fluctuations of their fortunes with alternate emotions of cheerfulness and dejection, of gladness and sorrow, which found their natural expression in alternate rites of rejoicing and lamentation, of revelry and mourning.<sup>1</sup>*

Today’s winemaker may take a more profane approach to vineyard husbandry, and vegetation rites may be a thing of the past, but even the most hard-bitten vineyard entrepreneur will usually say that he finds vines in winter sad, spring budbreak uplifting, and autumn celebratory.

In 2007, the unexpectedly and mercifully healthy crop was not the only reason for high spirits. Everywhere there was a sense that this was a special time, something out of the norm, a time for working hard and playing hard. I started to understand what “the conviviality of harvest” really means. The vineyard is not a place for social niceties, and the jokes are mostly scatological, but there is a lot of camaraderie and goodwill and an acceptance of human foibles. Fatigue and dirt are always great social levelers. In the picking team, education, social status, and abilities beyond the bounds of the vineyard are all of little consequence; what matters is that each individual pulls his or her weight in the team so that the work gets done. Cracking a joke that lightens the backbreaking, physical work is far more important than any polite pretension.

### Moving around

After a couple of days at Baudry-Dutour, I moved on for a stint at Domaine Filliatreau in Saumur-Champigny, went back to Chinon for a day at Domaine Noiré, then on to St-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil for a few days at Frédéric Mabileau, rounding things off at Domaine de la Chevalerie in Bourgueil.

The teams at these wineries were also almost exclusively French, but a couple had a more eclectic mix. There were local seasonal fruit pickers; students ranging from those with rather vague courses of study to muscular PhDs, who often stay on local campsites for the duration; the long-term unemployed, of whom there are many in France; and retired people who may well need the extra money but who choose this work because, as retired telecommunications worker Philippe put it, “the atmosphere is good.”

Clockwise from top left: At Domaine Baudry-Dutour in Chinon; Jean-Max Manceau dispensing in the vineyard; part of the Collard family relaxing over lunch; at Domaine Filliatreau in Saumur-Champigny; Pierre Caslot prepares for the party at Domaine de la Chevalerie in Bourgueil; Cindy displaying the fruits of her labor

The morning passed quickly, as the team worked fast and together, passing full buckets of grapes across the rows of vines to be emptied into the tractor-trailer. The atmosphere was cheerful and hardworking. Perhaps the loudest group was a gang of local mothers

There were also a lot of gypsies. Drive about in the Loire Valley and you will notice the number of gypsy camps, most of them permanent, often with very smart caravans. They are part of the agricultural life of the region, performing much of the seasonal work. (Further south in France this work tends to be carried out by North African immigrants.)

In Bourgueil, the Collard family has been harvesting for four generations at Domaine de la Chevalerie, which is owned by the Caslot family. The Collards used to bring their horse-drawn caravans to the domaine for harvest, but now, like the rest of us, they commute. Michel Collard proudly tells me that this year ten of his children and seven of his 38 grandchildren are harvesting. The family makes up the whole of the team. The Caslots are savvy enough to let them get on with it, leaving Michel in charge. Respect for the Collards' traditions and their desire for privacy is probably why there has been a successful long-term partnership between the two families. This is not always the case, and there are plenty of unsavory stories, too.

According to Manceau, the general rule of thumb seems to be that harvest teams have to be either exclusively gypsy or exclusively native French, and problems, suspicions, and even crime will arise when the two groups are mixed. So it was particularly refreshing at the harvest party at Daniel Chotard in Sancerre to find a mix of both social groups. Since most of the team were musicians, playing and enjoying music seemed to transcend the cultural differences and create equality.

Meeting all of these varied people, and the sense that harvest was a special time with its own rules, reminded me of anthropologist Victor Turner's work on "liminality."<sup>2</sup> Liminality is a time apart, a rite of passage, a period caught between two states. This seems an apt description of harvest time for both man and nature. For us, the *vendangeurs*, it is a few weeks away from our normal working lives; for the vine, it is the time between growing and dormancy; for the wine, it is the time between fruit and liquid. Everything is in transit, betwixt and between. During a period of such vicissitude, social norms do not apply or are turned on their head.

Turner describes how, in liminal periods, the fool becomes king and the king becomes fool, and how new queens are crowned. Such rituals may not literally be played out in France's vineyards, but there are plenty of examples that fit the mold. When gypsy girl Cindy danced flamenco at Daniel Chotard's harvest party, she may not physically have been crowned queen, but there was not a single person in that crowded room who would have denied her the title. And on the opposite side, when one of the porters at Domaine Filliatreau hurt his shoulder and had to move on to the lighter work of grape picking, it was owner Fred Filliatreau who picked up the hod—and became the butt of jokes for a while, which he cheerfully shouldered

along with the grapes. He had the grace and intelligence to accept the lowlier role, and perhaps even to enjoy it, aware that it was only a temporary dethronement.

Not all vigneronns, however, are prepared to accept this temporary reversal of roles, and the atmosphere in those teams is palpably less convivial. One harvester—who asked to be called Nemo (the word for "nobody" that Cyclops is tricked into using in Homer's *Odyssey*) and for the domaine where he worked to remain anonymous—was particularly insulted that the boss addressed her employees as *tu* (the less formal form for "you") but demanded to be called *vous* (the more formal form) in return. This may seem trivial to non-French speakers, but it is the equivalent of being spoken to by your employer as though you were a child.

### No picnic

It was through my conversations with Nemo and his friends that I started to understand more about how tough life is for seasonal fruit pickers. When they pick, they may be paid the minimum wage of €8.44 an hour, but because work can be canceled with very little notice (perhaps due to bad weather or a backup in the winery), they may not get a full week's work, making this a hard and precarious existence. Seasonal picking is no picnic. At the same time, most vineyard owners bemoan the unreliability of many pickers and are not surprised when the morning head-count is lower than expected, so liberties are probably taken on both sides.

Nemo also told me he wished to learn more about winemaking, but his interest had been dismissed. Of course harvest is a very, very busy period for owners and winemakers, so being asked to tell seasonal workers about the more complex processes involved in vinification might be a tall order. As with any enterprise, however, making time to pass on knowledge to staff does create a tremendous amount of goodwill. In Montlouis, Damien Delechneau gets out a few bottles to be opened at his harvest party, so pickers can at least taste wine from previous years. It is certainly appreciated.

Alcohol is clearly a thorny issue, though. Historically, harvesters drank wine freely in the vineyard, and in many ways this is still part of the harvest culture. At Baudry-Dutour they still load a couple of plastic *vracons* of plonk on to the vans for those who want. Far be it from me to criticize anyone for enjoying a glass of wine at the right time, but there is something slightly sordid about providing workers with a large supply of free booze, almost as a palliative or a sedative. As Nemo agrees, "A drunk workforce is a docile workforce," and as Filliatreau concedes, "Free wine does encourage dependency. Moreover, people are using tools, so it can be dangerous. And one drunk can wreck a whole day's work."

In another way, the provision of wine and food is also one of the biggest parts of the “conviviality of harvest” myth. There was a time when harvesters were lodged at the domaine and fed three times a day. Paul Caslot, now 80 years old, remembers when harvesters, including Michel Collard’s grandfather, were served a dawn breakfast of bread, herring, and pork (much more suitable than the croissant and yogurt on which I was trying to get through the day), then a substantial lunch and dinner. (He also says that food tasted better in those days, and for some odd reason I believe him.) But feeding a team of between 20 and 40 harvesters three times a day is a huge cost in money and time, so the tradition has largely stopped. Nowadays harvesters tend to bring their own *casse croute* (literally “break crust”)—a baguette with ham or cheese or chocolate—and eat this perched on an upturned bucket.

The women who once spent harvest undertaking this gargantuan amount of cooking now tend to take on the administration of the domaine or winemaking itself. Three women whose wines particularly caught my attention during my visit are Stephanie Caslot at Domaine de la Chevalerie, Tessa Laroche at Domaine aux Moines in Savennière, and Lise Jousset of her eponymous winery in Montlouis.

Fortunately the superstitious belief—once prevalent in France and probably the rest of Europe as well—that females should not enter the winery because a menstruating woman could turn the wine sour, seems to have turned into guffaw-inspiring folklore. (Note to Loire vignerons: I do hope my presence among you didn’t have any damaging effects...)

So as women now labor over a hot PC or wine vat rather than the stove, long lunches are a thing of the past, and the real celebrations are kept for the harvest party on the final evening, usually called the *berlot* in the Loire. Not every domaine hosts an end-of-harvest party, for it is a lot of work at a very busy time. But for those who do, it is a time of laughing, singing, plentiful wine, and good, often seasonal food.

### Summing up

So, back to my original question: Is “the conviviality of harvest” a mere marketing myth, or does it add something elusive to the value of wine?

My experience in the Loire suggests that the tradition is alive and well. It’s a combination of enjoying, and even being grateful for, the bounty of nature—a time when people are obliged to drop social pretensions and appreciate the qualities of their fellow men and women, from whatever social group they hail from. It is a transient period in which rules can be broken, yet the astute players know that these rules will be re-established at the end of this exceptional time and are happy to go along. And although catering has changed in recent years, at least it is a time of employment and for most a time when wine and food are abundant. These factors combined make something special and, yes, convivial.

Harvest is also, however, very hard work, and anyone whose only income comes from seasonal fruit picking, paid at a minimum wage and subject to cancellation at a moment’s notice due to bad weather, leads a very tough life. I may have enjoyed my time picking grapes and meeting Julia, Philippe,

Nathalie, Julien, Delphine, and the rest, but if I ever forget that it is their sweat and blood that allows me to enjoy a particularly fine bottle of hand-harvested wine, then I hope the secateurs scar on the little finger of my left hand will throb to remind me of their toil. But I hope I will also remember the laughter, the singing, and the jokes. After all, as even my angry anarchist friend Nemo said, with a wink, *la vendange, c’est tres bien pour draguer* (look it up).

So if “the conviviality of harvest” may be genuine, at least in some ways, why is that important? Fine, it proves that not all marketing is a lie, but is that it? There may be practical reasons why hand-harvesting will win out over mechanization: Uneven, old vines aren’t uniform enough for machines, and many of the more vertiginous slopes that host some of the world’s best vineyards would simply overturn a heavy harvester. Hand-harvesting is, however, slow and vastly expensive, and recent experiments show that it doesn’t always reap a huge benefit in quality—in 2003, for example, Domaine Filliatreau harvested half a plot by hand and the other half by machine, but when the resulting wines were tasted blind in 2007, the difference between them was minuscule.

So why do we like the idea of hand-harvesting? Yes, there is the implication of care and the notion of tradition, but there is also the idea that as consumers we are participating vicariously in “the conviviality of harvest” when we drink wine. But why is that important?

Perhaps it is because wine is one of very few comestibles to be dated with its moment of creation (its vintage), rather than its point of decomposition (its sell-by date). At its most extreme, a packet of, say, cheese, is racing toward putridity and reminds us of our own mortality via the implied threat of some terrible form of food poisoning. Wine, on the other hand, seems to extend our lives by allowing us to relive the past. A bottle not only preserves but can even improve a moment in history. “I remember 2007—it was so wet, but then we had that Indian summer, and it’s amazing how ripe this wine is...”

A wine at optimum maturity has improved its past and softened with time, just as nostalgia has crept into our memories. And part of that retrospection is the need to believe that harvest was not a time of hard, mechanized, soulless labor but instead a time of joy.

The idea of human exploitation is abhorrent in any industry but perhaps especially so for wine. After all, if I’m thirsty, I’ll drink a glass of water. I choose wine because I like the way it tastes and I like the way it makes me feel. Because it’s a luxury that increases my enjoyment of life, I want to know that the people who made it had at least some pleasure in the process. Now I know that, at least on some estates in the Loire, “the conviviality of harvest” is a reality. Which means I can enjoy my favorite wines in good conscience. ■

### Notes

1. Frazer, Sir James George, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (Macmillan & Co Ltd, London; 1941).
2. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Aldine de Gruyter, New York; 1995).