

An old friend of mine from a former life bought me a film on wine for Xmas. It's called Mondavino, and it won high praise at the Cannes Film Festival way back in 2004. In many ways it's a strange film. Shot in documentary style, with no commentary, it's a kind of pure journalism – just the camera and the subjects, whether powerful wine-families like the Mondavis of California, or famous winemakers like Michel Rolland, or an Argentinian Indian living in a shack, getting 10 cents a bottle for his wine, and barely covering his costs. Yet somehow this strange almost home-made movie gets to the heart of a lot of issues in the wine world, which even find echoes here in Devon.

The heart of the argument goes like this.

Is wine really the same as soap powder? Can it be packaged, branded, marketed – in just the same way? Or does this process devalue it – and turn a life-enhancing pursuit of man for thousands of years into something insipid and uniform?

We meet the Californian Mondavis. There is a magical moment here where the son tells the film-maker that the best thing about floating the company on the New York Stock Exchange was that “ I got my father back “. His father is sitting next to him – and when he hears this he frowns – “ What's that? “ he says. “ I said I got to get you back when we floated” says the son. Dad's expression says it all. “ What the hell are you talking about? “ Following this up on Google later, it becomes clear that all was certainly not sweetness and light in the Mondavi family – there were famous bust-ups and the empire crumbles just after the film is made, apparently because of tensions between – you guessed it – father & sons. Brilliant filming. Dallas in Napa.

Other magical moments include the Mondavi's Italian wine partners and their pro-Mussolini heritage, the flying winemaker who seems to tell all his clients the same thing ( “ micro-oxygenate”) & a succession of passionate small winemakers, some of whom are not quite the innocents they would like to appear.

Great stuff. But what has it do with Yearlstone and Devon or even South West England's wine scene?

Bear with me. The real theme of the film is just how successful big business has been in dominating the wines we are all offered with “ brands”. Even in Burgundy we learn how the same wine is labelled and relabelled for different markets, to appear something different. We learn why wines are becoming more and more alcoholic, oaked – and uniform in taste. ( It's called the Parker Effect after America's pre-eminent wine critic, Robert Parker )

But we are also shown the other side of wine. The world of individuality and diversity, where anyone – rich or poor – can grow and make wine which has more personality and more local character than any designer brand. A world where the individual counts. There may not be much money in it. But there are people enjoying life, and giving enjoyment. What's more they don't talk like the chief operating office of Microsoft.

As English wine gets bigger, these issues are already being fought out here. Big City money has already set out to create English wine “ Brands” in sparkling wine. And already they are getting the lions share of publicity. The early “ rebellious” wine individuals who inspired me back in the late 80's and 90's are getting fewer and fewer. Maybe this is coming of age. Or maybe the start of a sellout.

Perhaps they'll make a film about us one day. “ Anglovino”.

In the meantime here's to a great start to 2012 – and the end of the long winter pruning!

CC Version 2

PS New Year started well for us, with a great write up in the French wine mag Le Revue du vins de France – which rated our VIntage Brut 8th out of 50 English fizzes – “ beautiful example of English fizz, & great value for money”...And if you’re going to the West End to see a show, pop in to the famous Wiltons restaurant for a pre-theatre supper offered with a glass of our Number 2!