

🐾 *First Growth: An Essay on Love & Wine*

by SOPHIE HELENE MENIN

Some women marry older men for wealth, some for security, some for real estate. Mine was a love marriage, but had it not been, I might have married Geoffrey for the wine. A man who has been collecting wine for decades comes with the most sublime baggage. His cellar yields cases of treasures that tantalize the palate, reveal the past and encourage one to rejoice in the present. Each bottle bears 750 ml of story: European vacations; treasures to mark special occasions; gifts from ex-girlfriends; the singular bottle from the small estate discovered at an out-of-the-way wine store; barter from clients who could not pay their bills; the big splurge.

Wine and matrimony are closely linked for us. We registered at Sherry-Lehmann. We even purchased a bottle of vintage Le Montrachet, the ultimate white Burgundy, to sip when we took our vows. At the last minute my husband decided it would be sacrilegious to open such a bottle without the proper time to linger and instead poured the Matanzas Creek, a fine quality California Chardonnay we had chosen to serve two hundred guests. The wedding video reveals a surprised pucker across my face as my lips touch the silver chalice.

Last summer we catalogued the collection. Geoffrey pulled bottles from the cav and I took notes. We sorted the list by region, winemaker and vintage. Then we evaluated each bottle to determine whether we should store the wine at home or let it age in our locker. About halfway through the process I became giddy.

I knew I had married into wine, but I did not know I had the auspicious

luck of wedding just as a large chunk of the collection had entered into the “not getting any better” stage. Scores of bottles had reached their prime and basked in it long enough to demand immediate attention. Since then we have been opening distinctive bottles as if every Saturday night was New Year’s Eve. Either I cook and my husband searches for the meal’s perfect mate, or he declares which wine we shall try and together we design a menu to set it off in the most favorable light.

I tend to like imperfect wines the best, like that one bottle of 1982 Chateau Ducru-Beaucaillou that had turned, just a little. This classic St. Julien, born on 120 acres of gravelly hills overlooking France’s Gironde River, should have possessed a deep claret color. When we drank it, flames of orange sparked against the edge of the hand-blown crystal glass. The orange signaled decay, but you could still taste the nuanced undertones of cedar, cassis and ripe blackberries in this slightly unraveled beauty and imagine the wine in its prime. The Ducru-Beaucaillou reminded me of so many women I love and admire. Aging enchanters with great bone structure and even greater depth, who no longer possess the rosy glow of youth, yet remain objects of wonder.

I also appreciate the wines we opened too young, like the 1999 Mondavi Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. One cannot drink this wine simply by uncorking the bottle. It took hours for the protective coil, a tightly bound double helix of tannins and alcohol, to unwind and reveal hints of how, if stored properly, it will mature over time. We had to be patient, take detours, drink a lesser wine as an intermezzo, before we could experience the lush tapestry of dark fruit, licorice and exotic spices. I didn’t mind. How often do you have the chance to taste the future? We have a dozen more.

The cellar contains quirky wines too. A Schwarz Riesling from Germany, Buffalo Blood from a friend’s ranch in Marin, Bull’s Blood from Hungary. Then there are the perfect wines. These are the ones I am just coming to understand. I seem to lack an intuitive affinity for perfection. It’s easier to appreciate imperfection. It grabs your attention. You can’t escape it. Imperfection is human; perfection smacks of the divine.

Recently my husband decided to celebrate the third anniversary of our engagement by opening what might be the best bottle of wine in our collection, a 1961 Lafite Rothschild. His sister gave him the bottle twenty-five years ago.

Lafite Rothschild is one of five Bordeaux wines that earned the designation first growth under the Classification of 1855, one of six if you include the sauterne Château d’Yquem. Most wine aficionados consider 1961 to be the region’s premier mid-20th century vintage.

I must admit at first I was a little disappointed by the choice. I had wanted to roast a duck. I had a vision of crisp skin, dark fatty meat and a 1985 Shafer helping to restore the much-maligned reputation of Merlot. He knew my fantasy. I had articulated it on more than one occasion. Still, he said Lafite Rothschild was not a wine for duck. Lamb or veal would make a better match. How could I complain?

Wanting to be an equal partner to this grand bottle, I rummaged through my books and asked my friends what to make. In *The Slow Mediterranean Kitchen*, Paula Wolfert suggested veal shanks smothered in carrots, chestnuts and chanterelles, a favorite recipe of her daughter, who works as a wine importer. The recipe took three hours to prepare. I seared meat, rendered lardons, caramelized onions, braised and basted. Finally, I plated the veal shanks in a large earthenware dish over steaming spaetzle. There was enough food for six.

As the earthy aromas perfumed our home, we set the table, lit a fire and opened the night’s main act. We were dressed casually in jeans, bare feet, and comfortable tees. Still, dinner held all the promise and anxious expectation of a lavish black-tie affair.

Geoffrey pulled out my chair before I sat down, then walked to the credenza and poured a small amount of wine from the decanter into a tasting glass to inspect. He returned to the table holding a white towel beneath the decanter’s rim and poured the Lafite into our hand-blown crystal goblets. After he sat down, we raised our glasses and toasted to our life together. We sipped and savored. A 1961 Lafite Rothschild represents silky elusive perfection. Light on the tongue and supremely balanced with subtle hints of almonds and violets, the symmetry brings to mind the elegance of a Bach fugue.

Moments later I bit into the veal shank. The chestnuts, lardons and braised veal bespoke essays in lusty indulgence for carnivorous appetites. I had set out silver caviar spoons to scoop the marrow, which I adore. As I dipped the curved blade into the soft fat, the scraping of the spoon against the bone brought to mind my bulldog Satchmo and how she would relish this meal. At that

moment, I realized I had miss-stepped. The luscious veal shanks seemed somehow immodest in the presence of such a noble wine.

Gazing across the candlelight at my husband, I could tell that he too recognized the imbalance. We both chose to be polite, to respect the integrity of all the delights that graced our table, even if they were not complementary. We chewed our food slowly, savoring each morsel, then took a breath to cleanse our palates before sipping.

On this third anniversary of our engagement, fine food and drink encouraged us to make space for difference, to value both finesse and lust. Of course, a tender rack of lamb would have been a more elegant mate for the heavenly first growth and a bold Barolo could have stared down the haute-peasant cuisine more fully (it did so splendidly the next night). Hopefully, like dancing together, we’ll have years to get these pairings right.

