

gob-less hedonism



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My wine's ^{not} bigger than your wine.

What is it about the need for big, brawny, full-throttle reds? Men have been insecure about drinking light-bodied wines even as far back as 1779, when Dr. Samuel Johnson said, "Claret is the liquor for boys, Port for men." Don't get me wrong—I think that bold red wines have their place. But as a rule, I value refinement over ripeness, complexity over power, clarity of expression over sheer weight.

While some people think that a red wine must be massive and dense in order to be considered great, I am not one of them. In fact, I find that huge concentrations of fruit and excessive levels of alcohol only serve to obscure the expression of terroir, fatigue the palate and decrease a wine's usefulness at the table. In contrast, a wine that possesses a harmonious balance of ripeness, alcohol and acidity expresses both fruit and soil character with greater clarity and detail; it refreshes the palate and invites you to drink more of it.

I think about this as I sit here drinking one of my favorite red wines: the Arbois Pupillin of Emmanuel Houillon, from the Jura region of France. Now, I realize that with its pale, almost partridge-eye color and mere 12.5 percent of alcohol, it barely qualifies as red wine for some people. I'm okay with that. This wine is utterly delicious, its dusty flavors of pomegranate and cranberry accented by an intense, nearly salty minerality and a fleetingly fragrant whiff of leather. Furthermore, I could drink the whole bottle tonight by myself (and believe me, I will), and wake up tomorrow feeling unencumbered and uncompromised. That idea is very appealing to me.

I remember a winemaker once pouring me several pinot noirs in excess of 15 percent alcohol and saying proudly to me, "I'm looking for wines of intensity!" Unfortunately, he was confusing intensity with loudness. A wine can be intense in expression without

needing weight; it can be concentrated in flavor without being large in body. Few wine-knowledgeable people would say that Joh. Jos. Prüm's pungent, minerally Riesling Spätlese is lacking in intensity or concentration, even at only 8.5 percent alcohol. Think of it this way: In a movie theater, if someone whispers to you to shut up, it can be just as effective as if they had screamed.



Vineyards around the village of Mesnay, Jura, France.

The Houillon Arbois doesn't astound you with its complex array of components, nor would it score 95 points. It's not that sort of wine. What it does demonstrate is a rare purity and individuality of character, expressed with quiet confidence, clarity and restraint. It makes me think of the novel *A Maggot*, in which John Fowles laments the passing of the old English definition of mediocrity as "a wise and decent moderation," and warns that the modern day perversion and debasement of the word reflects an obsession with excess in our society that is unsustainable and ruinous. In a world where more is often equated with better, we seek wines of ever-greater ripeness, power and richness, yet such qualities rarely increase a wine's expression of place or improve its ability to distinguish and articulate its attributes. In fact, they detract from a wine's individuality and shift the emphasis from expression of identity to simply a greater accumulation of fruit flavor.

In a response to such wines of excess, as well as the language employed in describing them, a friend of mine has coined the term "gob-less." When encountering a wine of particular finesse, balance and grace, one of his highest compliments is to say, "This wine has no gobs of anything. It's utterly gob-less." I love this sentiment. I need no gobs to fuel my hedonism. My Arbois Pupillin is completely devoid of gobs, and I couldn't be enjoying it more. ■