

ONE BOTTLE: THE 1983 CHÂTEAU D'YQUEM

by JOSHUA BAER

The state where I live has a shadow government. In that shadow government there are many departments, more departments than anyone can count. I work in the Department of Highways and Memories. Some people say I got fired from the Department, or that I retired for medical reasons. Other people say I run it. All of those people are mistaken. I'm still on the job, but no one can run the Department of Highways and Memories because no one can know where it begins or where it ends. Anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to scam you out of everything you love and hold dear.

The state where I live has a lot in common with the state of New Mexico. It is a large state. It is a state where mystery is both an atmosphere and a destination. It is a poor state full of rich people and a rich state full of poor people. It is something else, is what it is. But the state where I live is not New Mexico. It is a state of anxiety crossed with a state of bliss. It is a state of denial crossed with a state of grace. Everything happens here—including nothing.

I have lived here all my life, though there were times when I believed with all my heart that I lived someplace else. (The heart can be tricky that way.) My parents lived here before me. Their parents lived here before them. My children live here. God willing, their children and their children's children will carry on the tradition. My wife lives here. My dogs live here. Anyone who has ever dreamed of an island, tasted a snowflake, or forgotten his or her own name lives here, too.

The Department of Highways and Memories has been around for years. It's as old as the hills. What we do, basically, is provide a service for travelers. We give travelers the chance to erase the lines between their highways, their destinations, and the memories of their highways and their destinations. When we do our job well, travelers recall their highways, their destinations, and the memories of their highways and their destinations with a certain combination of nostalgia and relief. None of us can explain where the nostalgia comes from though we think it has something to do with leaving home and knowing—the moment you leave, not later—that things will never be the same.

If all of this sounds vague, strange, or mystical, then I apologize. It is none of the above. The Department of Highways and Memories is as real as death, love, sacrifice, or war. The Department is neither a concept nor an allegory. What I am describing is not a figment of your imagination. This is not *The Twilight Zone*. The problem is, words cannot describe the Department of Highways and Memories. To describe what goes on here, you would need an ocean of mirrors or a sky full of stories. You would need all the colors that never made it onto the wheel. You would need a bottle of wine that tasted like the human soul.

Which brings us to the 1983 Château d'Yquem.

Château d'Yquem (pronounced "shah-toe dee-kem") is one of the most celebrated wines of France and is the best-known Sauternes in the world. Because Château d'Yquem is a Sauternes, people think of it as a dessert wine.



Yquem is a dessert wine, but to put Yquem in the dessert wine category and leave it there is like saying that making love is a biological function we perform to reproduce ourselves. You can drink Yquem with grilled *foie gras*, roast beef, *fettuccine arabiata*, or a ham sandwich. Nothing intimidates Château d'Yquem.

The vineyard is two hours southwest of Paris, on a hillside south of the Garonne River. (For pictures, visit www.yquem.fr—the site is a jewel.) Yquem's *cepage* is eighty percent *sémillon* and twenty percent *saugvignon blanc*. The grapes are allowed to overripen on the vines, sometimes into late October. They are harvested only after they have been attacked by a grey fungus called *Botrytis cinerea* (Latin for "grapes like ashes"). The fungus, known in the wine world as "noble rot," contributes to Yquem's metaphysical flavors.

In the glass, the 1983 Yquem walks the line between copper and gold. Forget about describing the bouquet. Suffice it to say that given the choice between inhaling and drinking this wine, plenty of people would choose the former. On the palate, the Yquem is a bag of tricks, each one designed to humiliate you with pleasure. The flavors seem definitive at first, then the symphony of uncertainty begins. There is no way to be sure, no way to say with any degree of authority, what it is that you are tasting. By the middle of the glass, the uncertainty works its way into your heart. By the end of the bottle, it lives in your soul. The finish survives the wine's uncertainty but also maintains it. When your glass is empty, you still taste the Yquem. When the bottle is empty, you are haunted by the Yquem. That's what I call a finish.

As great a wine as the 1983 Yquem is, it is also a great lesson. Some wines give you a feeling of power. Other wines give you thrills. Château d'Yquem gives you faith, and it does it by dispelling your illusions of certainty. Numerical rating systems and paragraphs full of culinary adjectives may promise you an understanding of what you're drinking but they cannot keep that promise. All they can do is provide you with the illusion of certainty.

Like the related illusions of immortality, invincibility, and perfection, the illusion of certainty is a highway to hell. Wine, like life, is uncertain. Accepting its ineffable nature is the key to appreciating it. If you know—or think you know—what you're doing, you're not only mistaken, you're a danger to yourself and others. Take it from a lifetime employee of the Department of Highways and Memories. The known may be the favorite, but the unknown is the sleeper bet. Only a fool is certain.

One Bottle is dedicated to the appreciation of good wine and good times, one bottle at a time. The name *One Bottle*, and the contents of this column, are © 2007 by onebottle.com. If you need help finding a wine or building a cellar, write to Joshua Baer at jb@onebottle.com.

