

THE DRINKS INTERVAL: WINE AND CRICKET

TEXT: Stuart George



Following India's victory over West Indies at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua on 30th June 2017, the former Indian captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni, who scored 78 not out, was asked by a journalist about how he is getting better with age. Dhoni replied, "It's like wine".



Dhoni was born in 1981, which was a reasonable vintage for red Bordeaux, red Burgundy, Alsace, and the Loire Valley. Dhoni's former teammate Sachin Tendulkar – arguably the greatest of all international batsmen – is known to enjoy good food and wine.

The parallels between cricket and wine are many and varied.

Vineyards and wickets

John Arlott, a distinguished English cricket commentator but also an accomplished wine writer, wrote, "The most important single factor governing any first-class cricket match is the wicket."

Wickets (or pitches), like vineyards, are influenced by the sun, soil, climate, and weather. Bounce and pace varies according to the soil, just as – to a certain extent – vigour and yield do in a vineyard.

The WACA ground in Perth, for instance, was for years renowned for its rock hard, lightning-fast, clay-heavy wicket baked in the scorching Western Australian sun, a bit like some Australian wines are known, rightly or wrongly, for their high alcohol and deep colour. Vineyards can be dusty and bumpy too, like the wicket at the vast Eden Gardens ground in Kolkata.

A groundsman, just like a vigneron, spends the winter and spring tending to his few acres. The grass on a cricket pitch is close-cropped like vines being pruned. Groundsmen like to add nitrogen to their pitches to produce a vivid green grass, which looks nice on the TV, just as spraying nitrogen in a

vineyard encourages vigour and lots of fat grapes. The smell of freshly mown grass is a common descriptor for some young white wines.

Heavy rolling and covering the wicket is akin to spraying – a contrived manipulation of the environment that lessens the effects of climate and weather on how the pitch wears or the grapes ripen. Covers keep the area dry but can encourage fusarium, the cricket pitch equivalent of downy mildew, which is a grape disease caused by wet weather.

Australians: Good at cricket and wine

The Australian aptitude for playing cricket and for making wine is demonstrated by the many Antipodean labels that



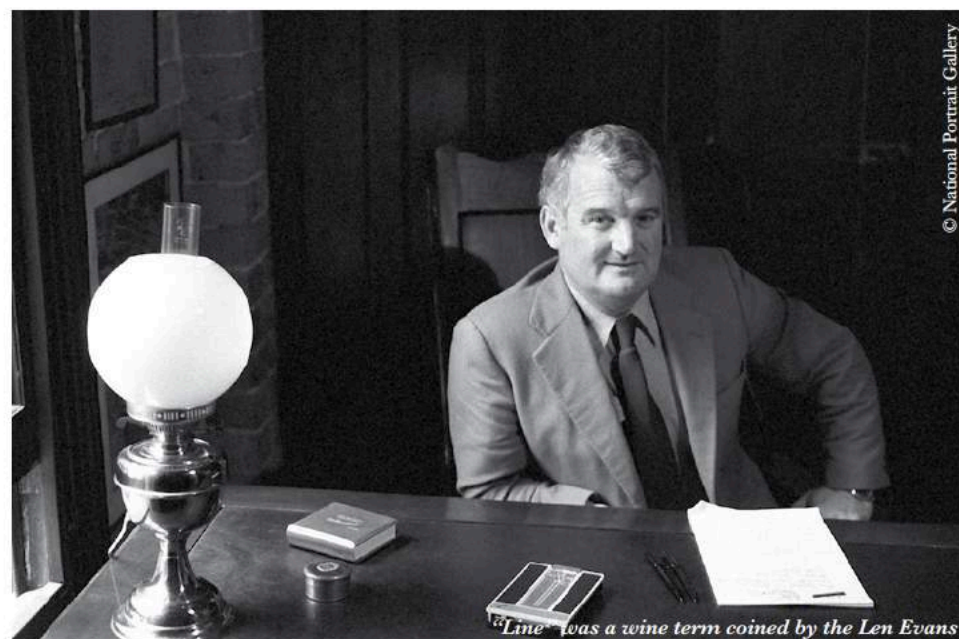
evoke cricket: Jim Barry's The Cover Drive; Bleasdale Second Innings Malbec; DogRidge SQUARE CUT Cabernet; One Chain Vineyards The Googly Chardonnay; St. John's Road Line and Length Cabernet Sauvignon (the label of which depicts the great England openers Herbert Sutcliffe and Jack Hobbs); and Wandin Wines Cricketers Pavilion Shiraz, among others.

Wyndham Hill Smith, nephew of Australia captain Clem Hill, took over the management of his family's Yalumba winery in the Barossa Valley in 1938. "Wyndie" was a good left-handed batsman and played nine games of first-class cricket. In October 1932, he represented Western Australia and an Australian XI in two warm-up matches against the touring England side during what became known as the "Bodyline" tour. The England team's great fast bowler Harold Larwood targeted batsmen, and especially the brilliant Australian Donald Bradman, by aiming at their bodies – hence "Bodyline".

"Selling Port and Sherry to the miners of Kalgoorlie was pretty tough", said Wyndie's son Sam; "nevertheless, one of the greatest challenges to confront Wyndie Hill Smith was in the form of the formidable Harold Larwood". Hill Smith opened and scored 26 for Western Australia in the match against the England team that included Larwood. His obituary in Wisden Cricketers' Almanack noted, "In later life he became famous for the liberal hospitality







"Line" was a wine term coined by the Len Evans

which he extended to touring teams at his Yalumba vineyard in South Australia."

Jack Mann of Houghton winery in the Swan Valley, to the north of Perth, was a fine club cricketer. He said, "The greatest grape I have is the noble Cabernet. I suggested many a time that it is the only grape tolerated in heaven and cricket is the only game that is played."

About three miles south of Houghton is the Midland Guildford Cricket Club, which is surrounded by vineyards. The

club has produced international players including Tom Moody, Tim Zoehrer, Brendan Julian, and Simon Katich.

The Hill of Lord's

Great vineyards like Romanée-Conti in Burgundy or Henschke's Hill of Grace in Eden Valley are like Lord's Cricket Ground, a few acres to which people from around the world pay pilgrimage.

Lord's, in chilly London, has a much slower pitch than Perth, though not without its own particular terroir of a slope of six

and a half feet down from the Grandstand boundary to the Tavern stand. Before drainage was installed, Lord's used to flood in front of the Tavern Stand, like the bottom parts of the Clos de Vougeot vineyard in Burgundy.

The "ridge", a fractional undulation in the surface right across the table of wickets, which runs east by north to west by south, also defines the terroir of Lord's. Glenn McGrath of Australia obtained maximum use of the ridge in 2005 during an amazing spell in which he took 5-21.



Ian Botham



Lord's has used Sprinter, Majestic, and Island Brown Top grass varieties. Different sorts of grass are used for sport pitches, just as different vine clones are used in a vineyard.

Happily, Lord's is the only major cricket ground in the world where spectators can bring their own wine.

Cricket and wine tragedies and tragedies

In Australia some distinguished cricketers have been unable to resist basking in the

reflected glory of their country's vinous exploits.

Shane Warne, who took 708 Test wickets, had his own range of wines via the Zilzie winery at Sunraysia in Victoria. The former leg spinner Stuart MacGill is another cricketer and noted wine enthusiast, or "wine tragic" in Aussie speak.

Brokenwood in the Hunter Valley sells a "Cricket Pitch" wine, so-called because the vineyard adjacent to the winery was once the site of a cricket ground (though



Jason Gillespie

recent vintages of this wine have included grapes from outside the Hunter Valley). It also owns a "Graveyard" vineyard, presumably named in honour of all those failed England tours of Australia.

Geoff Merrill's winery at Reynella near McLaren Vale has for many years been a favourite stop for England players during an Ashes series. Ian Botham and Bob Willis befriended Merrill during the England tour of Australia in 1978. This longstanding friendship led to the creation of the Botham Merrill Willis



wines, the first releases of which were the 2001 Cabernet Sauvignon, 2001 Shiraz and 2002 Chardonnay. Botham's love of wine was greatly influenced by John Arlott. In June 2008, Thomas Hardy Wines released the "Dizzy 201" Shiraz 2005 to honour the Australian fast bowler Jason Gillespie's score of 201 not out in his final Test appearance. A total of 2,001 numbered and signed bottles and 201 numbered and signed magnums were offered, as well as 337 numbered bottles, 144 numbered magnums, and 1,178 numbered bottles. At A\$495 / INR24,000 per magnum, it would be – like the current Indian captain Virat Kohli – a costly thing to drop.

A perfect 100

Scoring is an admirable occupation in the cricketing world, but more controversial

when applied to wine. The US wine writer Robert Parker rates wines on a 100-point scale; thus a century equals, for him, perfection in a wine glass. Scoring 100 is the height of excellence for a batsman.

The language of cricket has parallels with the language of wine. Fielders and bowlers have length and can be fine, full, and long, like a good wine. "Line" was a wine term coined by the Len Evans (1930–2006), one of the founding fathers of the modern Australian wine industry, to describe a wine's continuity of flavour and structure.

A Test of patience

We live in an era of social media and short attention spans. With cricket and wine and everything else, people demand instant gratification. The pleasures of a long-aged fine wine and of a five-day Test match are

being lost. Many people prefer Chilean Sauvignon Blanc and Twenty20 cricket to fine Bordeaux and a Test.

The former England batsman Graham Thorpe said, "Test cricket is connoisseur's cricket, it is like a fine wine. Twenty20 cricket is like the fast-food version".

The English writer Neville Cardus frequently championed the beauty of Test cricket, comparing it to music and literature: "Cricket, more than any other game, is able at its best to rise above competitive appeal and results; it can show its fine arts entirely for our pleasure – our aesthetic pleasure".

Like all the good things in life, fine wine and cricket are worth the wait – and even more pleasurable when enjoyed together. 🍷

