TROPICAL WHINE

Can paradise truly be paradise if there’s no decent wine?

BY TOM BENTLEY

Imagine yourself on a tropical island, with azure waters and swaying palms. Imagine savory meals of fresh lobster, mangrove crab and succulent tuna. Now imagine pairing those meals with wine that tastes like it was squeezed out of a sailor’s socks.

That’s what my sweetheart Alice and I braved during the year I was on a teaching assignment on the Micronesian island of Kosrae, a stronglyskipped stone above the equator in the North Pacific. Accustomed to the bounty of wines at home, we found it a sad education.

Kosrae is out there. Way out there—2,500 miles away from both Hawaii and Australia. That isolation means removal from primary markets and shipping lanes. It means very high temperatures: any goods shipped to the island are subject to thermal torment. And it means that a “Liquor Is Sin” sensibility still prevails: Kosrae received drowses of 19th-century Christian missionaries, and they got their books in. Thus you have remarkable laws like one declaring you can be arrested for having a drink on Sunday—in your own home.

And with a population of 8,000, wine marketers aren’t going to get much bang for their buck. Weigh that onus with a regulatory one that taxes wine imports at 30%, add stinging shipping charges, and you have the dreary situation in which a liter of bulk table wine costs $25. There were a few Australian wines, but none familiar. It was common to see a bottle of Australian Chardonnay that bore the colors of blush wine—with much to blush about.

I’m no wine geek, but I’ve lived in the greater Bay Area for 25 years, and if you’re a wine drinker at all, exposure to good wine is a casual component. What to do? I knew that shipments from our favorite wineries were improbable and expensive. The only sensible resort was subterfuge. Nothing too high-handed: just side-stepping the USPS regulations regarding shipping bottled liquids (and liquors) overseas. So, wine orders from my California friends and family sold themselves on customs forms as “books,” “CDs” or, best yet, “school supplies.”


In fact, the Turley, the first bottle we opened, was a dizzying experience. We’d been months without good wine, and now we were taken from the dark abyss of nothingness to dazzling brilliance The Turley had everything: ripe power, generous mouth-feel, lingering finish. It offered relief that bordered on the spiritual.

At one point, we had only the Provenance left, and just anticipating drinking it was almost as good as the deed. “Maybe we’ll have the Provenance this Saturday.” “Maybe we should save it until we have people over.” (No chance on that one, by the way.) Once you got a bottle in your hands on Kosrae, you’d marvel at your finely focused attention.

If ever you feel the need to restore your heartfelt appreciation of fine wine, might I recommend moving thousands of miles away from it?