

## ***Instant Claret***

It's the twenty-first century and we're in hyperdrive! Mae West, who preferred a Guy that Takes his Time, was long ago crowded off the stage by Eartha Kitt and her Minute Man. Then even a minute became tedious: top billing went to the nimble-fingered ivory tickler who could scamper through Chopin's famous waltz in well under sixty seconds. And now digital technology, which has compacted a lifetime of human cognition into a nanosecond, makes a minute seem like a millennium. Any computer operation which leaves us time to twiddle our thumbs sends us to a discount outlet to seek out the latest inconceivable acceleration.

For the duration of a finger-snap I'm actually leading the pack. I've been signed up for a trial run of a hi-speed Internet access program which keeps me on-line twenty-four hours a day and downloads web pages at four times my usual speed. Not only can I visit all the web sites in the Culinary Institute of America's *Resource Guide for Food Writers*, but if I wanted an extended prison holiday, in less than an hour I could load enough porn onto my hard disk to get myself dressed in steel for the rest of my productive life.

INEVITABLY this time-compaction has invaded the kitchen. What chance has slow food in an imploding universe? If prosperous multi-employed families can hardly keep up with the latest trendy restaurants where you can't tell the cuisine from the décor, how will they find the time to work their way through the time-honoured, time-consuming culinary classics? Even those who haven't succumbed to the freezer and the microwave are unlikely to labour for a week over a cassoulet. Thick pictureless volumes which devote several meticulous pages to each recipe are impatiently discarded in favour of oversized, overpriced folios full of racy prose and sensuous photographs promising instant gratification. Titles like *Down the Hatch* and *Banquets in Seconds* suggest that it's possible to dash into the kitchen at 5:45, whip out the wok, feed the cat, check your e-mail, and sit down to dinner with the Six O'Clock News.

Not wanting to see the old standbys totally disappear, well-meaning chefs tell us how to knock up a quick-bake low-fat cassoulet sans crust and confit, topped off with a scattering of pan-fried bread crumbs. Others demonstrate how quickly a coq au vin will tenderise if we start with a spring chicken. As for Oriental dishes, there is such a plethora of prepared sauces that we can mix-and-match with Barbie-doll virtuosity.

What a shame that the vintners have been left behind. True, there are very few wines left which must be allowed to age as inexorably as an uncompromising Barolo. Nevertheless, the finest Bordeauxs and Burgundies are still sold in the first instance for laying down; how long they remain dormant is determined by the age and/or patience of the buyer.

To eliminate this annoying and expensive hiatus, I have invented Instant Claret. This takes its methodology from the Davis aroma wheel, which has established objective criteria for describing and evaluating wine. (My inspiration derives more distantly from the Tibetan prayer wheel, whose constant reiteration of established formulae gives them divine authority.)

Eschewing hyperbole, Ann Nobel, working at the famous University of California Department of Viticulture and Oenology, has assembled a vocabulary of explicitly

descriptive words which relate to identifiable odours and flavours. On perusal, it immediately became obvious to me that, to make Instant Claret, you need only assemble and store the appropriate grape juice and isopropyl alcohol, together with the substances which will give you the desired characteristics.

TO determine your requirements, it is necessary to purchase enough bottles of mature first growth claret to decide where your preferences lie. (This is an expensive investment, but it will save years of valuable time and need only be accomplished once.) It's not necessary to go for the most expensive years; once you have selected your preferred châteaux, you can regularly update and fine-tune them from the Robert Parker bulletins.

Suppose that you favour a ten-year-old Latour. Along with the usual tartaric acid and glycerine, your cedarwood and eucalyptus cupboard should be well-supplied with powdered minerals, roasted nuts, and crème de cassis. Add these carefully, a pinch at a time, to your grape juice and alcohol mixture, until the right balance is achieved. Don't be afraid of over-generosity—this wine has a “powerful, brute-like style”. However, a day's respite from the violent action of the blender may be necessary before your chosen ingredients settle to an elegant equilibrium.

With time, you can accumulate a treasure-trove of rich aromas, including vanilla, tobacco, pine, caramel, crusty bread, pepper, cinnamon, petrol, boiled beetroot—and even cat's piss for the elusive essence of sauvignon blanc. Your first attempts may not be successful. You may even detect a certain rough gaucherie in the finished product. But stick with it. Eventually, after years of practice, you will have trained your palate to appreciate the simple virtues of raw chemistry. Just remember—millions of happy eaters have taught themselves to prefer the greasy anonymity of an instant slobburger to the disturbing complexity of a tournedos Rossini.

For the Davis aroma wheel see <<http://wineserver.ucdavis.edu/oldsite/VEN7.html>>

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