

Mondovino

Mondovino ("World of Wine") is a documentary with taste, the taste of the grape. It offers a tour-d'horizon of the contemporary wine world, the vintners, the companies, the consultants, the distributors, and the tasters--all focused on the intriguing nature of this classic beverage and, just as importantly, its increasing market.

More than just an introduction to the wine biz, *Mondovino* details a running dilemma in that biz: the open question of whether traditional, smaller wine producers (especially in France) are being overtaken and undercut by the growing power and reach of industrial-level wine production, pitting, as one source says, the "resisters against the collaborators." To state it another way, it asks whether the "democratization" of wine consumption worldwide is leading to a denaturing of the product itself. The little Daunai Gassac vs. the colossal Mondavi--David and Goliath in a bottle.

Mondovino, conceived, directed, shot, and edited by Jonathan Nossiter, does not make its points blatantly. The film develops slowly--in locations from Sardinia to Argentina--as you are introduced to its various protagonists and cast of characters. And a rich line-up it is. It includes: a representative small winery in Volny, Burgundy, and its crusty owner Hubert de Montille; amiable, jet-setting wine consultant Michel Rolland; the powerful Mondavi family, father and sons based in Napa Valley; the street smart New York wine importer Neil Rosenthal; members of the venerable Mouton-Rothschild house; the all-powerful wine critic Robert Parker (ensconced in Monckton, Maryland, outside Baltimore); the genial Frescobaldi brothers in Tuscany; and so many more. There is much talk of vintage, volume, varietals and, especially, the mystical *terroir*, that elusive but crucial French term that means the very essence of the soil and land where a wine is grown.

Through what can seem, at times, a bewildering barrage of interviews and landscapes, there are some solid narrative threads in the film. One is a beguiling story of how a small French town, Aniane, principally through the actions of its communist major, fended off a takeover of its major vineyards by the giant Mondavi, only to later succumb to a takeover of another sort perpetrated by a large *French* company. All of this is tangled up in the question of whether the local traditional wines will deteriorate because of the new corporate interest. Another story line has a father, son, and daughter (the de Montilles) struggling over whether to throw in their valued family business with one of the big wine kings. A further side bar deals with the power of the new critics, like Parker (jovially interviewed with his wife and dog) and how they work and decide which Bordeaux to anoint and which to reject.

As intriguing as this film might be for oenophiles, *Mondovino* has elements which could drive a viewer (like this one) to seek avidly for a quaff of the stuff. The documentary is not sexily made, and with Nossiter doing his own shooting (on digital video) the camera work is often clumsy, or pedestrian, or even out of focus. The filmmaker also inserts himself too much into his interviews, and--for a film that runs 137 minutes--he could have used an outside editor. The film's construction can seem at times haphazard, and there are too many interview segments or storylines that have no follow-through.

One should see *Mondovino*, however, not for its technical achievements, but for its wide-ranging investigation of an intricate subject. It presents complicated matters of

taste, scale, family history, and more, mingled in what is for many in the business (like Messr. de Montille) an almost religious feeling for wine: its cultural meanings and its best attributes. The narrative doesn't really answer the questions it poses, and it poses numerous ones, but leaves it to the viewer to sort out the welter of arguments as he defines his own taste. What is best about *Mondovino* is that it is a salubrious conversation-starter, a film which is worth absorbing, then, especially with five or six of your best friends, having an animated discussion over a couple of bottles of Chateau Latour or Montepulciano or Two Buck Chuck...

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