

Sideways

Sideways, in the context of Alexander Payne's new movie, suggest how you should store wine bottles; it could also mean that tipsy feeling that comes from too much imbibing--in this case wine. However tipsy his characters might come to be, this year has seen no more clear-headed, intelligent, and smarter filmmaking about real people than this wry, brilliant paean to American male bonding.

Sideways introduces us to Miles Raymond (Paul Giamatti), frustrated 8th-grade English teacher and would-be novelist, and Jack Lopate (Thomas Haden Church), feckless TV actor whose career is on the downslide, as they head for the Santa Ynez Valley above Los Angeles for a bachelor week of vineyard-hopping before Jack succumbs to his nuptials. One last chance for old college chums to bond, play golf--and booze it up. Miles is the oenophile, the wine connoisseur on the lookout for the fragile Pinot Noirs he loves. He also morbidly revisits his divorce and anxiously awaits word on the publication of his novel. Jack, in contrast, is the easy hedonist, on the lookout for a good lay just before he settles into matrimony--and bit jobs in commercials.

Once in a cheesy motel in the region, the two seek out their respective and uncertain goals. In the event, Jack quickly latches on to a lively wine pourer, Stephanie (Sandra Oh), at one of their winery stops, while Miles finds that a waitress Maya (Virginia Madsen) he knows shares a genuine interest in the grape. Over a week, they quaff, Miles frets, they sip, Jack beds Stephanie (and reconsiders his wedding), they taste, Miles bonds with Maya, they drink. The wine is great but their futures are shaky, made the more so when Stephanie--who has fallen for Jack--explodes upon learning of his marriage plans. As their week comes to an end, the two must decide what to do with their lives. As bad as Miles' life gets, however, and typical for a Payne scenario, the film ends gently on a note of wistful hope.

What happens in *Sideways* is not as important as to whom it happens. A dozen nuances of character and attitude are revealed in Miles and Jack as they simply sit in a restaurant booth or on a winery stool, drive in a car, lay on motel beds (at one point, a TV set discreetly portends their future, showing "The Grapes of Wrath"). At first, one might wonder (I did) how these so disparate creatures became best friends. The script has them as roommates from college, but one comes to accept what they mean to each other over the course of their sojourn; the actors make it real. As so often happens in Alexander Payne films, these are people you come to know, understand, and identify with.

The wine talk in this film is ample but not distracting, and it establishes that Miles, though he may be a failure in many areas of his life, does know his wine. His love of it is both informed and heartfelt, and it redeems him. He may look like a schlub, but his rhapsody on Pinot Noir proves delicious foreplay in winning lovely Maya, as passionate about wine as he is. They trade revealing intimacies about the juice: Miles reveals himself as well as his tastes when he says he likes Pinot "because it's fragile and delicate; it needs nurturing," and Maya answers with "a bottle of wine is actually alive...it's constantly evolving and gaining complexity"--rather like their relationship.

As Miles, Paul Giamatti has proved again to be the embodiment of a great American type, as he did in *American Splendor* two years ago. He is superlative as a man living in quiet anguish, who needs to get smashed to call his ex, a guy with the lid

barely on. In fact, within a movie filled with small gestures, Miles/Giamatti has what amounts to a titanic one when--having learned of his novel's rejection and totally plastered--he pours a winery's spit bucket all over himself! In it's heroic futility, it is a kind of triumph of the nerd.

Giamatti is ably backed by the rest of the cast. Church, little known to the movie-going public, comes through bigtime as the "in-the-moment," emotional being that contrasts so sharply with Miles's thwarted intellectual. In playing an actor on the down slope, he seems to be living out in Payne's film something of his own career with a refreshing lack of vanity. Sandra Oh (best known for her role on HBO's "Arli\$\$") compliments him perfectly as the smart, but compulsive charmer whose instincts match his own. Madsen (*The Rainmaker*, *Ghosts of Mississippi*)--in what I hope is a breakthrough role for her--plays a smashing combination of down-to-earth and radiant, the woman Miles thinks is too good for him but who is willing to plumb beneath his morbid exterior to uncover the shared passion of a wine-lover.

The script, written by Payne and his longtime collaborator Jim Taylor, is smart and intricate--and very funny, likely to win another Academy Award nomination alongside the one they garnered for *Election* in 1999. Payne also happily surrounds himself with a coterie of skilled filmmakers with whom he has worked on almost all of his films: Jane Ann Stewart (production design), Wendy Chuck (costumes), Kevin Tent (editor), and Rolfe Kent (music), and all make significant contributions to what is a stellar motion picture.

So let's drink to *Sideways*--but with no easy, down-the-hatch Merlot; but rather sipping the fine 1961 Cheval Blanc cited in the picture. It deserves it.

An Interview with Director Alexander Payne

With his new film *Sideways*, director/writer Alexander Payne consolidates his reputation as one of the movie's most perceptive, thoughtful, and funny observers of contemporary American life. In his story of the fitful odyssey of two mismatched friends, he has made an especially beguiling quartet, once added to the trio of tales he has fashioned in the last decade: *Citizen Ruth*, *Election*, and *About Schmidt*.

Alexander Payne is in his early forties, slim with an angular face and black hair. His family lineage is Greek, and he was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, which featured in his first three films. It turns out he has an earlier DC connection, having served as an intern with the State Department in 1983, working in Western Hemisphere affairs. Besides doing publicity business like interviews, he was in town in September to receive the "Nebraskan of the Year" Award from the Nebraska Society of Washington, DC.

The material for *Sideways* had lingered for a while: with producer Michael London, Payne had paid for options on the Rex Pickett novel of the same name in 1999, but had to finish *About Schmidt* in the interim. This was his first directorial effort not involving his home town of Omaha, a move he was not reluctant to make.

Asked about his relationship with co-writer Jim Taylor (the two have co-scripted all of his films), Payne was matter of fact, saying their individual contributions were hard to define. They both work on copy at the same time, though he stated that "we work on one screen with two keyboards." They always write together, in each others' homes or

in hotels or hideaways, whatever works. The script writing typically takes months; *Sideways*, he said, was done “relatively quickly” in four months, in part because so much of the novel’s dialogue could be used directly.

His leads seem so perfect in their roles that it comes as a mild surprise to find that Payne did not have them--or any other actors in mind--when casting. He said that when he reads a literary work with an eye toward filming, specific actors do not come to him. Instead, he said he conjures “up the sort of ‘blob,’ an unspecified figure we envision as we read.” Both Paul Giamatti and Thomas Haden Church auditioned for him in New York. He did know the lesser-known Church, not from his TV show “Wings” (which he said he had never seen), but because the actor had auditioned for him on two earlier pictures.

Giamatti, of course, turned out to fit his character brilliantly. Payne said the actor served his vision in a specific way. An admirer of American landmark movies of the 1970’s, he wanted *Sideways*--though contemporary--to evoke the spirit of that earlier filmmaking. He consciously, with cinematographer Phedon Papamichael, aimed at a Seventies “look” in the picture, a grittier, yet softer vision. With the unglamorous Giamatti as his protagonist, this, too, invoked the 1970’s. Payne recalled, “I remember when actors like Elliott Gould, Bruce Dern, and Al Pacino were leads; not ‘stars’ so much as believable people.”

Since *Sideways* turns so crucially on wine and its connoisseurship, I asked Payne if he himself was a fan. He replied that his interest in wine stems from a trip in the early 1990’s to Italy, when he traveled with a girlfriend and got to sample some classic Tuscan wines. After that impetus, he came to discover California wines and appreciate them. He declined to confirm if people on his set were getting sloshed--like his characters--with wine, but he did find himself assaying the grape often, after shooting, with his production designer Jane Ann Stewart. He admitted, too, that his actors, sick of drinking fake wine during takes, readily turned to the real thing off camera.

He feels that Santa Barbara County, much less known for its wine than the state’s Napa and Sonoma Valleys, is worthy of discovery, and he thought the area was likely to get a tourist boost from his film. Several wineries in the area cooperated in the film, and all the tasting shots were done on location in actual settings. Even the climatic comic scene at the crassly commercial “Frass Canyon” was done at a real local winery (that of Fess Parker) though the name was changed to protect the innocent. For a small insider joke, Payne quizzed me on what “Frass” meant, then told me it was a term which means larval excrement.

Payne’s films seem to share characters who are, at bottom, ineffectual, unable to better their circumstances or positively change: Ruth (Laura Dern) in *Citizen Ruth*, as well as all the pro and anti-abortionists around her, Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick), the frustrated civics teacher in *Election*, Schmidt (Jack Nicholson) roaming to nowhere in the 2002 film. Now Miles in his latest opus. The director considered the point, then said in his latest film he drew pretty much from the novel but admitted he may be drawn to such people. “It’s where we find drama,” he noted, “which so often comes from pain and failure.”

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