I Hear Voices
by Charles M. Bear Dalton

So what voices do I hear? Well, sometimes it's a corporate spokesman and sometimes it's a farmer. Sometimes it is the strikingly beautiful pure tenor of a solitary winemaker and sometimes it is a chorus. Sometimes the chorus is tuned up and in sync but other times either the cracks are showing or it becomes elevator music.

Sometimes I hear the grape variety or varieties. A single variety can be interesting but add a couple of back up singers (Cabernet Sauvignon and the Bordeaux Babes) and things can hop. And sometimes a duet (Sauvignon and Semillon) or a trio (Grenache-Syrah-Mourvedre aka GSM) is the top of the scene. When GSM plays at the Chateauneuf, all their local buds sit in, but after Counoise and Cinsault join in the harmony, and maybe Bourboulenc, they all kind of fade in together.

Sometimes the very earth talks. Limestone speaks with an elegant reserve. Clay offers more fruit and freshness. Slate gives a thrilling trill. Quartz authority. Sand is all about fruit and elegance.

Sometimes it is technique talking. Do I hear the tenor of punch-down or the quiet bass of pump-over? Do I hear the bubble and hiss of barrel fermentation or the whisper of a temperature controlled tank? Sometimes the very barrels speak, maybe with a French accent or an American twang or even the exotic tones of Hungarian oak. The yeast can whisper and even slip into a harmony. Even the cellar can talk, but only rarely and I really have to listen.

Most of these are good voices but sometimes the leather-jacketed, gum-smacking flaws intrude with the strident, discordant voices of TCA and oxidation and barnyard.

When do I hear these voices? Usually only when I'm tasting or drinking from proper glasses in a quiet situation where I can pay attention to the wine. But sometimes they are so loud and insistent that they can intrude into Syrah in a red Solo cup at a tailgate. Not all wines speak and not every voice breaks and the wine is somehow flawed. Experience will help.

Some wines have the corporate monotone of the committee that can't or won't become a choir but is more of a multi voice corporate rap, but without any edge or other redeeming value. In some wines the earth speaks, not with elegance or freshness but as dense black dirt or bottomless, wet, black clay that is more, well, dirt than terroir or place. Sometimes the winemaker tries but the voice breaks and the wine is somehow flawed. Experience will help. Some wines try to blend too many different grapes or too many different places or too many disparate techniques or … and the sound gets muddied and indistinct. There is no joy in hearing these wines but they do speak and in their speaking and even singing, they tell us all about themselves. They have so much to say if only we learn to listen to their voices.

Are you listening?