



Settling or Not

Thinking about Christie's Seafood and Henri de Villamont

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



Last Sunday, my son John and I had our after church lunch at a Houston institution: Christie's Seafood. I remember going to Christie's as a kid. My mom thought they had the best fried shrimp in town. My fraternity initiation banquet was also held at Christie's, then located in the Astrodome/Medical Center area. The menu notes that the restaurant moved to the current location on Westheimer in 1979 but it looks almost timeless - think pre-Pappas, pre-Landry's Texas gulf coast seafood restaurant with jacketed waiters and white table cloths - that could be located almost anywhere on the Texas coastal plain. I last ate at Christie's more than 10 years ago. On this breezy Sunday, the restaurant looked as I remembered it and they had a nice if older lunch crowd.

I took my son to Christie's expecting to get classic fried Gulf seafood - and that's pretty much what we got. To start, I had seafood gumbo and he had crawfish bisque. We both ordered the "Old Fashion Platter" which is a classic fried seafood combination platter that featured shrimp, oysters, scallops, crab balls, and fish. Everything was good but it all could have been better. Nothing was excellent or even fine. Nothing made me say or even think "delicious." Which isn't a huge knock. My son and I both finished everything on our plates and the service was excellent. However, as an avid cook, I can see how EVERYTHING we ate could have been better. The taste of my son's bisque was OK but there was a hint of flour that wouldn't have been there if they'd cooked the roux a bit longer. My gumbo had a nice flavor but could have used a bit more intensity (achievable by reducing or concentrating the seafood stock a bit more) and spice (lacking both seasoning and heat). Even though both were good, neither soup popped. I have the same sort of quibbles with the seafood platter. The textures and basic flavors were there but the seasoning wasn't - so none of the elements jumped off the plate. I guess it's easy for the kitchen to settle for "good enough" but it wouldn't be that hard to tweak the seasonings and take a bit more care with the preparations.

All in all, it was a great trip down "Memory Lane" but it was just a good (but nothing special) lunch. But for a lunch that includes no wine, beer, or spirits and still costs over \$60.00 (including tip), I expect more.

Why do I mention all this in a wine column? My lunch at Christies reminded me of a lot of the wine I taste. Many are "just good" or "good enough". Most of these wines could be better. (I also taste a lot of frankly bad wines but that's another story.) A little extra attention from the winemaker - maybe picking a bit sooner, maybe using less new oak, maybe arresting the malo-lactic fermentation, maybe getting the wine into the bottle a bit sooner - would've made a big difference but the winemaker settled and got "just good" or just "good enough".

If the wines are low priced, I can accept this. We often complain that wine is priced too high but it costs money both in farming and in winemaking to make great wine. At some price points, all we're looking for is good. Earlier today, I tasted some Alsace wines from a new-to-me producer - Baron de Hoen - that were mostly good to very good. They weren't anything special but the wines are fairly low priced. Depending on the final pricing I work out with the supplier, they'll sell for from \$10.50 to \$12.50 per bottle - which is very good pricing for everyday drinking Alsace. These wines don't "pop" out of the glass like the Zind Humbrecht wines do but then, they are half the price.

It's the higher priced wines that don't carry their weight that bug me. It's when I taste a \$35.00 Burgundy or Oregon Pinot Noir that is just shooting for good that I am most disappointed. While I am no winemaker, I often have a clue or two as to what could have been done differently to make the wine better. A lot of the time, these under achievers just leave me scratching my head.

Sometimes things change. Over the years, I've tasted the wines from Henri de Villamont in Burgundy several times. Before my trip this year, the last time I had tried them was five or six years ago. As before, they had disappointed me. Looking back at my notes, the wines weren't offensive; rather they were bland and boring. After several similar experiences, I had written Henri de Villamont off as a mediocre to poor negociant that I could safely ignore.

This year, I had a broker who supplies us with some good Bordeaux and Champagne pestering me to taste the Villamont wines again. I said no but he kept after me. I finally agreed to taste them, just to get him to stop bugging me. As it turns out, he did me a good turn by insisting.

Henri de Villamont's parent company Schenck has finally put the right man - Pierre Jhean - in charge both as winemaker and manager and from the day he took over, the wines have gotten better. They discounted and sold all the old stock to the supermarket trade in Europe and are starting fresh with Pierre's wine. Pierre Jhean had been at Villamont previously in an assistant winemaker capacity. While there, he got frustrated with the then winemaker and management and left to go to work for the Boisset family. Eventually, the Schenck company realized what they'd lost so they brought Pierre Jhean back and put him in charge. The lower priced wines are now much better than just good and the best wines (including a Savigny Clos de Guettes 1er cru and a Grands Echezeaux Grand Cru) were excellent. I tasted wines from several vintages and could see a steady improvement between 2005 and the 2009s the company is now showing. This is a complete turn around facilitated by putting the right man in charge and letting him do his job. By this fall, Spec's will be carrying the Henri de Villamont wines and you'll get to taste how good they are. I'm betting you'll like the wines and their prices as much as I do.

If Henri de Villamont can turn it around like this after so many years of mediocrity, maybe Christie's can too. I may try 'em again in a few months and see. Maybe about the time the Villamont wines arrive. ✱

