

Dan Berger

1. Is a desire to experience the world of wine in ways that only a few can and in ways that one could not otherwise afford (i.e. the benefits in the form of samples, events, trips, press junkets, etc) acceptable as part of a career in wine writing (so long as one avoids conflicts of interest and maintains journalistic integrity)? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.

Some people are only in the wine-writing dodge to get free trips to exotic places. I have read some of the results (stories they've written) and they are woeful -- shameless puff pieces that reflect badly on the person who took the trip and the subject of the article.

Like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart saying that hard-core pornography was hard to define, "but I know it when I see it," so it is hard to define journalistic ethics. But when someone steps over the line, you know it when you see it. And thus it's hard to construct a simple definition that establishes various prohibitions and then concludes that any violation of "the code" is unethical. Every case must be analyzed on its own merits.

2. Is it possible to fulfill one's desire for these experiences through the benefits mentioned above and avoid conflicts of interest and maintain journalistic integrity? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.

Much as it might seem that some situations are fraught with compromises, there are extenuating circumstances. For instance, dining with wine makers actually has three crucial purposes. One is that it gives the wine reviewer long enough to evaluate a wine that might have needed aeration to properly show its potential. Secondly, there is the question of how well a particular wine works with food. And then there is the conversation that takes place between wine writer and winery subject that happens in a setting where vital information that doesn't appear on the tech sheets can be discovered.

3. Considering all the resources necessary to produce a wine publication (which relies on new content with every cycle), is it acceptable for the writers to accept free samples, trips, etc as (so long as one avoids conflicts of interest and maintains journalistic integrity)? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.

To say that wine journalists shouldn't accept "free meals" doesn't define the word free. Or meal. How about the situation where an individual attends a wine tasting at which food is served? What if the individual drove 65 miles each way to get to the tasting, paid \$6 to cross the Golden Gate Bridge, \$12 for parking, and spent more than six hours in the endeavor. Is the food received "free?"

As to what sort of meal we are talking about, I think we can all agree that there is a vast difference between a coffee shop and a three-star in Paris. After a meal at the latter, does the writer gush rhapsodically over the bottle he has just had? Does the writer slam the product as being unworthy of cleaning a trailer hitch? Is the meal and/or the venue mentioned in the article?

And what of a five-day "junket" to Sicily where the airfare was paid for by the wine entity? What if the airfare was coach class, the plane was filled to the brim, was delayed for hours by bad weather, and the three days visiting wineries was bitterly cold and the food barely passable? And there was no time to see anything other than drafty wineries and drizzly vineyards? Sound like fun?

4. Can a wine publication remain competitively priced and maintain a healthy revenue stream while paying for all samples and 100% of its reporters' trips and expenses? Please provide a reason for your answer or some elaboration.

My various travel to France, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Portugal have all been either self-funded, part of wine competition participation, or part of cruises on which I have been a lecturer. And it's still nearly impossible to make a living as a freelance writer on wine.