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THE WINE WARS, SPILLED ONTO THE SCREEN

IT'S not often that French movie circles and French wine circles are buzzing about the same thing. But "Mondovino," Jonathan Nossiter's documentary about the globalization of wine, has movie critics here reaching for superlatives and some wine experts lobbying expletives, while audiences have turned the movie into a surprise hit.

"What you dream of when you make a film - and it's the first time it's ever happened to me - is that it becomes a provocation for debate," Mr. Nossiter said recently at his high-ceilinged Paris loft, where film-editing equipment occupies one corner and dozens of empty wine bottles line what seems like every available shelf. The film landed amid a wine crisis: consumption in France has been dropping, and some native producers feel threatened by an invasion of wines from abroad and pressured to make more universally accessible wines. More than a wine documentary, "Mondovino" is a passionate defense of the individuality of small wine producers in a more standardized world. Its unflattering portrayal of advocates of homogenization has angered some in the French wine establishment, but Mr. Nossiter, who calls "Mondovino" a "militant" film, insists that he was fair and respectful toward all of the participants.

The film draws a complex picture of an industry torn between those who embrace the trend toward a homogenized taste and those who do not. The New York-based wine importer Neal Rosenthal, who grew up drinking milk in Brooklyn, defines the conflict as a fight between "the Resistance and the collaborators." The Bordeaux-based wine consultant Michel Rolland, who works for 100 vineyards in 12 countries, preaches the gospel of globalization, half-jokingly dismissing "diversity" as the reason "there are so many bad wines."

A former sommelier with 15 years' experience devising wine lists for New York restaurants, Mr. Nossiter began working on the film as a two-month break between feature projects. (He is the director of "Sunday," which won a Cannes grand jury prize in 1997, and "Signs and Wonders," a 2000 film about a rocky marriage starring Stellan Skarsgard and Charlotte Rampling.) But his quickie wine documentary soon turned into a four-year obsession, with Mr. Nossiter following his nose from France to Italy, Napa, Argentina and Brazil to dramatize the battle for the soul of his favorite beverage.

"The point was not to make a film about wine for wine lovers," Mr. Nossiter said. "I couldn't imagine anything more boring - anything that would betray more my real love of wine."

Mr. Nossiter, son of the late Bernard Nossiter, a former United Nations bureau chief at The New York Times, possesses a merciless, novelistic eye for character and a journalist's instinct for hunting down both sides of a story. He interviewed his subjects in five of the half-dozen languages he learned while growing up between the United States and Europe. The movie, which Mr. Nossiter has sold in 30 countries and is making into a 10-part television series, is to open in the United States in March. Mr. Nossiter said he had already heard from American wine companies expressing concern about the film.

Last May, "Mondovino" became only the fourth documentary ever shown in competition at Cannes. Despite complaints at Cannes about its length (34 minutes have been cut from the film, which originally ran 2 hours and 49 minutes) and what some critics described as drunkenly jerky camerawork, "Mondovino" has been widely and enthusiastically reviewed in the French news media. The daily *Libération* called it "gripping," and *Le Monde* referred to it as "an epic" that "gave off a perfume of intelligence and impertinence." French magazines have used the film as a springboard for cover articles about the globalization of taste, as part of a continuing national discussion about the future of wine.

But even before the film opened, Mr. Nossiter said, he felt a backlash from the French wine establishment. His invitation to a post-screening debate organized by an influential trade magazine, *Revue des Vins de France*, was rescinded. And, he said, he has received telephone calls, faxes and e-mail messages threatening lawsuits and worse. "The wine world is ruled by secrecy and snobbery - it's a clubby, chummy, hermetically sealed little world," he said. "There's an almost mafia-like *omertà* in the wine world, because there's never really been any outside scrutiny."

Mr. Nossiter's most vocal critic has been Mr. Rolland, who has remade wines from France to Argentina for global tastes - often to plaudits from the influential American wine critic Robert Parker, a longtime friend who is also featured in the film. Onscreen, Mr. Rolland smokes cigarillos and talks on a cellphone in the back of his chauffeur-driven Mercedes, advising many of his clients to "micro-oxygenate" their wine (injecting it with microscopic bubbles to soften tannins). He brushes off Mr. Nossiter's on-camera request for specifics about his methods - and laughs, according to a journalist in *Le Monde*, like Mephistopheles. Mr. Rolland tried to discredit Mr. Nossiter, whose first film was "Resident Alien," a 1990 documentary about Quentin Crisp, with a strident retort in the British trade magazine *Off License News*. Mr. Rolland quoted an anonymous journalist who labeled the filmmaker's work "dishonest and biased," calling him "a swindler," and adding that Mr. Nossiter "must have grown up, like so many Americans, surrounded by Coca-Cola, hamburgers and the 'Muppet Show,' which produces a very particular kind of culture." (In a subsequent edition, the British wine writer Stephen Brook called this portrayal of Mr. Nossiter "grotesque," adding, "It's unfortunate that Rolland, rather than addressing the issues, resorts instead to sneering.")

"I'm a wine expert, a peasant, a simple person," Mr. Rolland said when reached on his cellphone. "And I don't like liars or people who make up stories. Jonathan Nossiter in this matter is a liar and a maker up of stories. And I won't forgive him!" He said, most notably, that Mr. Nossiter had augmented the sound of his laugh to make him appear ridiculous and had used an off-the-record comment in which he called Languedoc residents who had fought to prevent his client, the Robert Mondavi family, from setting up shop in France "hicks." (Mr. Nossiter denied the charges.)

"If people are unhappy with the portrait they see in the film, they have, you know, only themselves to blame," Mr. Nossiter said. "I'm not Spielberg - there's no special effects here." Nevertheless, it's not difficult to see which side of the ideological battle he is on, with his lyrical treatment of artisanal winemakers from Sardinia to Argentina ("It takes a poet to make a great wine," says a Languedoc winemaker, Aimé Guibert, walking among his vines) and his knack for catching corporate wine giants with their pants down (including an accidentally revealing scene in which a leading Burgundian wine producer, wearing only boxer shorts, performs an impromptu grape-crushing demonstration). If people are angry, Mr. Nossiter said, "they should look in the mirror."

The wine world is a microcosm of the world at large, he added, and "Mondovino" is above all an old-fashioned look at the nature and uses of power. "If you'd made a wine film in the fourth century B.C.," he said, "you would have observed the end of the Greek empire and seen the Greeks trying to colonize their last Iraq-like gambit in the Sicilian expedition at the end of the Peloponnesian War - planting vines, making war. Act of civilization, act of imperial power. I think this is still true today."

By KRISTIN HOHENADEL
