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IN VINO VERITAS

Wine has a mystique like no other drink and few other subjects. Many people are often defeated by it, thinking that in order to claim any knowledge of it they need to have visited various vineyards in France, to have a cellar (i.e., not a cupboard under the stairs), or to be able to identify exactly where a wine comes from without looking at the label.

This, needless to say, is nonsense. Long gone are the days when the wine drinker would ignore anything that didn't come from France or Germany. New World wine countries – Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Chile, Argentina and South Africa – have put themselves firmly on the map. Sleeping giants like Italy, Spain and Portugal are realising their potential with new and exciting styles. Even Greek wine, once a lost cause, has improved. The grapevine, in fact, is being cultivated in the most implausible places, from the hills of Maharashtra to the paddy-fields of Thailand and even the sheep-filled wilderness of Patagonia. And with global warming gathering pace, Falkland Islands

Cabernet Franc and Greenland Gewürztraminer may not be far off. The message to the bluffer, then, is not to be intimidated by the mystique.

Some familiarity with the old traditions and etiquette is desirable, however, so that you can take on the *bon viveur* at his or her own game. This guide sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones in which you are most likely to encounter wine and the wine expert, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer.

But it will do more. It will give you the tools to persuade legions of marvelling listeners that you are a connoisseur of rare ability and experience – without anybody discovering that, until you read it, all you really knew about wine was that it's red, white or somewhere in between.