Episode Title: Ray Isle and the Taco Bell Principle

Episode Summary: In our season one finale, Food & Wine’s executive features editor Kat Kinsman catches up with her brilliant friend and colleague, Ray Isle, a few weeks before his debut book "The World in a Wineglass" arrives in stores. Growing up in Texas, the self-described "word-drunk kid" was years away from discovering the pleasures of fermented grapes, but he was clearly a born storyteller — and even ended up as a character in a famous novel. The executive wine editor shared his winding, wonderful path to becoming one of the most trusted and beloved writers and educators in the business, the bottle that changed his life, why Morrissey is such a disappointment, and how fast food tacos can help you feel more confident when you're learning about wine.

Episode Type: Full
Episode Rating: Clean
Season Number: 1
Episode Number: 13
Episode Date: September 12, 2023

Episode Transcript:

Music: Tinfoil Swans Music begins

Kat Kinsman (VO):

Welcome to Food & Wine's Tinfoil Swans, a weekly podcast serving up inspiring, touching, hilarious, revealing conversations with some of the biggest names in the food and beverage world and — we hope — giving you plenty to savor even after the episode is over. I'm your host Kat Kinsman, executive features editor at Food & Wine, and I'm eternally fascinated by how successful, creative people become, well, themselves. What are the moments, influences, missteps, pep talks, and decisions — big and small — that got them where they are today?

I don’t remember the first time I met Food & Wine's executive wine editor Ray Isle in person, just that once I did, my drinking life got so much more exciting — and confident. Everybody loves Ray — myself included — for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that he doesn’t just know everything under the sun about wine and spirits; he’s a born teacher and entertainer who genuinely wants people to discover the drinks they love without being intimidated.

Ray has won or been nominated for every writing award on the planet because in addition to all that expertise, he’s a gifted storyteller who cares so deeply about the people and places and traditions behind the bottles he’s pouring — and that’s exactly what his upcoming book is all
about. I had such a delightful time talking with my friend and colleague about how a nerdy little bookworm from Texas became one of the world's great wine experts, our shared disdain for Morrissey, and what Taco Bell has to do with it all.

Welcome to Season 1 Episode 13 of Tinfoil Swans, Ray Isle and the Taco Bell Principle

**Kat Kinsman:**
We have known each other for a long time, but I did not know you when you were 10 years old, and that is how I like to start out, asking people you know, sort of where were you with food and being a chef? But you read about wine.

**Ray Isle:**
At 10 years old I was more of a chef than I was a wine guy, for sure, 'cause I wasn't allowed to drink. I didn't grow up in any kind of wine drinking family. I grew up in Texas, I mean it was not like I grew up on a ranch surrounded by cows. My dad was a professor of English, I did, at a relatively young age get a little bit interested in cooking, mostly because of a neighbor who lived next door, a friend of my mother's, who would let me help in the kitchen. There were a lot of generic peanut butter sandwiches and burritos in between (laughs) those years and ending up at Food & Wine, but the wine didn't come out of my childhood at all. The love of words did, for sure. I read a ton. I read constantly. I read book after book, after book, after book. I don't know that I knew that early that I wanted to be a "writer." But I certainly loved reading and loved words and loved stories, and then probably by the time I was in, let's say late junior high, early high school, I knew I wanted to write things and so, I was interested in... I mean, oh God, I read a ton of science fiction, I mean heaps and heaps of science fiction, and then I read, somewhat beyond that (laughs) in terms of literary stuff. But, not so much as a kid.

**Kat Kinsman:**
You and I were discussing, just earlier today (laughs), 'cause hey folks, I get to work with this man. It is truly one of the greatest joys of (laughs) my career that I get to work with this fantastic man, and we were discussing earlier today he had like dropped a, *The Magician's Nephew*, reference into it. So, I was thinking that is why I liked ginger beer. I was so interested in it because it was something that it was completely foreign to me and Digory drinking a quiet ginger beer in the attic, and I'm wondering for you in these books, were you picking up on the food, were you picking up on the drinks as you were reading these things?

**Ray Isle:**
Ginger beer was a mystery, because I didn't know what ginger beer was either, and here's this eight year old or whatever he was, drinking beer. I mean how was I supposed to know that ginger beer didn't have alcohol in it? And so that was deeply mysterious. It was in the same realm as the *The Phantom Tollbooth* for me, which I loved as a kid. I mean as a kind of word
drunk kid, I loved that book. But I grew up in Texas, I had no idea what a tollbooth was. Literally no clue. We didn't have any toll roads. There were no toll booths. And so it was like, what's this cardboard tollbooth thing he's building? And there was, as you may remember, there was no Google at the time to look it up (laughing),

**Kat Kinsman:**
What was the curiosity like, in your home for those kind of things? Like for that looking up, for the citing the passage, for whatever it was.

**Ray Isle:**
I certainly was curious... I mean I think I got it as a gift and it's World Book Encyclopedia which was an exciting gift, crazily enough.

**Kat Kinsman:**
Nerd.

**Ray Isle:**
I was a nerd. I was absolutely a nerd. Who knew nerds were to become cool at one point, and take over the world as tech people? (laughing) But at the time, yes, a nerd was not the best thing to be, but I was endlessly curious about stuff.

**Kat Kinsman:**
And, these passions manifested. You've written a very large book (laughing).

**Ray Isle:**
I have written a very large book, yes, and I am quite happy that I am done writing the very large book (laughing). The book is called *The World in a Wineglass*, and it is out in November. It is available for pre-order. Soon it will be available for actual order. It is a look at wineries, winemakers, vigneron, whatever you wanna call it, from around the world who are independent, so not corporately owned, who make wines that express the place they're from and who are working in ways that benefit the environment or at the very least don't damage it. So, looking at sustainability and organics and biodynamics and regenerative farming and what the hell natural wine is and so on. I very much wanted to write a book that was not to the wine business. It's not a super geek out technical book. It is meant to do what I do with wine, which is make people interested in it and invested in it, and tell stories about it.

**Kat Kinsman:**
For some reason in my head, maybe it's some of this perception, maybe it's some buried bit of information, were you a drama kid?

**Ray Isle:**
I didn't do any acting until I got to college and I kind of fell into it as one does, because there was, in my case, a girl I was interested in who was involved in it, and I realized that I actually quite enjoyed being on stage and in front of an audience. I also realized by the end of four years (laughs) of doing it that it was not necessarily what I should do as a career. It's very interesting, I'm relatively good at being myself on a stage, meaning that I don't get stage fright, I enjoy interacting with an audience. I'm shameless enough that I like a camera pointed at me, that kind of thing. But playing other people is a different gift. And I can kind of muddle along, but you start to realize if you do acting for a while, that there are people who have an extraordinary gift for just descending into a role and becoming that person. I knew that I was better with writing things than I was with the acting at that level. So I didn't pursue it past college really. But of all the stage skills that you learn as just basic acting training are so incredibly helpful for public speaking, and so incredibly helpful for doing any kind of TV, and so incredibly helpful for teaching, which I did for a while.

Kat Kinsman:
But it's also got to be a really good skill for being a wine seller also, which is a part of your career.

Ray Isle:
Believe me, I definitely sold wine for a while. And sales is its own form of performance. The act of getting people to do what you want them to do, which is what sales is, it's a form of manipulation. I mean you hope that it's because they like the product, but it is that classic thing, you're trying to get them to say yes to buying the thing from you. And there are some people who are remarkably good at it and some people who are, like me, who can kind of fake it along. I'm good at talking to people and I like talking to people and I knew what I was selling. And what I was selling happened to be not bad, which is a big difference, but I don't have that kind of killer instinct that really good sales people do. And I worked with people like that in the wine business who are terrific sales people, but that's a different psychology than my brain at least. I'm more interested in stories and things.

Kat Kinsman:
And also you genuinely care about wine and the stories of all of this. When did that come into play? How did you get to the point where you felt like you had this entry into wine maybe? What is this transformative moment that made you think this was a path for you?

Ray Isle:
Well, the first transformative moment is starting to like the stuff. Which I was kind of interested in it, or whatever. But then a couple of things, essentially at one point I was living in, it always involves a relationship somewhere in there (laughing). I was living in DC in that relationship, I was working at a rare book store, had gotten kind of a little bit interested in wine, because when we met, me and the girl I was talking about, she had been working at a pretty nice restaurant in Providence and I had spent time there and tasted wines that I wouldn't have normally tasted. I was like, "Ooh, that's really good." So I got a little bit interested. And the job
at the rare book store involved a lot of sitting and waiting for customers to walk in the door. They didn't that often (laughing) and so I started reading, just random stuff, some of which was about wine. Got interested, started buying occasional bottles. And then, what happened was I went out to dinner with my girlfriend and her father, and he had been in Napa for something and he bought a bottle for dinner and I remember this very clearly. People talk about this with wine all the time. There's like that epiphonic moment of things changing and he bought a bottle of 1984 Diamond Creek Volcanic Hill Cabernet Sauvignon, and I took a sip, was like, "This is really good" and then as this went on, it was that kind of thing where you’re like, "I should be paying attention to my girlfriend’s father talking about whatever the hell he’s talking about." But I'm really paying attention to this wine, 'cause this stuff is amazing and it did that thing that great wines do, which is you get towards the end of the last glass, because the bottle's empty, and you've got like, a quarter of an inch left in the glass and you're torn, because it's so good you want to drink it, but then it's going to be gone. And it's a really kind of piquant moment of like, I wanna just savor this last little bit of it. And I walked away from that dinner thinking, "That was amazing. That stuff is great." And that changed the interest level dramatically. And I started buying wine just to see what it tastes like and so on, and started looking for wines that would replicate that, not just hedonistic pleasure, but kind of like fascination and, I mean, one, it tasted amazing, but two, there was kind of just like magic to it and, that I didn't know would affect me. So, I started buying wines on my minimal rare book store budget. A lot of the great wines of the world, for sure, and even a lot of the really good wines of the world have gotten stratospherically more expensive than they used to, even taking into account inflation. So for 20 bucks back then, I could buy a really, really good bottle of wine and it wasn't necessarily Chateau Petrus, it wasn't like First Growth Bordeaux, but it was serious legit wine. So, I could spend my weekly burrito money (laughs). I should also say my girlfriend who I was living with was working, so she had an income that allowed my 20 bucks of wine. There was a little bit of balancing around, 'cause we broke up, got together. It was one of those relationships. Super fun, (laughing) nothing like breaking up seven times. And then what happened was I got a writing fellowship out in the Bay Area. A thing called a Stegner fellowship at Stanford. I should back up and state that the bookstore that I worked in DC, was owned by the novelist, Larry McMurtry-

Kat Kinsman:
Lonesome Dove.

Ray Isle:

Lonesome Dove, Terms of Endearment, who was a friend of my family 'cause he had taught at Rice when my father was there and had been in grad school at Stanford when my father was there. If you watch the movie Terms of Endearment, or read the book, the two kids, they're Debra Winger's kids in the movie, and the main character's Emma's kids in the book, are modeled on me and my brother.

Kat Kinsman:
What? Wow (laughs).
Ray Isle:
I'm the older one who's the grouchy, unpleasant one. And my brother's like the young, cheerful, sunny one, it's like, wait a minute.

Kat Kinsman:
Were you grouchy and unpleasant?

Ray Isle:
No (laughs). It was totally unfair. Anyway, so McMurtry had been a Stegner fellow, which is why I thought to apply for the thing. He was an influence on my kind of early sense of what I might write, 'cause I thought I would write fiction obviously.

Kat Kinsman:
What kind of writer did you want to be?

Ray Isle:
So the joke when I got to Stanford among all the Stegner fellows who were there, some of whom have gone on to be quite good novelists and some of whom have disappeared. And one of whom has turned out to be a wine writer of all things. I didn't know as unformed short story novelist person, I didn't really know what I wanted. I didn't have a driving thing I needed to express, which I think is one reason why I ended up switching to non-fiction and journalism and wine. I also began to realize I didn't wanna be in academia. Even though I was on a fellowship at a really good school that was very prestigious, it was great to have it. It was kind of a growing awareness that for me, academia was a little too static. I kept my interest in wine going. I started buying wines out there. Had split up with the girlfriend more or less.

Kat Kinsman:
The fifth time.

Ray Isle:
I mean both of us were probably at that point like, "Thank god (laughing)." So, I started buying wines, and because I was close to wineries, I started go tasting and then I kind of thought, "Well, as long as I'm doing this, I might as well find out more about it. Maybe I can write something about it," who knows what. So, I started helping out at bottlings for very small wineries because, one, people need help with the bottling truck coming and they need someone to like put labels on all the stuff. Two, they pay you in wine. As a grad student, I couldn't afford a lot of wine, so if they work a day and get paid in six bottle of 40 buck wine, life was good. I found it kind of fascinating, at this point I had finished the fellowship and I was a lecturer at Stanford in creative writing. I switched my teaching schedule around so that I could
work harvest during the fall and teach the rest of the year. I worked two harvests for a winery called Clos LaChance, which at the time was up in the hills above San Francisco, but since moved down to Gilroy. And at the end of that I finished the lectureship, I had done two harvests at a winery, and I was like, "I'm done with academia. I am gonna be in the wine world in some context." I had no idea if the writing and the wine would come together, I just knew that I was gonna get some kind of job in wine and keep trying to write and not be in the academic world. I do remember being at Stanford and the director of the program, sitting in the office of the director of the program, which looked out over the quad, and his sort of arch nemesis walked by onto the quad-

Kat Kinsman:
(laughs).

Ray Isle:
... and he looked at me, he said, "Wouldn't it be nice if he just died?" And I thought (laughing) "Get me out of this place. These people are freaking nuts," you know?

Kat Kinsman:
It's funny because the outside perception of it that those of us who are not, you know, steeped in wine culture are, as it is portrayed in movies, everybody seems like they live to intimidate you. Did you find any intimidation coming into this? Were you worried that you were going to encounter that?

Ray Isle:
I ran into that early on when I was in DC I went to buy a bottle of wine, when I was just getting into wine at a store there. I wanted to buy cabernet sauvignon, and I said, I want maybe one that's not too tannic. The guy who was the clerk, who was probably four years older than me at most. You could see the expression was like, this guy's an idiot, he doesn't know what he's talking about in terms of tannins. You could see the sort of inward sigh of attitude and dismissiveness. And I just thought... if I'm gonna do anything with wine, that's not it. I'm gonna do the opposite, which is make people feel like they can ask any question about wine and feel good about it and not have that kind of pretentious exclusionary BS attached to it, which drives me bonkers. Wine can be as complex as you want it to be 'cause there's a lot to know. You walk into a Total Wine, and there's 600 bottles of chardonnay, and they go from 7.99 a bottle or 4.99 a bottle to $175 a bottle, and they're from all over the world and have got labels on them saying, "This got 95 points, this got 95 points. If you walked into a grocery store and there were 600 kinds of chicken soup and they ranged in price from 1.99 to 75.99 and some of them were like single chicken singles sourced soups and some of them were, lightly seasoned chicken soups and some of them got 95 points from some unknown critic, you would look at the wall of chicken soup, you'd be like, "I'm out of here (laughs). I didn't want soup to begin with. Get me away from the soup. It's stressful."

Kat Kinsman:
We'll be back with more from Ray Isle after the break...
(Break)

Kat Kinsman:
Welcome back to Tinfoil Swans. Today I’m chatting with Ray Isle!

Kat Kinsman:
I think that's why you're so good at what you do and why you've always been so good at this, 'cause you see the humanity in it and you know who you are, so you don't need to hold it. Like this kind of gatekeeping happens in so many different things whether it's cast iron or barbecue or bourbon.

Ray Isle:
It's a weird thing with wine, we don't know what we like when it comes to wine, because we don't grow up drinking it. You know if you like pickles on hamburgers. Some people like pickles on hamburgers, some people don't. You don't question your judgment. You don't look at a pickle and go like, "Hmm, I just don't know whether I want that on a hamburger or not," Whereas people look at a cabernet or a Chasselas from Switzerland or whatever, and they say, "I don't know if I like it. I've never had it." It's as if all food was unfamiliar to us and it was always a form of exploration, but a lot of people are daunted by that, and justifiably, you run into foods and as the American palate and as the American food world has become radically more diverse in terms of culinary traditions and so on, you do run into things at restaurants that you never ever grew up with. I mean I remember very clearly the first time I had uni and it was very much a dare. There's some textural issues with uni. Growing up in Texas and eating a lot of, whatever hamburgers, I had no context for what this would taste like or be like, and sure enough, I put it in my mouth and it was like I definitely have no context for this. I happen to like uni, but it's as if everything that ended up on your plate all the time was that when it comes to wine. Because until you start learning about wine, it's all unknown. It's like I don't know if I like New Zealand sauvignon blanc. What do you mean it tastes like green peppers? That's weird. It's a wine. It's no wonder people are daunted. At the same time a little bit of knowledge of wine goes a huge way. You can know a few grapes and a few things you like and you're good to go. It is fermented grape juice, you know? That's it (laughing).

Kat Kinsman:
I mean I sort of think just about anything I know about wine is something you taught me (laughs), I think of some of these things, I like it when my favorite musicians talk about who their favorite bands are. You know I love The Cure and Robert Smith is a tremendous champion of other bands and up and coming bands. Calvin Johnson from Beat Happening has always been great about this, and I follow this-
Ray Isle:
And then there's Morrissey (laughs). And he just-

Kat Kinsman:
Awe, Morrissey deserves no wine.

Ray Isle:
No wine for Morrissey.

Kat Kinsman:
Morrissey deserves like room temperature tap water (laughing).

Ray Isle:
But it's so frustrating, 'cause I love those albums so much,

Kat Kinsman:
However Johnny Marr deserves-

Ray Isle:
Johnny Marr deserves everything. Yeah.

Kat Kinsman:
Well, actually what would you wanna pour for Johnny Marr?

Ray Isle:
That's a fine question. Well, one, I don't know if he drinks, you never know.

Kat Kinsman:
I think he's vegan (laughs).

Ray Isle:
I think the dude deserves champagne.

Kat Kinsman:
Oh yeah (laughs).

Ray Isle:
Really great champagne.
With all of these things, taste is used as a cudgel to beat other people with on a regular basis with this. But it can also really, again, like empower people. And you were saying, knowing a few things, it can help in so many areas of your life. When did you get to the point of confidence, or what were the circumstances when you did start writing about it and you started marrying this and you became an authority on it?

Ray Isle:

One nice thing about wine is that it is inexhaustible as a subject, you never reach the level of perfect authority. So what happened was I was at Stanford on this fellowship and then a couple things happened. Working at a winery during harvest, the first amazing thing I learned about wine that was applicable to writing about it was anybody who writes about wine should find a way to get this experience, which is the process of being around wine as it becomes wine. Being around grapes as they become wine and what a tank of fermenting grapes smells like. You see these pinot noir grapes come in and several weeks later you more or less got wine. It may age for a couple years, but it's wine. And you smell it along the way, everything from the fresh juice to the fermentation. The smell of fermentation to the way it gradually becomes wine. And that is a tremendously valuable lesson, and so I learned that. And then what happened was I moved. I thought I was gonna stay in the Bay Area. I did two things, I met my now wife, who was in New York. She had a quite good job in the arts world and seem to think that leaving it to move to California to be with unemployed potential wine guy was possibly unwise. I (laughs) really had no argument for that. And then almost simultaneously through a very random connection, I was offered a job working for an importer as a supplier rep in New York City, selling Dow's and Graham's port. But getting to that question of expertise, selling port didn't make me an expert. It made me an expert on where every single liquor store in New York City was, which was good, but it did give me the opportunity to go to, what I refer to as trade tastings or wholesaler portfolio tastings, which is basically someone who imports a hundred different wineries, has a tasting for the trade where all reps are introduced from all those wineries or some of the employees of the company are pouring tastes to restaurant buyers and retail buyers, so that they can decide what they wanna buy. However, if you happen to work in the business, I mean I would be at the pouring port, but then one of my colleagues would spell me, and you could go taste 100 different wines from 20 different countries. It's a very good way to quickly indoctrinate yourself into a lot of wine styles. I still was freelancing, and writing fiction and also writing, some journalism, some profile pieces. I wrote a profile piece, actually about Larry McMurtry for the Stanford Alumni magazine, and Josh Green who is the editor of Wine & Spirits, saw that and got in touch with me and mostly it was about potentially to freelance for the magazine, 'cause he liked the story. And pretty quickly, he offered me an editorial job at Wine & Spirits. And that was another being in the right place at the right time. It didn't hurt that I had written that was a nice profile about McMurtry (laughing). The thing about Wine & Spirits, which we don't do at Food & Wine, but Wine & Spirits does is they rate hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of wine in every issue. To do that you have to taste 10 times that many wines. So, for five years, when we were tasting, which was let's say two weeks out of every month. we would taste 40 McLaren Vale Shiraz's in the morning and 40 Barossa Shiraz's in the afternoon, and 40 Clare Valley Shiraz's in the morning and 40 Western Australia Shiraz in the afternoon, and then we would move to New Zealand and do, 40 New Zealand pinot noirs in the morning,
and 40 New Zealand, cabernet blends and merlots and so in the afternoon. And if you do that for five years, across a whole lot of wines, you learn a ton about wine and you learn a ton about what wine tastes like, you learn a ton about what wine is. It was grad school in wine. I learned a fantastic amount. I just tasted and tasted and tasted and tasted in a context the way we would do it is we would get local sommeliers to be on a panel for the tasting. So, there would be five or six sommeliers like Bernie Sun from, at the time, Jean-Georges and, all these people who are now been in the wine business in New York a long time. And it was a fabulous learning experience. I left after five years, partly because mechanical reasons, had a kid, needed better benefits, Food & Wine wanted to hire me. I kind of burned out my engines there and needed to do something a little bit different. I've always been interested in food, so I wanted to kind of combine the two. I've always cooked.

**Kat Kinsman:**

But this also hits on a thing that I appreciate about you and appreciate about actually my favorite people in the beverage world, it’s knowledge coupled with humor. And, you know my particular taste in these things. There’s that humor and that through line that makes me feel like I am welcome into this. And that’s something that you bring too, and is that something that has always been appreciated about you, or did you feel like you needed to button up at some point when you come to Food & Wine (laughs).

**Ray Isle:**

I mean I never felt like I had to button up particularly. When I started Food & Wine, you start anywhere you have to reign in your own style a little bit to fit the voice of the magazine, I mean you know this from when we did, I mean was it a blog? What was it (laughs)?

**Kat Kinsman:**

So, for (laughs) context, I used to work at CNN and run a section called Eatocracy. And I would get Ray’s columns, I think two weeks before they ran on foodandwine.com, and we were able to do things that maybe didn't work in the context of the magazine, but worked incredibly well online.

**Ray Isle:**

Yeah. And I was able to be much more my own personal voice. Food & Wine's voice was a little more controlled than it is now. But I've never felt like I had to edit down the humor too much, to some degree. I mean this one of the crazy things is taking fermented grape juice, which is alcoholic and tastes great, and making it not fun. Why would you do that? That doesn't make any sense at all. It's fun, by its nature it's fun. Yes, it’s also intellectually interesting and complex and has a cultural history going back, but it's also a ton of fun.

**Kat Kinsman:**

When I opened up your book and I knew that it was going to have your voice in it and I knew that it was gonna have your scholarship in it, and I opened it up and I started to laugh, and I would like for you to explain Taco Bell-
Ray Isle:
(laughs).

Kat Kinsman:
... in the context of wine to people.

Ray Isle:
I had a momentary hesitation about that analogy, because I actually don't mind Taco Bell tacos.

Kat Kinsman:
I love Taco Bell.

Ray Isle:
There is a big difference between a Taco Bell taco and having a conscientious chef at a really good restaurant make a plate of food for you that is handcrafted and where the ingredients were selected for a reason and because they're really great ingredients. I use the analogy of artisanal tacos, but the point is, a lot of wine is a corporate beverage product. It is made in hundreds of thousands of cases at a time, hundred thousand gallon tanks, and the point I'm making in the book is a Taco Bell taco is made, I mean there are millions of them made probably every day. They are not an artisanal product. They are a corporate product that has been designed, specifically designed, like all fast food, by people with very advanced degrees, to taste really good to you. And so, the book I wrote is not about the Taco Bell tacos of wine (laughs). It is about wines that are made by actual people who know the land that they're working on and care about the grapes they're growing, and are invested in the process of turning it into wine. if you can look at a wine and ask the question, "Who made it?" "How did that make it?" And "Why did they make it that way?" That's really important. And if you look at most of your generic sort of supermarket 150,000, 250,000, 300,000 case wines, it was made by a marketing committee. Doesn't mean it tastes bad. Taste... you can make something that is in a sense utterly artificial in some ways, that taste fantastic. We all know this and that's kind of the point I'm making. There's a pleasure or a joy, or a deepening of experience that you can get out of drinking wine that is made by real people from a real place in a way that expresses that place. But it's kind of funny, (laughs), you know, it's like at the same time, Taco Bell tacos taste good, sure. They are, the bags of meat come from somewhere. Hundreds and thousands of shells, lots of meat goes in the shells. Lettuce is sprinkled on top and it's shoved at you through a window, you know? That's a lot of wine in the world realistically, so I wanted to write about the other wine. I don't mean this as an attack on people who like wanna drink mass market wine or people who want to eat Taco Bell tacos. I happily drive past a Taco Bell now and then, I'm going, "I'm gonna have a Taco Bell taco." But I think if you are interested in wine, there is a kind of wine out there that offers more than that. You learn to buy wine by drinking it. And As your level of knowledge deepens, your appreciation deepens. If you look at the percentages, the vast majority of wine that's sold is fairly generic. It used to be generic and bad like in the 19 early 70s, whatever. It's all made very well now. It's all processed beautifully and it tastes fine, but it's not interesting. It's more
important to me that a wine has personality than that it's perfect, it needs to express something that's real, rather than just be kind of perfectly made shell.

Kat Kinsman:
I like the flaws in things. I mean that's what gives, you know, a rock its sparkle.

Ray Isle:
Yeah. I mean, humans are interesting 'cause they're not perfect. I mean if you want perfect, I guess ChatGPT is on the way (laughing). I think we are interesting in our imperfections. It's the classic thing they say about beauty, that beauty is not perfection, beauty, like the people who are most beautiful are often somewhat off of what you would expect beauty to be.

Kat Kinsman:
So, on a practical sense, how should people approach using this book?

Ray Isle:
Oh, well, they should approach it first by buying it. That's the best way to approach using the book.

Kat Kinsman:
(laughs).

Ray Isle:
I heartily recommend it. But the other way is that, the part of the book where I talk about why this book is what it is and who these people are who are in it. It's an important part of the book, but it's fairly short in the overall scheme of things, and the vast majority of the book are individual profiles of wine, wineries, wine makers, vigneron around the world who are making wines in this way with recommended wines. And so it's meant as a statement on some level, but it's very much meant as a guide and it's meant as a useful guide to just give you stuff to look for in stores. It's not meant to be all theoretical, it's in fact extremely practical. And so, there are a couple of filters on who's in the book. I mean, one, obviously the basic philosophical approach, but two, almost all the wines in the book are under $100. I didn't wanna write a book about super hyper expensive Burgundys that only the very rich can afford. It's not what I do and it's not really what I'm interested in. I say it somewhere in the book that you can spend your entire life drinking wines that cost under 100 bucks, under 75 bucks and have an amazing experience of drinking wine. But it's meant to be fun to read and it's also meant to be interesting, and it's also meant to be useful, to actually be something that gives you wines you can go out to buy that you will at least find interesting and probably really like.

Kat Kinsman:
What is the single best drinking moment that you had in the course of creating this book?

**Ray Isle:**
One of the best moments was before I actually knew that this was the book I was gonna do, but it's material that definitely went into the book, which was when I went with Pascaline Lepeltier, who's a master sommelier and runs a wonderful restaurant, Chambers, here in New York. I did a profile piece on her. We drove through the Loire together visiting winemakers that she's particularly fond of and thinks are wonderful and Pascaline's from the Loire, and it was one, she's a friend. Two, she's an encyclopedic knowledge of the Loire Valley, so I learned a vast amount. But, there was a moment where we were at a winery and we'd gone back into the caves and the woman who was the winemaker at Domaine de la Chevalerie, said, "Wait." She poured us an older, much older bottle of their wine. She said, "Wait," and it's actually literally a cave. The cellar of the winery goes back into a kind of cave system, and she turned out the lights and it was pitch black. And she said, "When I was a teenager, you would come down here and you would sit, drink wine and the total dark" and it was sort of towards the end of this trip and we just sat there in the silence drinking this wine, and it was really a magical moment. Not to be repeated, because very tragically she passed away a couple of years later. That trip and those winemakers informed the book in a way. That's the kind of stuff that I'm interested in wine. I did an interview with David Hirsch for the book of Hirsch Vineyard in California. And we sat down and talked for two or three hours and he is interesting because he is a farmer who's a very intellectual farmer, who was in a tractor accident five years ago or so and is now in a wheelchair. He's still intensely passionate about what he does. He is still the farmer on the property, and he's a wonderful thinker about wine. We were drinking a Burgundy that was from his cellar while we talked. That bottle of wine, but that conversation, for me it's always context. It's the wines that matter are the ones that are in a context. It's such a pleasure to be around someone who thinks so deeply, makes such wonderful wines and drinking wine together. So, those are the wines that really linger and matter in memory, I think.

**Kat Kinsman:**
You're making me think of that Frank O'Hara poem, “Having a Coke with You”.

**Ray Isle:**
Yea, Coca-Cola can be a meaningful thing if you're having it with the right person at the right moment. It's a crucial aspect of wine, but there are those moments that are just kind of transcendent and/or meaningful, and there were a lot of those in writing this book, because I was meeting a lot of people who are fascinating. I was tasting wines that I care about, and I was funneling that into this project.

**Kat Kinsman:**
I think what you're doing though is giving people a passport for their own to happen here as well, and giving them the courage and empowering them to do it. And I guess I wanna know then, do you have sort of a Holy Grail combination of the wine you'd wanna be drinking when
you, you know, obviously you wanna be with the loved ones who you know and all these things is there a dream person who you would want to share a particular bottle of wine with?

Ray Isle:
I think the person I would like to share a bottle of wine with, particularly in the context of this book, would be my father. I didn’t manage to publish it before he passed away. He was a professor and he was a reader for sure, and he's the one who created my love of reading. And, we did take one trip through Texas wine country together, which was it lingers in memory as a really wonderful few days. But I would've very much liked for him to have sit down with him and had a glass of something that's in this book and been able to show him that I'd written this book. So, that would be the person, I mean for sure. If I had to pick a non-related person who's really famous, I really like Ingrid Bergman (laughs). Also, I've become friends with Kyle MacLachlan who makes wine, and Kyle got into wine because of David Lynch, the film director, and I would actually be quite interested to have a glass of wine with David Lynch. I don't know what would amount... wha- wha- (laughs) what it would be like but, Kyle has flown the possibility by before, so that would be pretty amazing.

Kat Kinsman:
I don't admit this often to the outside world, I turned an entire room of my house into the Black Lodge from Twin Peaks (laughs).

Ray Isle:
I know this (laughs).

Kat Kinsman:
I feel like this needs to happen for you and David Lynch. We're speaking this into the universe

Ray Isle:
I mean it's a little more likely than Ingrid Bergman I think And sadly more likely than my dad who passed away but, you know.

Kat Kinsman:
How would he not be so proud of you. You educate people, you teach them how to have an incredible time, you empower them to seek out their pleasure and you have written this extraordinary book that everybody needs to buy, and also makes a great holiday gift.

Ray Isle:
Thank you. Yes, The World in a Wineglass. It's available for pre-order, it's available soon for order order. It's useful as a doorstop if you don't ever get around to reading it (laughing).

Kat Kinsman:
It's good for holding up your computer when you're recording a podcast (laughs).
Ray Isle:
It's very good for that, yeah.

Kat Kinsman:
(laughs) Thank you for your time. Thank you for being an amazing colleague always and I cannot emphasize this enough to folks, go out and get this book, make your life richer in all the ways. You'll have the wine, you'll have Ray's words in your head and that's a damn good time.

Ray Isle:
Thank you.

Music: Tinfoil Swans Theme Songs Fades In

Kat Kinsman (VO):
Thank you so much for listening to my conversation with Ray Isle. And also thank you for listening to this whole season. This is our final episode of season 1 and I have had an absolute blast with this. If you maybe want to hear some more of this for a second season it would really help us so much if you would leave stars and reviews on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts, send it to a friend, I don't know, listen 25 times in a row, whatever it is you need to do, because it is a pleasure and a privilege to get to do this podcast every week. And especially with this incredible production team, it is Lottie Leymarie, Jennifer Del Sole, Michael Klasek, Amelia Schwartz, Ashley Day, Sean Flynn, and Hunter Lewis. If you want to get caught up on the season you can go to foodandwine.com/tinfoilswans, stay well.

Music: Tinfoil Swans Theme Songs Fades Out