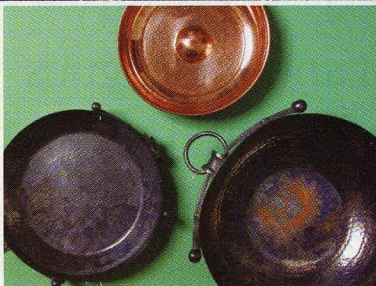
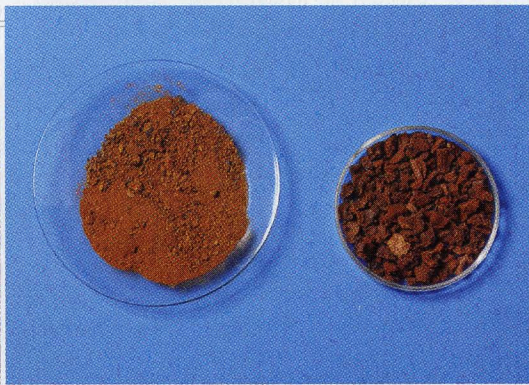
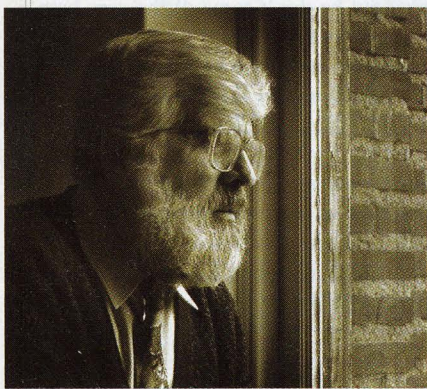


In Search of Ancient Spirits

Booze brainiac Pat McGovern gives new meaning to the term “rare vintage”

|| BY BENJAMIN WALLACE



PAT MCGOVERN WAS PLAYING SHOW-AND-TELL WITH some of the oldest leftovers known to man. “This is lamb or goat stew with lentils,” the bushy-bearded archaeologist noted, as he sat in his cluttered office in the bowels of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. “And this is wine.” What McGovern was holding were two Ziploc bags, one containing a sandy powder, the other what appeared to be dirt. In fact, they had been retrieved from a 2,700-year-old burial site in Central Turkey, and were remains of the funeral feast of, quite possibly, King Midas.

Unappetizing as the remains appear, they are remarkably intact for such ancient organic residues, and with their assistance, McGovern has taken to recreating the king’s funeral feast in grand fashion. In the past few years he has hosted five Midas dinners, at which the menu has included, in addition to a spicy fire-roasted lamb-and-lentil stew topped with watercress, a honey-caramelized fennel tart with pomegranate jus. The reconstruction is fairly speculative; it’s not really known whether lamb and lentils were served, only that meat and vegetables of some sort were on the menu. “Textual evidence is minimal,” McGovern says, “but there are some good quotes from *The Iliad* about the beverage and

WINESTEIN: Clockwise from upper left, McGovern and his artifacts: 2,700-year-old leftovers; modern-day Midas beer; dyeing mollusks; a pottery shard; and reproduction sake urns.

funerary ceremonies.” The skeleton thought to be Midas’s indicates a natural death. Certain furniture in the tomb, along with the quotes from Homer, suggests there was a feast.

This kind of research has helped McGovern emerge from the obscurity of his esoteric subspecialty—molecular archaeology—to become the go-to pundit for journalists seeking quotes on extremely old alcohol. *The Economist* cited him in its Christmas issue; *Wine Spectator* just published its second article about him; and for the recently published book *A Short History of Wine*, Canadian author Rod Phillips made a special trip to Philly to interview McGovern. After reading the latest *Wine Spectator* story, Le Mas Perrier manager Bernard Perrier asked McGovern to host a dinner at the restaurant. It’s scheduled for June 4th. “I feel like I’ve tapped into a gold mine of research,” McGovern says. “It keeps spreading out.”

The detective work that would turn Patrick McGovern—ex-English minor, organic chemist and Near Eastern archaeologist—into the man to see about paleo-booze can be dated, if not with radiocarbon precision, to circa 1985. In a

ON FOOD

field concerned mainly with inferring the past from the bloodless evidence of inert tools and dusty pottery fragments, McGovern, with his organic-chemistry background, imagined he might illuminate whole swaths of previously murky history by analyzing the living substances that survive as residues on the surfaces of ancient vessels. He first focused on Royal Purple, a luxury dye of the pre-classical world made from Mediterranean mollusks (a luxury because it took 10,000 animals to generate one gram of dye). In the French Mediterranean village of Banyuls-sur-Mer, McGovern waded into the sea and gathered mollusks, from which he extracted the hypobranchial glands for analysis. Back in Philadelphia, he hooked up with a retired DuPont chemist who had access to the sophisticated equipment in the company's

McGovern and some colleagues soon came up with an answer. From their analysis of pottery shards found at Godin Tepe, located in modern Iran, they determined that wine entered the civilized menu as early as 7,000 B.C., more than 2,000 years sooner than previously thought.

Book knowledge is well and good, but McGovern, as a rigorous scholar, figured that the pursuit of knowledge required he drink some of the very beer swigged at King Midas's interment. An important influence in this regard was his colleague Sol Katz, a professor of anthropology at Penn who in 1993 teamed up with the San Francisco microbrewery Anchor Steam to recreate the beer of ancient Sumeria. Though that beer was never sold commercially, two batches were produced, both of which McGovern tasted. "The first was

From their analysis of pottery shards, McGovern and colleagues determined that wine entered the civilized menu as early as 7,000 B.C.

Wilmington lab. Together, they determined to a 99 percent degree of certainty that some shards they were analyzing did indeed contain Royal Purple, a finding that righted an historical wrong, giving to the ancient Canaanites credit that had long been granted to the later Phoenicians.

Soon, McGovern shifted his attention to a consumer good more dear to his heart. Years earlier, when he was a student, he and his wife had worked the harvest in a vineyard in the Mosel region of Germany. And in Banyuls, known to wine aficionados for the ambrosial dessert wine produced there, McGovern found himself gazing upon artfully terraced vineyards that dated to Roman times. "I was thinking about wine a lot," he says. An idea had begun to form in his mind: Wine might be another high-end luxury item worth studying.

In 1991, he helped organize a symposium at the Robert Mondavi winery in the Napa Valley, where someone posed the question: Just how long have people been drinking wine, anyway?

almost like a champagne, with a hint of dates," he says, "and the second was like an ale, with a more toasty, caramel-y, yeasty character."

At a 1998 dinner at the University museum in honor of British beer guru Michael Jackson, McGovern took advantage of the presence of lots of microbrewers in the Upper Egyptian Gallery to stand and suggest that someone should actually make the Midas stuff. One of the beer-makers, Sam Calagione of Dogfish Head Craft Brewery in Rehoboth, Delaware, was already experimenting with offbeat ingredients like chicory, organic Mexican coffee, baked pumpkins, St. John's wort and licorice root. ("Our beers are blissfully inefficient," the hyper-passionate brewer's website quixotically boasts.) At the dinner, Calagione served a "braggot" beer, a kind of mead made from honey, barley beer and plums. McGovern thought that if grapes were substituted for the plums, the result would be close to what King Midas drank. Calagione soon came up with an ale he dubbed Midas Touch,

brewed from thyme honey, barley, muscat grapes and saffron. "I was predisposed to Sam because my wife and I had tried his beer at a tavern in Centreville," says McGovern, whose dogged search for truth involves maintaining a healthy supply of Midas Touch in his home refrigerator (it sells briskly at the Foodery at 10th and Pine) as well as making the occasional visit to the Belgian restaurant Monk's, on 16th Street. "I think my first real epiphany of how beer can approximate to wine [in complexity] came at Monk's," McGovern says, referring to his maiden experience with an aromatic Belgian Chimay aged for three years.

The five Midas dinners have included one at the tomb itself, one at Copia in the Napa Valley, and three at the museum. (The museum events cost \$135 for members.) Why does he bother? "The re-creation actually serves a very good purpose," he says: "Trying out various permutations of the evidence, to see which work and were possible for the ancient beverage-maker and chef. Our palate is different from the ancients"—long ago, sweet beverages were the rule—"and some concessions were made so that the meal and beverage are a culinary delight for the attendees."

As for his other research and reconstruction activities, a winery on the island of Crete is currently working to recreate a Minoan wine identified by McGovern on some Cretan pottery shards, and the researcher is now waist-deep in Chinese sake, as he studies sealed bronze urns that still contain liquid from 3,000 years ago. (The Chinese had been making the rice wine for thousands of years before the Japanese started to, around 400 A.D.). "I've got contacts with the secretary of the Chinese wine society," McGovern says. "We could do a rice-wine tasting for the next Michael Jackson event."

Naturally, all this poring over ancient texts and scrutinizing pottery from grimy dig sites leaves McGovern a bit parched, and he's something of a beverage connoisseur and foodie. He eagerly jots down restaurant recommendations and unhesitatingly opines on the wines of the local Chaddsford winery. ("I haven't been that impressed.") When he travels to Ontario in May to speak at a conference on the history of wine, seminars and white papers won't be the only attractions for him: "Ontario's coming up in terms of ice wine and other varieties," he notes.

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