

# Guest Editorial

## Tasting wine and library software

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"Is it the wine or the subject of your next editorial which makes you look so meditative?" — I teased David Raitt on climbing back into the bus when returning from a wine tasting party we both attended along with 350 librarians and information specialists from fifty-three countries who participated in the recent Second International Conference on the Application of Microcomputers in Information, Documentation and Libraries, in Baden-Baden.

"You Hungarians are quite good in wine production but what about writing a guest editorial?" — he retorted. This was a challenge I could not resist, so here we are with the guest editorial. But why this title? Couldn't I write about the conference itself? Sure, I could have; it was an excellently organised one. In addition to wine and software, we could taste many other delicacies which would be worth writing about, like:

- the urbane Europeanism of Peter Canisius, the Chairman of the Organising Committee who managed both the professional and the social programmes with the same efficiency, competence and ease in English, German and French;
- the impressive workaholicism of Ching-Chih Chen which kept her alive in spite of her demanding pentathlon (she was a member of the International Advisory Committee, chaired the first plenary session, tutored a full-day workshop, co-chaired a panel session and disc-jockeyed a multi-media demonstration of her videodisc project) which left the audience — but not her — breathless;

□ the sardonic humour of David Raitt with which he gave a tongue-in-cheek report about the adversities of the life of an electronic library manager, which was a refreshing and illuminating change from the deadly serious we-did-it-this-way-papers;

□ the jam-session-like panel meeting featuring C.C. Chen and the three Peters (Canisius, Simmons and Noerr) which reminded me of the come-together of chart-buster singers to record the song: 'We are the World'.

Yes, I could have written about these in more detail; still I have chosen to ponder two satellite events: the wine tasting party and the exhibition accompanying the conference. Strange, you might say. Well, it is a matter of taste and an editorial is rather apt for playing with an idea, however strange it may seem.

So to get down to brass tacks. Going through the wine tasting party I got more and more concerned why can't we have such a perfectly organised software tasting party at highly topical conferences such as this. I bet as many people would join such a party as were participating at the wine tasting which was carefully orchestrated. The cellar was kept at the optimal temperature, tables were arranged in an ideal way for tasting, snacking and chatting; smoking was strictly prohibited, snacks were served in time to cleanse our palates, candles were placed on the table for observing the clarity of wine, the sequence of the eight brands to be tasted was presented on a wine card and was in perfect order: dry before sweet, young before old, modest before fine and all these were



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garnished with an adequately portioned tutorial from a wine-expert. This was a disciplined, but pleasant way to learn the basics of wine-tasting and appreciation.

Experts explained to us how to taste and judge wine by appearance (hue, clarity, viscosity), bouquet (grape aroma, maturity, intensity) and flavour (dryness, sweetness, acidity, body). We learnt that older wine is not necessarily better, a minor red wine is not worth holding over-long; that alcoholic content in itself is not all-decisive, it is the ratio of other ingredients which gives a well-balanced wine; that by holding a glass of wine in your palms will encourage vapourisation, thereby help the tasting of the bouquet. In a four-hour session we had plenty of advice and practical guidelines to know what to look for in our next wine shopping. Those who wanted to, could buy one or more bottles of their favourite. Many did!

Now compare this to the typical hectic software tasting at exhibitions. Usually, there is room for only a few people to sit by the demonstrator, others keep eavesdropping over your shoulder and breathing onto your neck; there is only one display to see the action going cheek-to-cheek with other; demonstrators are often interrupted by incoming calls and other visitors and you have a good chance to be kept waiting for an hour with the promise I'll-be-back-to-you-in-a-minute, so you feel inclined to rather leapfrog from one vendor to the other, to pick up brochures here and there, and to accept at face value the verbal and written hypes of vendors in lack of adequate circumstances to cleverly taste the exhibited software, though you know as well that seeing is believing, and asking is knowing.

Wouldn't many of the conference attendees join software tasting prep sessions to learn how to navigate effectively between vendors' booths and gather relevant information despite the prevailing conditions described above? Just imagine a well-tempered room equipped with a dozen display terminals scattered around for watching the demonstrations in comfort. Imagine that a representative of the vendor of an information retrieval system would take the floor for an hour to demonstrate (to sell if you prefer) program X. (I guess most vendors would gladly do so for publicity.) Imagine the audience 'aahing' and 'oohing' at hearing that the system provides Boolean search facilities, handles a thesaurus of 15,000 terms, permits both index file and serial searching by author, title, series, all of them also in truncated form, accommodates one million records, etc. Then imagine an expert in IR packages coming to cross-examine the system — or to

put it more gently, to taste it, to ask some questions for revealing the unsung parts of the story. Imagine the following dialog:

*Expert:* Are all the Boolean operators ('and', 'or', 'not') allowed?

*Vendor:* Yes, except the 'not' operator.

*Expert:* Can you apply parentheses to control the precedence of evaluating the Boolean expression?

*Vendor:* You do not need them as you will use two terms per expressions.

*Expert (aside):* It is making virtue out of necessity, you may prefer to have four terms 'or'ed together in a row.

*Expert:* By 15,000 terms you mean 15,000 top terms or that figure includes also the non-descriptors, narrower or broader terms each time they occur with a descriptor?

*Vendor:* I mean 15,000 individual terms without qualifying their relationships.

*Expert (aside):* So it is not a thesaurus but a plain-vanilla controlled vocabulary at best.

*Expert:* Can you search by any title word? For example, if you recall a rather unique word from the title, which is not necessarily the first title word?

*Vendor:* Yes, by a special command to scan through all the title fields for the specified character string.

*Expert:* But that task takes, say, fifty times more response time than an index search.

*Vendor:* No doubt, but if you know the correct lead term of the title the program will happily search for it in the index file much faster.

*Expert (aside):* Then I could do as well with my traditional printed catalog.

Is it extreme? Maybe. I just wanted to pinpoint that listening to educated questions and comments may be very informative. And contagious. Next time when you are told that a circulation control program can handle multiple copy subscription, you will not be limited to saying 'aha', but likely to ask: what happens if two copies are received on time but the third must be claimed? Next time a vendor wants to enchant you by the glamorous check-in procedure of a circulation program, you may find yourself requesting a demo where an overdue book is to be returned with two reserves on it, and asking some questions: Is the delinquent patron trapped for fining? Can the fine be waived? Is the book trapped for reserve? Is the first patron on the reserve list automatically sent an availability notice or has the librarian the

chance to rearrange priorities? If you sit through some software tasting parties, you may develop a good antidote to exhibits.

Software tasting parties should be practice-oriented just as wine tasting parties are. We tasted wine quite at leisure and learnt a lot about practical issues without getting that much information about grape varieties, soil and climate differences or methods of cultivation, even though all of these have an essential effect on the quality of wine. But customers are more interested in the end-product than in the wine growing and wine making process, just as librarians are likely to be much more interested in performance parameters and functional features than in technical internalities, such as hierarchical *versus* relational file structure or compiled *versus* interpreted code, which though these have their effects, undoubtedly tend to distract from the main issues.

Having said all this, I admit that you can become neither a wine expert, nor a software connoisseur in a couple of hours. The old adage applies: *practice makes perfect*. Furthermore, I admit that there are no absolute rules either for wine or software selection. You should not expect from a single wine tasting party to know which is the best white wine, nor should you hope that a software tasting

party would tell you which is the best circulation control program. Tasting and selecting wine and software is after all subjective. Just as the adequacy of a particular wine depends as much on the food context, the time of day and your mood, the goodness of a particular software package depends on the context of your library (number of borrowers, size of collection, volume of transactions) on your needs for searchability, ease-of-use, etc.

On a hot summer evening in Portugal I would not give my inexpensive *vinho verde* for the finest Moscatel de Setubal and neither would I prefer a full-bodied cataloguing software requiring some esoteric operating system to a lighter one running under PC-DOS. Both wine and software should be tasted and selected in accordance with *your* requirements, but it is worth knowing the rules of the game if you want to make more than a haphazard tasting and selection of either.

I now raise my glass to the software tasting party to be held prior to the third conference on microcomputers in libraries.

Cheers, zum wohl, à votre santé, skåal,  
santjes, egészségére

Editor's note: Slàinte dhuitse.

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