

STORY 2

Taste

by Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl was born in Wales to Norwegian parents in 1916. His father had a strong belief that his children must go to English schools, and so Dahl was sent to boarding school in England, where he developed a hatred for bullies and injustice. During the Second World War he joined the Royal Air Force. He crashed in the middle of a desert, and wrote a newspaper story about his experiences. He realised how much he enjoyed writing. Later, when he married and had children, he wrote children's books, for which he is most famous today. He died in 1990. To find out more about his early life, read his two autobiographies *Boy* and *Going Solo*.

There were six of us to dinner that night at Mike Schofield's house in London: Mike and his wife and daughter, my wife and I, and a man called Richard Pratt.

Richard Pratt was a famous gourmet. He was president of a small society known as the Epicures, and each month he circulated privately to its members a pamphlet on food and wines. He organised dinners where sumptuous dishes and rare wines were served. He refused to smoke for fear of harming his palate, and when discussing a wine, he had a curious, rather droll habit of referring to it as though it were a living being. "A prudent wine," he would say, "rather diffident and evasive, but quite prudent." Or, "a good-humoured wine, benevolent and cheerful – slightly obscene, perhaps, but none the less good-humoured."

I had been to dinner at Mike's twice before when Richard Pratt was there, and on each occasion Mike and his wife had gone out of their way to produce a special meal for the famous gourmet. And this one, clearly, was to be no exception. The moment we entered the dining room, I could see that the table was laid for a feast. The tall candles, the yellow roses, the quantity of shining silver, the three wineglasses to each person, and above all, the faint scent of roasting meat from the kitchen brought the first warm oozings of saliva to my mouth.

As we sat down, I remembered that on both Richard Pratt's previous

gourmet – person who specialises in food

palate – the part of your mouth that tastes

visits Mike had played a little betting game with him over the claret, challenging him to name its breed and its vintage. Pratt had replied that that should not be difficult provided it was one of the great years. Mike had then bet him a case of the wine in question that he could not do it. Pratt had accepted, and had won both times. Tonight I felt sure that the little game would be played over again, for Mike was quite willing to lose the bet in order to prove that his wine was good enough to be recognised, and Pratt, for his part, seemed to take a grave, restrained pleasure in displaying his knowledge.

The meal began with a plate of whitebait, fried very crisp in butter, and to go with it there was a Moselle: Mike got up and poured the wine himself, and when he sat down again, I could see that he was watching Richard Pratt. He had set the bottle in front of me so that I could read the label. It said, "Geierslay Ohligsborg, 1945". He leaned over and whispered to me that Geierslay was a tiny village in the Moselle, almost unknown outside Germany. He said that this wine we were drinking was something unusual, that the output of the vineyard was so small that it was almost impossible for a stranger to get any of it. He had visited Geierslay personally the previous summer in order to obtain the few dozen bottles that they had finally allowed him to have.

"I doubt anyone else in the country has any of it at the moment," he said. I saw him glance again at Richard Pratt. "Great thing about Moselle," he continued, raising his voice, "it's the perfect wine to serve before a claret. A lot of people serve a Rhine wine instead, but that's because they don't know any better. A Rhine wine will kill a delicate claret, you know that? It's barbaric to serve a Rhine before a claret. But a Moselle – ah! – a Moselle is exactly right."

Mike Schofield was an amiable, middle-aged man. But he was a stockbroker. To be precise, he was a jobber in the stock market, and like a number of his kind, he seemed to be somewhat embarrassed, almost ashamed to find that he had made so much money with so slight a talent. In his heart he knew that he was not really much more than a bookmaker – an unctuous, infinitely respectable, secretly unscrupulous bookmaker – and he knew that his friends knew it, too. So he was seeking now to become a man of culture, to cultivate a literary and aesthetic taste, to collect paintings, music, books, and all the rest of it. His little sermon about Rhine wine and Moselle was a part of this thing, this culture that he sought.

claret – kind of wine

vintage – where and when a wine is made

vineyard – where grapes are grown

amiable – friendly

stockbroker – someone who works with money on the stock exchange

“A charming little wine, don’t you think?” he said. He was still watching Richard Pratt. I could see him give a rapid furtive glance down the table each time he dropped his head to take a mouthful of whitebait. I could almost *feel* him waiting for the moment when Pratt would take his first sip, and look up from his glass with a smile of pleasure, of astonishment, perhaps even of wonder, and then there would be a discussion and Mike would tell him about the village of Geierslay.

But Richard Pratt did not taste his wine. He was completely engrossed in conversation with Mike’s eighteen-year-old daughter, Louise. He was half turned towards her, smiling at her, telling her, so far as I could gather, some story about a chef in a Paris restaurant. As he spoke, he leaned closer and closer to her, seeming in his eagerness almost to impinge upon her, and the poor girl leaned as far as she could away from him, nodding politely, rather desperately, and looking not at his face but at the topmost button of his dinner jacket.

We finished our fish, and the maid came around removing the plates. When she came to Pratt, she saw that he had not yet touched his food, so she hesitated, and Pratt noticed her. He waved her away, broke off his conversation, and quickly began to eat, popping the little crisp brown fish quickly into his mouth with rapid jabbing movements of his fork. Then, when he had finished, he reached for his glass, and in two short swallows he tipped the wine down his throat and turned immediately to resume his conversation with Louise Schofield.

Mike saw it all. I was conscious of him sitting there, very still, containing himself, looking at his guest. His round jovial face seemed to loosen slightly and to sag, but he contained himself and was still and said nothing.

Soon the maid came forward with the second course. This was a large roast of beef. She placed it on the table in front of Mike who stood up and carved it, cutting the slices very thin, laying them gently on the plates for the maid to take around. When he had served everyone, including himself, he put down the carving knife and leaned forward with both hands on the edge of the table.

“Now,” he said, speaking to all of us but looking at Richard Pratt. “Now for the claret. I must go and fetch the claret, if you’ll excuse me.”

“You go and fetch it, Mike?” I said. “Where is it?”

“In my study, with the cork out – breathing.”

“Why the study?”

rapid – quick

furtive – secretive

engrossed – involved deeply

jovial – friendly, sociable

breathing – wine should be opened to “breathe” for a while before you drink it

“Acquiring room temperature, of course. It’s been there twenty-four hours.”

“But why the study?”

“It’s the best place in the house. Richard helped me choose it last time he was here.”

At the sound of his name, Pratt looked around.

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Mike said.

“Yes,” Pratt answered, nodding gravely. “That’s right.”

“On top of the green filing cabinet in my study,” Mike said. “That’s the place we chose. A good draught-free spot in a room with an even temperature. Excuse me now, will you, while I fetch it.”

The thought of another wine to play with had restored his humour, and he hurried out the door, to return a minute later more slowly, walking softly, holding in both hands a wine basket in which a dark bottle lay. The label was out of sight, facing downwards, “Now!” he cried as he came towards the table. “What about this one, Richard? You’ll never name this one!”

Richard Pratt turned slowly and looked up at Mike; then his eyes travelled down to the bottle nestling in its small wicker basket, and he raised his eyebrows, a slight, supercilious arching of the brows, and with it a pushing outwards of the wet lower lip, suddenly imperious and ugly.

“You’ll never get it,” Mike said. “Not in a hundred years.”

“A claret?” Richard Pratt asked, condescending.

“Of course.”

“I assume, then, that it’s from one of the smaller vineyards?”

“Maybe it is, Richard. And then again, maybe it isn’t.”

“But it’s a good year? One of the great years?”

“Yes, I guarantee that.”

“Then it shouldn’t be too difficult,” Richard Pratt said, drawling his words, looking exceedingly bored. Except that, to me, there was something strange about his drawling and his boredom: between the eyes a shadow of something evil, and in his bearing an intentness that gave me a faint sense of uneasiness as I watched him.

“This one is really rather difficult,” Mike said. “I won’t force you to bet on this one.”

“Indeed. And why not?” again the slow arching of the brows, the cool, intent look.

supercilious – feeling more important than others

imperious – like a king, feeling important

condescending – talking down to someone as if you are more powerful than them

intentness – concentration

“Because it’s difficult.”

“That’s not very complimentary to me, you know.”

“My dear man,” Mike said, “I’ll bet you with pleasure, if that’s what you wish.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to name it.”

“You mean you want to bet?”

“I’m perfectly willing to bet,” Richard Pratt said.

“All right, then, we’ll have the usual. A case of the wine itself.”

“You don’t think I’ll be able to name it, do you?”

“As a matter of fact, and with all due respect, I don’t.” Mike said. He was making some effort to remain polite, but Pratt was not bothering overmuch to conceal his contempt for the whole proceeding. And yet, curiously, his next question seemed to betray a certain interest.

“You like to increase the bet?”

“No, Richard. A case is plenty.”

“Would you like to bet fifty cases?”

“That would be silly.”

Mike stood very still behind his chair at the head of the table, carefully holding the bottle in its ridiculous wicker basket. There was a trace of whiteness around his nostrils now, and his mouth was shut very tight.

Pratt was lolling back in his chair, looking up at him, the eyebrows raised, the eyes half closed, a little smile touching the corners of his lips. And again I saw, or thought I saw, something distinctly disturbing about the man’s face, that shadow of intentness between the eyes, and in the eyes themselves, right in their centres where it was black, a small slow spark of shrewdness, hiding.

“So you don’t want to increase the bet?”

“As far as I’m concerned, old man, I don’t give a damn,” Mike said. “I’ll bet you anything you like.”

The three women and I sat quietly, watching the two men. Mike’s wife was becoming annoyed; her mouth had gone sour and I felt that at any moment she was going to interrupt. Our roast beef lay before us on our plates, slowly steaming.

“So you’ll bet me anything I like?”

“That’s what I told you. I’ll bet you anything you damn well please, if you want to make an issue out of it.”

“Even ten thousand pounds?”

“Certainly I will, if that’s the way you want it.” Mike was more confident

shrewdness – cleverness, cunning

now. He knew quite well that he could call any sum Pratt cared to mention.

“So you say I can name the bet?” Pratt asked again.

“That’s what I said.”

There was a pause while Pratt looked slowly around the table, first at me, then at the three women, each in turn. He appeared to be reminding us that we were witness to the offer.

“Mike!” Mrs Schofield said. “Mike, why don’t we stop this nonsense and eat our food. It’s getting cold.”

“But it isn’t nonsense,” Pratt told her evenly. “We’re making a little bet.”

I noticed the maid standing in the background holding a dish of vegetables, wondering whether to come forward with them or not.

“All right, then,” Pratt said. “I’ll tell you what I want you to bet.”

“Come on, then,” Mike said, rather reckless. “I don’t give a damn what it is – you’re on.”

Pratt nodded, and again the little smile moved the corners of his lips, and then, quite slowly, looking at Mike all the time, he said, “I want you to bet me the hand of your daughter in marriage.”

Louise Schofield gave a jump. “Hey!” she cried. “No! That’s not funny! Look here, Daddy, that’s not funny at all.”

“No, dear,” her mother said. “They’re only joking.”

“I’m not joking,” Richard Pratt said.

“It’s ridiculous,” Mike said. He was off balance again now.

“You said you’d bet anything I liked.”

“I meant money.”

“You didn’t *say* money.”

“That’s what I meant.”

“Then it’s a pity you didn’t say it. But anyway, if you wish to go back on your offer, that’s quite all right with me.”

“It’s not a question of going back on my offer, old man. It’s a no-bet anyway, because you can’t match the stake. You yourself don’t happen to have a daughter to put up against mine in case you lose. And if you had, I wouldn’t want to marry her.”

“I’m glad of that, dear,” his wife said.

“I’ll put up anything you like,” Pratt announced, “My house, for example. How about my house?”

“Which one?” Mike asked, joking now.

“The country one.”

“Why not the other one as well?”

“All right then, if you wish it. Both my houses.”

At that point I saw Mike pause. He took a step forward and placed the bottle in its basket gently down on the table. He moved the salt-cellar to one side, then the pepper, and then he picked up his knife, studied the blade thoughtfully for a moment, and put it down again. His daughter, too, had seen him pause.

“Now, Daddy!” she cried. “Don’t be *absurd!* It’s *too* silly for words. I refuse to be betted on like this.”

“Quite right, dear,” her mother said. “Stop it at once, Mike, and sit down and eat your food.”

Mike ignored her. He looked over at his daughter and he smiled, a slow, fatherly, protective smile. But in his eyes, suddenly, there glimmered a little triumph. “You know,” he said, smiling as he spoke. “You know, Louise, we ought to think about this a bit.”

“Now, stop it, Daddy! I refuse even to listen to you! Why, I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life!”

“No, seriously, my dear. Just wait a moment and hear what I have to say.”

“But I don’t *want* to hear it.”

“Louise! Please! It’s like this. Richard here has offered us a serious bet. He is the one who wants to make it, not me. And if he loses, he will have to hand over a considerable amount of property. Now, wait a minute, my dear, don’t interrupt. The point is this. *He cannot possibly win.*”

“He seems to think he can.”

“Now listen to me, because I know what I’m talking about. The expert, when tasting a claret – so long as it is not one of the famous great wines like Lafite or Latour – can only get a certain way towards naming the vineyard. He can, of course, tell you the Bordeaux district from which the wine comes, whether it is from St Emilion, Pomerol, Graves, or Médoc. But then each district has several communes, little counties, and each county has many, many small vineyards. It is impossible for a man to differentiate between them all by taste and smell alone. I don’t mind telling you that this one I’ve got here is a wine from a small vineyard that is surrounded by many other small vineyards, and he’ll never get it. It’s impossible.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” his daughter said.

“I’m telling you I can. Though I say it myself, I understand quite a bit about this wine business, you know. And anyway, heavens alive, girl, I’m your father and you don’t think I’d let you in for – for something you didn’t want, do you? I’m trying to make you some money.”

“Mike!” his wife said sharply. “Stop it now, Mike, please!”

Again he ignored her. “If you will take this bet,” he said to his daughter, “in ten minutes you will be the owner of two large houses.”

“But I don’t want two large houses, Daddy.”

“Then sell them. Sell them back to him on the spot. I’ll arrange all that for you. And then, just think of it, my dear, you’ll be rich! You’ll be independent for the rest of your life!”

“Oh, Daddy, I don’t like it. I think it’s silly.”

“So do I,” the mother said. She jerked her head briskly up and down as she spoke, like a hen. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Michael, ever suggesting such a thing! Your own daughter, too!”

Mike didn’t even look at her. “Take it!” he said eagerly, staring hard at the girl. “Take it, quick! I’ll guarantee you won’t lose.”

“But I don’t like it, Daddy.”

“Come on, girl. Take it!”

Mike was pushing her hard. He was leaning towards her, fixing her with two hard bright eyes, and it was not easy for the daughter to resist him.

“But what if I lose?”

“I keep telling you, you can’t lose. I’ll guarantee it.”

“Oh, Daddy, must I?”

“I’m making you a fortune. So come on now. What do you say, Louise? All right?”

For the last time, she hesitated. Then she gave a helpless little shrug of the shoulders and said, “Oh, all right, then. Just so long as you swear there’s no danger of losing.”

“Good!” Mike cried. “That’s fine! Then it’s a bet!”

“Yes,” Richard Pratt said, looking at the girl. “It’s a bet.”

Immediately, Mike picked up the wine, tipped the first thimbleful into his own glass, then skipped excitedly around the table filling up the others. Now everyone was watching Richard Pratt, watching his face as he reached slowly for his glass with his right hand and lifted it to his nose. The man was about fifty years old and he did not have a pleasant face. Somehow, it was all mouth – mouth and lips – the full, wet lips of the professional gourmet, the lower lip hanging downwards in the centre, a pendulous, permanently open taster’s lip, shaped open to receive the rim of a glass or a morsel of food. Like a keyhole, I thought, watching it; his mouth is like a large wet keyhole.

Slowly he lifted the glass to his nose. The point of the nose entered the glass and moved over the surface of the wine, delicately sniffing. He swirled the

wine gently around in the glass to receive the bouquet. His concentration was intense. He had closed his eyes, and now the whole top half of his body, the head and neck and chest, seemed to become a kind of huge sensitive smelling-machine, receiving, filtering, analysing the message from the sniffing nose.

Mike, I noticed, was lounging in his chair, apparently unconcerned, but he was watching every move. Mrs Schofield, the wife, sat prim and upright at the other end of the table, looking straight ahead, her face tight with disapproval. The daughter, Louise, had shifted her chair away a little, and sidewise, facing the gourmet, and she, like her father, was watching closely.

For at least a minute, the smelling process continued; then, without opening his eyes or moving his head, Pratt lowered the glass to his mouth and tipped in almost half the contents. He paused, his mouth full of wine, getting the first taste; then he permitted some of it to trickle down his throat and I saw his Adam's apple move as it passed by. But most of it he retained in his mouth. And now, without swallowing again, he drew in through his lips a thin breath of air which mingled with the fumes of the wine in the mouth and passed on down into his lungs. He held the breath, blew it out through his nose, and finally began to roll the wine around under the tongue, and chewed it, actually chewed it with his teeth as though it were bread.

It was a solemn, impressive performance, and I must say he did it well.

"Um," he said, putting down the glass, running a pink tongue over his lips, "um – yes. A very interesting little wine – gentle and gracious, almost feminine in the aftertaste."

There was an excess of saliva in his mouth, and as he spoke he spat an occasional bright speck of it on to the table.

"Now we can start to eliminate," he said. "You will pardon me for doing this carefully, but there is much at stake. Normally I would perhaps take a bit of a chance, leaping forward quickly and landing right in the middle of the vineyard of my choice. But this time – I must move cautiously this time, must I not?" He looked up at Mike and he smiled, a thick-lipped, wet-lipped smile. Mike did not smile back.

"First, then, which district in Bordeaux does this wine come from? That is not too difficult to guess. It is far too light in the body to be from either St Emilion or Graves. It is obviously in Médoc. There's no doubt about *that*.

"Now – from which commune in Médoc does it come? That also, by elimination, should not be too difficult to decide, Margaux? No. It cannot be Margaux. It has not the violent bouquet of a Margaux. Pauillac? It cannot

bouquet – smell of wine

eliminate – get rid of

be Pauillac, either. It is too tender, too gentle and wistful for a Pauillac. The wine of Pauillac has a character that is almost imperious in its taste. And also, to me, a Pauillac contains just a little pith, a curious, dusty, pithy flavour that the grape acquires from the soil of the district. No, no. This – this is a very gentle wine, demure and bashful in the first taste, emerging shyly but quite graciously in the second. A little arch, perhaps, in the second taste, and a little naughty also, teasing the tongue with a trace, just a trace, of tannin. Then, in the aftertaste, delightful – consoling and feminine, with a certain blithely generous quality that one associates only with the wines of the commune of St Julien. Unmistakably this is a St Julien.”

He leaned back in his chair, held his hands up level with his chest, and placed the fingertips carefully together. He was becoming ridiculously pompous, but I thought that some of it was deliberate, simply to mock his host. I found myself waiting rather tensely for him to go on. The girl Louise was lighting a cigarette. Pratt heard the match strike and he turned on her, flaring suddenly with real anger. “Please!” he said, “Please don’t do that! It’s a disgusting habit, to smoke at table.”

She looked up at him holding the burning match in one hand, the big slow eyes settling on his face, resting there a moment, moving away again, slow and contemptuous. She bent her head and blew out the match, but continued to hold the unlighted cigarette in her fingers.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” Pratt said, “but I simply cannot have smoking at table.”

She didn’t look at him again.

“Now, let me see – where were we?” he said. “Ah, yes. This wine is from Bordeaux, from the commune of St Julien, in the district of Médoc. So far, so good. But now we come to the more difficult part – the name of the vineyard itself. For in St Julien there are many vineyards, and as our host so rightly remarked earlier on, there is often not much difference between the wine of one and the wine of another. But we shall see.”

He paused again, closing his eyes. “I am trying to establish the ‘growth’,” he said. “If I can do that, it will be half the battle. Now, let me see. This wine is obviously not from a first-growth vineyard – nor even a second. It is not a great wine. The quality, the – the – what do you call it? – the radiance, the power, is lacking. But a third growth – that it could be. And yet I doubt it. We know it is a good year – our host has said so – and this is probably flattering it a little bit. I must be careful. I must be very careful here.”

He picked up his glass and took another small sip.

“Yes,” he said, sucking his lips, “I was right. It is a fourth growth. Now I

am sure of it. A fourth growth from a very good year – from a great year, in fact. And that’s what made it taste for a moment like a third- or even a second-growth wine. Good! That’s better! Now we are closing in! What are the fourth-growth vineyards in the commune of St Julien?”

Again he paused, took up his glass, and held the rim against that sagging pendulous lower lip of his. Then I saw the tongue shoot out, pink and narrow, the tip of it dipping into the wine, withdrawing swiftly again – a repulsive sight. When he lowered the glass, his eyes remained closed, the face concentrated, only the lips moving, sliding over each other like two pieces of wet, spongy rubber.

“There it is again!” he cried. “Tannin in the middle taste, and the quick astringent squeeze upon the tongue. Yes, yes, of course! Now I have it! This wine comes from one of those small vineyards around Beychevelle. I remember now. The Beychevelle district, and the river and the little harbour that has silted up so the wine ships can no longer use it. Beychevelle ... could it actually be a Beychevelle itself? No, I don’t think so. Not quite. But it is somewhere very close, Château Talbot? Could it be Talbot? Yes, it could. Wait one moment.”

He sipped the wine again, and out of the side of my eye I noticed Mike Schofield and how he was leaning farther and farther forward over the table, his mouth slightly open, his small eyes fixed upon Richard Pratt.

“No. I was wrong. It was not a Talbot. A Talbot comes forward to you just a little quicker than this one; the fruit is nearer to the surface. If it is a ’34, which I believe it is, then it couldn’t be Talbot, and yet – yet it is so close to both of them, so close, that the vineyard must be almost in between. Now, which could that be?”

He hesitated, and we waited, watching his face. Everyone, even Mike’s wife, was watching him now. I heard the maid put down the dish of vegetables on the sideboard behind me, gently, so as not to disturb the silence.

“Ah!” he cried. “I have it! Yes, I think I have it!”

For the last time, he sipped the wine. Then, still holding the glass up near his mouth, he turned to Mike and he smiled, a slow, silky smile, and he said, “You know what this is? This is the little Château Branaire-Ducru.”

Mike sat tight, not moving.

“And the year, 1934.”

We all looked at Mike, waiting for him to turn the bottle round in its basket and show the label.

“Is that your final answer?” Mike said.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well, is it or isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“What was the name again?”

“Château Branaire-Ducru. Pretty little vineyard. Lovely old château. Know it quite well. Can’t think why I didn’t recognise it at once.”

“Come on, Daddy,” the girl said. “Turn it round and let’s have a peek. I want my two houses.”

“Just a minute,” Mike said. “Wait just a minute.” He was sitting very quiet, bewildered-looking, and his face was becoming puffy and pale, as though all the force was draining slowly out of him.

“Michael!” his wife called sharply from the other end of the table. “What’s the matter?”

“Keep out of this, Margaret, will you please.”

Richard Pratt was looking at Mike, smiling with his mouth, his eyes small and bright. Mike was not looking at anyone.

“Daddy!” the daughter cried, agonised, “but, Daddy, you don’t mean to say he’s guessed it right!”

“Now, stop worrying, my dear,” Mike said. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

I think it was more to get away from his family than anything else that Mike then turned to Richard Pratt and said, “I’ll tell you what, Richard, I think you and I better slip off into the next room and have a little chat?”

“I don’t want a little chat,” Pratt said. “All I want is to see the label on that bottle.” He knew he was a winner now; he had the bearing, the quiet arrogance of a winner, and I could see that he was prepared to become thoroughly nasty if there was any trouble. “What are you waiting for?” he said to Mike. “Go and turn it round.”

Then this happened: The maid, the tiny, erect figure of the maid in her white and black uniform, was standing beside Richard Pratt, holding something out in her hand. “I believe these are yours, sir,” she said.

Pratt glanced around, saw the pair of thin horn-rimmed spectacles that she held out to him, and for a moment he hesitated. “Are they? Perhaps they are. I don’t know.”

“Yes sir, they’re yours.” The maid was an elderly woman – nearer seventy than sixty – a faithful family retainer of many years’ standing. She put the spectacles down on the table beside him.

Without thanking her, Pratt took them up and slipped them into his top pocket, behind the white handkerchief.

erect – straight up

retainer – an employee

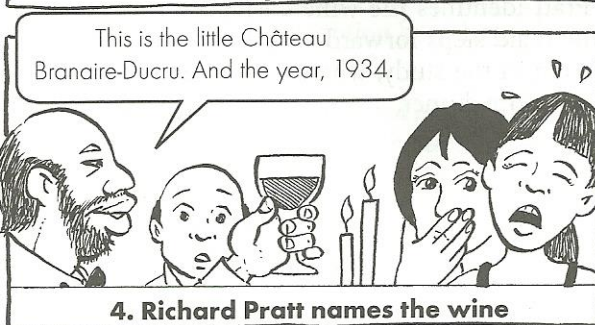
But the maid didn't go away. She remained standing beside and slightly behind Richard Pratt, and there was something so unusual in her manner and in the way she stood there, small, motionless, and erect, that I for one found myself watching her with a sudden apprehension. Her old grey face had a frosty, determined look, the lips were compressed, the little chin was out, and the hands were clasped together tight before her. The curious cap on her head and the flash of white down the front of her uniform made her seem like some tiny, ruffled, white-breasted bird.

"You left them in Mr Schofield's study," she said. Her voice was unnaturally, deliberately polite. "On top of the green filing cabinet in his study, sir, when you happened to go in there by yourself before dinner."

It took a few moments for the full meaning of her words to penetrate, and in the silence that followed I became aware of Mike and how he was slowly drawing himself up in his chair, and the colour coming to his face, and the eyes opening wide, and the curl of the mouth, and the dangerous little patch of whiteness beginning to spread around the area of the nostrils.

"Now, Michael!" his wife said. "Keep calm now, Michael, dear! Keep calm!"

Summary in pictures



Taste

Roald Dahl

Glossary

gourmet - a person who specialises in food	joyial - friendly, sociable
epicures - people who are devoted to pleasure	breathing - red wine should be opened to "breathe" for a while before drinking. This allows it to come into contact with oxygen, which helps to release its flavours and aromas.
palate - the part of the mouth that is most sensitive to taste	supercilious - feeling more important than others
droll - amusing	imperious - like a king
prudent - wise	condescending - talking down to him, as if he was more powerful than him
diffident - shy	intentness - concentration
benevolent - kind	lolling - leaning back lazily
obscene - rude or vulgar	shrewdness - cleverness, cunning
claret - a kind of red wine	differentiate - tell the difference
vintage - where and when the wine was made	pendulous - hanging down
vineyard - place where grapes are grown	bouquet - the smell of a particular wine
amiable - friendly, cheerful	eliminate - get rid of
stockbroker - someone who works with money on the stock exchange	erect - straight
jobber - money maker	retainer - employee
aesthetic - connected with beauty and good taste	apprehension - fear about what is going to happen
rapid - quick	compressed - pressed together
furtive - secretive	
engrossed - deeply involved	
impinge - trespass on her space	

Summary

A stockbroker, Mike Schofield, has a dinner party. One of the guests, Richard Pratt, is an expert on wine. Pratt can taste a wine and tell where and when it was made. Schofield bets him that he will not be able to identify the wine they will be drinking that night. Pratt says that he will bet both his houses and if Mike loses, Pratt wants to marry Mike's daughter Louise. Louise is horrified. Her father assures her that it is not possible for Pratt to identify the wine and win the bet. Pratt identifies the wine correctly. However, there is a twist in the when the maid steps forward with Pratt's spectacles. She announces that he left them in the study, where the wine had been "breathing", when he went there before dinner.

Explanation and analysis

Background and setting

- **Dinner party at Mike Schofield's house in London**

The story is set at the dinner table of Mike Schofield's house.

To understand the story you need to know something about wine. There are many different types of wine. Some people, like Richard Pratt, take wine very seriously. They take great pride in being able to describe the different tastes of wine. In the story, Richard Pratt uses words that usually describe people to describe wine. Wine experts like him can talk about where the grapes that made the wine are grown (the vineyard) and when (the vintage). They also believe that before you drink wine you should open it and leave it for a time to "breathe", as Mike Schofield does in the story.

Themes

- **Affectation, vanity and greed**

The main theme is affectation, vanity and evil greed of people. The story explores the snobbery of men like Richard Pratt. It is a snobbery mixed with a kind of ruthless greed.

Richard Pratt shows off his knowledge of wine and his "good taste". Mike Schofield also likes to think of himself as a man of "good taste". He is eager to impress Richard Pratt, the "expert" on wine and on good taste in both food and wine.

The title of the story is a comment on one of the things the story is about: tasting wine. The title also suggests what Richard Pratt and "experts" like him think of as their "good taste". This is something they like to show off.

Character

- **Richard Pratt:** snob, ruthless, greedy
- **Mike Schofield:** friendly and well-meaning, simple, eager to impress

Richard Pratt is affected and a snob in matters of 'good taste' in wine and food. In the story he shows himself to be ruthless and greedy. He treats Mike Schofield's daughter Louise in a similar way to good wine and food. He wants her and will stop at nothing to get her.

The way in which the writer describes him reinforces his gross animal like sensuousness and greed: his "wet lower lip, suddenly imperious and ugly"; his face is "all mouth ... the full, wet lips".

Mike Schofield is a friendly well-meaning man. He is also, in comparison to Pratt, simple and unsophisticated. He is eager to impress the "expert" and seems unable to see through Pratt's

Key quote

Richard Pratt was a famous gourmet. He was president of a small society known as the Epicures.

Key quote

"I want you to bet me the hand of your daughter in marriage."

Key quote

"And anyway, heavens alive, girl, I'm your father and you don't think I'd let you in for - for something you didn't want, do you? I'm trying to make you some money."

Key quote

"Daddy!" the daughter cried, agonised, "but, Daddy, you don't mean to say he's guessed it right!"

Key quote

"You left them in Mr Schofield's study," she said. Her voice was unnaturally, deliberately polite. "On top of the green filing cabinet in his study, sir, when you happened to go in there by yourself before dinner."



affectation and greed. He seems to be prepared to risk anything, even his own daughter, to show that he has "good taste" and is knowledgeable about wine. In this sense, he comes across as a weak character.

The **maid** is not a rounded character. She is only mentioned and not described in detail. It is only at the very end of the story that we realise she has played a crucial role in the outcome of the story.

Plot

The writer manages to create and sustain **suspense** throughout the story. We start to get the idea that Richard Pratt's motives are sinister when the writer drops hints of the evil lurking just below the surface in Pratt: "... there was something strange about his drawling and his boredom: between the eyes a shadow of something evil", and a little later in Pratt's eyes again "a small slow spark of shrewdness, hiding". So, throughout the time that Pratt spends tasting the claret we know that there will be an evil outcome.

There is an **ironic twist** at the end that changes our whole understanding of the story. The writer cleverly mentions the presence of the maid but does not describe her or her character or draw attention to her. We do not suspect that she will be vital to the plot or the action. But, by producing his spectacles at the end, it is she who reveals that Richard Pratt had cheated.

Symbols

- **The bottle of claret:** Richard Pratt has to identify its origin and year. The story hinges on this. It is the source of the terrible bet that Pratt and Schofield take. It is also the object of Richard Pratt's elaborate performance when he pretends to be able to identify it. Had it not been for the maid, Mike Schofield's daughter would have been sacrificed because of it.
- **Richard Pratt's spectacles:** The maid saw Pratt sneak into the study where the claret was "breathing". She is able to step forward at the last moment and produce the spectacles. In so doing she saves the situation and prevents Pratt from fulfilling his "evil" plan.

Language

The writer uses a lot of direct speech. This has the effect of revealing character, in particular Richard Pratt's character. It also makes the story seem almost like a play. We get involved in the dinner party and the suspense of the bet.

Richard Pratt describes the taste of a wine in words that we usually use to describe people: "a prudent wine", "a good-humoured wine, benevolent and cheerful". When he is pretending to identify Mike

Schofield's claret he describes it as "... too tender, too gentle and wistful for a Pauillac"; "a gentle wine, demure and bashful ...". He is an expert in wines but also a snob in the way he revels in using this kind of language.

The writer uses words that vividly suggest and describe Richard Pratt's animal-like sensuality and greed. His face was "all mouth – mouth and lips – the full, wet lips of the professional gourmet, the lower lip hanging downwards in the centre, a pendulous, permanently open taster's lip ...". The writer describes his tongue like a snake: "I saw the tongue shoot out, pink and narrow ... a repulsive sight."

Exam preparation

Sample contextual question

This question contains TWO extracts. Answer the questions on both extracts.

Extract 1

Read the extract from "Good!" Mike cried. *That's fine! Then it's a bet!*" to *like her father, was watching closely.*" and answer the following questions:

1. "... Richard Pratt said, looking at the girl. *It's a bet.*" (1)
 - 1.1 Who is "the girl"? (1)
 - 1.2 What was the "bet"? What did Richard Pratt have to do? (2)
 - 1.3 What did Mike Schofield promise to give Richard Pratt if won the bet? (1)
 - 1.4 What did Pratt promise to give Schofield if he lost the bet? (1)
2. State whether the following statement is true or false. Give a reason for your answer: Richard Pratt was the host of the dinner party. (3)
3. *"Now everyone was watching Richard Pratt"* (1)

Why was everyone watching Richard Pratt?
(*You won't find the answer in this extract. You need to know the story.*)
4. State whether the following statement is true or false. Give a reason or quote from the extract in support of your answer: Richard Pratt was a handsome man. (3)
5. "... *pendulous, permanently open taster's lip*" (1)

Write down the letter of the correct answer. Richard Pratt's lower lip was:

 - a. fleshy
 - b. wet and shiny
 - c. hanging down
 - d. thin and straight

(*Find the meaning of "pendulous" in the glossary. To answer a multiple-choice question, find the option that is MOST correct. It's easier if you cross out the incorrect answers first.*)
6. *"Like a keyhole, I thought ..."* (1)
 - 6.1 Identify the figure of speech in this sentence. (1)
 - 6.2 Which two things are being compared? (2)

(*Refer to the notes about figures of speech in the glossary on page 230.*)

- 6.3 Why, in the context of the story, does the writer use this image? (2)
(Think about what kind of man Richard Pratt is and what is happening here.)
7. “... to receive the bouquet.”
 Write down just the letter of the correct answer. The “bouquet” of the wine is its:
 a. taste
 b. colour
 c. ingredients
 d. smell (1)
(Use the glossary to help you.)
8. “He had closed his eyes, and now the whole top half of his body ... sniffing nose.”
 What does the writer compare Richard Pratt’s body with in this sentence?
 Use your own words. (2)
- 9.1 State whether the following statement is true or false: Mike Schofield was not at all worried that Richard Pratt would correctly identify the wine. (1)
(You won’t find all of the answer in this extract. You need to know the story.)
- 9.2 Give a reason for your answer. (2)
10. Which word in the last sentence of the extract means “a person who specialises in food and wine”? (1)
(Use the glossary to help you.)
- [25]

AND

Extract 2

Read the extract from “*He hesitated, and we waited, watching his face*” to “*all the force was draining slowly out of him.*” and answer the questions.

11. “*I heard the maid put down the dish of vegetables ...*”
 Briefly describe the role the maid plays at the end of the story. (3)
12. State whether the following statement is true or false: Richard Pratt identified the origin of the wine correctly. (1)
13. Write down the vintage of the wine. (1)
(Use the glossary to help you.)
- 14.1 State whether the following statement is true or false: Richard Pratt was an honest man. (1)
- 14.2 Briefly give a reason for your answer. (3)
15. Why did Mike Schofield look as if the “force was draining slowly out of him”? (1)

[10]

Total marks: 35

Sample essay question

Write the following essay as well as the two paragraphs:

Structured essay

- A Richard Pratt was a dishonest and ruthless man. Write an essay of 100–120 words in which you discuss this statement. Refer to incidents in the story in your discussion. [15]

Before you start writing:

- *Decide whether Richard Pratt was honest or dishonest and whether he had any feelings for others.*
- *Look at the way in which he took on the bet with Mike Schofield.*
- *Look also at what he was prepared to force Mike to do if Mike lost the bet.*
- *Decide whether Mike Schofield trusted him.*
- *Read the end of the story carefully to see what he did before he took on the bet.*

AND

Paragraph questions

- B Write a paragraph of 80–100 words describing the bet between Mike Schofield and Richard Pratt. Include in your description what Richard Pratt had to do to win the bet and what the stakes were. [10]

Before you write your paragraph:

- *Reread the fourth paragraph of the story to be clear about what was involved in the betting between the two men.*
- *Jot down the details of this particular bet, including what each of the men offered as a stake in the bet.*

AND

- C Describe the character of Mike Schofield. Include what it was about his character that made him agree to take on the bet with Richard Pratt. (Length: 80–100 words). [10]

Before you write your paragraph:

- *Reread the first part of the story, particularly the fourth paragraph of the story and the paragraph: “Mike Schofield was an amiable, middle-aged man ...”. Use the glossary to help you understand the meaning of words in this paragraph.*
- *Jot down all the points describing Mike’s character.*
- *Try to think what it was about Mike that made him so eager to accept Richard Pratt’s bet.*
- *When you write your paragraph remember to USE YOUR OWN WORDS.*

Total marks: 35

Taste (page 65)

Contextual question

Extract 1

- 1.1 Mike Schofield's daughter, Louise.✓ (1)
 - 1.2 Pratt had to identify Mike Schofield's wine/
– where it was made and the vintage.✓ (2)
 - 1.3 Mike Schofield promised to give Pratt his
daughter's hand in marriage.✓ (1)
 - 1.4 Pratt would give him both of his houses.✓ (1)
 - 2. False.✓ The dinner party was at Mike
Schofield's house.✓ Mike was the host.✓ (3)
 - 3. They were waiting for him to identify the
wine.✓ (1)
 - 4. False.✓ "He did not have a pleasant face".✓
His features were gross and animal-like.✓ (3)
 - 5. c✓ (1)
 - 6.1 Simile✓ (1)
 - 6.2 Richard Pratt's mouth✓ and a keyhole✓ (2)
 - 6.3 Pratt's mouth was like a hole✓ and could
"unlock" the taste of food or wine.✓ (2)
 - 7. d✓ (1)
 - 8. He compares it to an efficient✓ smelling
machine.✓ (2)
 - 9.1 False✓ (1)
 - 9.2 Mike was watching Richard Pratt's every
move✓ and the stakes were high.✓ (2)
 - 10. Gourmet✓ (1)
- [25]

Extract 2

- 11. She produces Richard Pratt's spectacles✓
before the bet is finalised.✓ Before dinner she
had seen Pratt sneak into the study where the
wine was "breathing".✓ (3)
 - 12. True✓ (1)
 - 13. 1934✓ (1)
 - 14.1 False✓ (1)
 - 14.2 He pretended to be able to identify the wine.✓
He went through a performance of doing
this.✓ In the end he was found to have cheated
by looking at the label beforehand.✓ (3)
 - 15. Richard Pratt had identified the wine
correctly.✓ (1)
- [10]

Total marks: 35

Essay question

A Structured essay

Richard Pratt was a dishonest man. He accepted Mike Schofield's bet and allowed Mike Schofield to think that he, Pratt, would possibly not be able to

identify Schofield's rare wine. Mike Schofield then thought he was safe if he bet his daughter's hand in marriage if Pratt did identify the wine correctly.

Pratt went through a long and elaborate performance of identifying the wine. He was pretending to do so since he had cheated. The maid revealed that before dinner she had seen him sneak into the study where the wine was "breathing".

His ruthless cheating of a friend, and the fact that he was prepared to force a young woman to marry him, show that he has no feelings for others. [15]

Paragraph questions

B

Mike Schofield often played a betting game with Richard Pratt. He challenged him to identify where the wine was made and its vintage. On this occasion, Pratt had to identify Mike Schofield's rare claret. If he identified the wine correctly, Mike Schofield's daughter, Louise would have to marry him. If he did not identify the wine correctly, he would give his two houses to Mike. [10]

C

Mike was a simple, good-natured and friendly man. He was eager to impress people with his good taste. The reason he was so eager to impress was that he was a stockbroker and thought that his friends would think he was just someone who made money and not a "cultured" person. They would not respect him if he did not show his good taste in paintings, music, books and other cultural things, including his taste in food and wine. It was this eagerness to impress that made him agree to take on the bet with Richard Pratt. Schofield wanted to show him what good taste he had in wine. [10]

Total marks: 35