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Winemakers make a U-turn



By Jancis Robinson

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An increasing number of winemakers are expressing disaffection with the wines they made in the past

In my little puddle of vinous life I am becoming aware of the most massive U-turn on the part of an increasing number of thoughtful wine producers. Interestingly, this is nothing to do with marketing but sheer disaffection with the wines they made in the past.

Take Alberto Antonini, a respected 55-year-old consultant winemaker with professional qualifications from Bordeaux and UC Davis in California. He has made wine in Argentina, Chile, Spain, South Africa, Canada, Romania, Armenia, Uruguay, Australia, California and his native Italy. He admits: “When I think of what I was saying 20 years ago, it seems like a different planet.” Although trained to make use of all the latest technical advances in winemaking, he has completely revised his views on, for example, suitable ripeness levels of grapes. “When you get over-ripeness, you cover the local character, just like over-extraction [macerating the grape must so long that the fruit is submerged by tough tannins]. Similarly, the use of synthetic products doesn’t help you display nature. The products that you’re taught to use – such as selected yeast, enzymes and various other additives – I have slowly got rid of all of them.” He was talking specifically in this instance about his work in Argentina with Altos Las Hormigas, which he co-owns, and was presenting his wines and thoughts in the company of fellow believers Sebastian Zuccardi and Gabriel Bloise of Chakana, all of them guided by soil expert Pedro Parra. They are all delightedly getting to grips with how very different the wines made from different areas of the high Uco Valley in the Andes can be.

“I grew up being told that the New World had no terroir,” laughed Antonini, “but it’s amazing how you realise terroir is everywhere. In just five hectares [12 acres] of Altamira you can find soils that can give you wines worth between \$5 and \$200. We really want to focus on the purity of local flavours and express terroir in our wines.” Zuccardi, Bloise and Parra were like excited nodding dogs beside him. They are hard at work, in a project led by Laura Catena of the eponymous Argentine wine company, shaping a credible and detailed appellation system for Argentina’s wine province Mendoza.

The same revisionist views can be heard throughout the winemaking world. Eben Sadie has been viewed as the leader of South Africa’s

next generation of winemakers since founding Sadie Family Wines in 1999. We met up earlier this year in London and he couldn't wait to recant about the wines he was making a decade ago. "My 2004 tastes so much better now than when it was released. I honestly don't know how people sold them when they were young; they were so hard in youth and then went into lockdown in middle age." He added that South African wines are now "definitely fresher, which is good because our wines were too ripe. Mind you, I would have protested if you'd told me that in 2004. In South Africa we now have this big, shared notion: everyone is going for freshness and acidity."



It is not just relative newcomers who are changing their tune. Last week I tasted the latest releases from Moss Wood, founded in Western Australia's Margaret River in the 1970s with Keith and Clare Mugford, who have been running it since 1984. They too volunteered a change in the way they make their famous whites. They used to make the region's characteristic blend of Semillon and Sauvignon Blanc in oak, in what Keith Mugford describes, referring to the famous dry white bordeaux, as "Domaine de Chevalier-style" but the wine sees no oak now. Similarly with their Chardonnay, they used to stir the lees feverishly, believing they were copying best burgundian practice. But when they asked a panel of respected palates to assess all vintages of their Chardonnay to establish which were classic Moss Wood: "Everyone agreed that the great years stood out and had nothing to do with the winemaking. The more you fiddle around with winemaking techniques, the more you will minimise the vineyard's individual stamp," says Keith Mugford.

Nor is this phenomenon by any means restricted to the New World. Someone as far-sighted as Gérard Gauby of Roussillon was revising his conception of ripeness and balance in wines as long ago as the late 1990s. I recently came across a fascinating pair of wines from the Spanish region of Valencia, made by Celler del Roure, about 50km inland on about the same latitude as Ibiza. The owner Pablo Calatayud and his appropriately named winemaker Javier Revert did very well commercially when exporting dramatically styled reds and whites to the US but were frustrated by the way that oak ageing, while endowing the wines with useful structure, robbed them of their freshness, elegance and local character. Over the past five years they have been experimenting with a reversion to *tinajas*, the large clay jars once used for winemaking in this part of the world. The results are delicious: chock-full of personality but accessible and expressive rather than overlaid with oak flavour.

For both Sadie and Antonini, their past sins are inextricably bound up with the use of too high a proportion of new small barrels. According to Antonini: "Too much small new oak covers the true character of the wine." He is even abandoning the neutral, easy-to-clean stainless steel that has been the preferred alternative to wood for many winemakers and is slowly replacing it with concrete "because it's more alive. Natural yeasts like concrete more than stainless steel which is a dead material. Small barrels probably work very well for the red bordeaux recipe but the big problem around the world has been that everyone has been using the same recipe."

Sadie mused to me: “I do wonder how my wines would have been with only half the new wood I used in the past.” I have written here before about the extent to which winemakers all over the world are using fewer new barrels, and larger sizes. I do hope the coopers, who did so well in the late 20th century, are now diversifying into clay and concrete.

Jancis's picks

- Moss Wood Chardonnay 2012 Margaret River

An elegant answer to white burgundy informed by the Indian Ocean. £24.95, Jeroboams.

- Altos La Hormigas Malbecs 2012 Uco Valley

Any wines from this vintage and this producer are exciting and already available at \$20-\$30 in the US. They should be on sale in the UK at around £20 later this year.

- Celler del Roure, Parotet 2012 Valencia

Made mainly from the local Mando grape aged in clay jars. £20, Tivoli Wines.

- Sadie Family Wines, Columella 2010 Swartland

The trailblazing red based on old vines took a new, fresher direction from the 2008 vintage. About £48, Uncorked, Swig, Hedonism, Handford Wines.

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