

SPRING 2026 ₹300

Sommelier INDIA

THE WINE MAGAZINE

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FRATELLI
• VINEYARDS •

Pour more into Life

Inspired by the starlit night skies of Akuj, Fratelli Brut is an ode to purity and precision. Crafted using the méthode traditionnelle of Champagne-making, it embodies finesse in every bubble.

Classic | Ceremonial | Effervescent



SCAN TO EXPLORE

from the Editor

Looking back, 2025 has been a challenging year for the wine industry as a whole. And India was not exempt. Climate change was the most disruptive force, with erratic monsoons, heat spikes and unseasonal rain. Indian importers and distributors continued to navigate high duties, regulatory friction and state-level policy uncertainty. Changing consumer behaviour, with limited retail access and competition from spirits, RTDs and non-alcoholic alternatives, reshaped demand, despite rising awareness and interest in wine.

While the headwinds were real, there are equally strong reasons for optimism. Across many markets, including India, growth is coming from better wines, not bigger volumes. Quality has never been higher. Premiumisation is gaining ground. Consumers are drinking less, but drinking better.

A more informed consumer is emerging. Wine drinkers are asking better questions – about origin, sustainability, food pairing and moderation – leading to deeper engagement rather than casual consumption. Most importantly, wine's cultural advantage remains strong. Unlike many competing beverages, wine is intrinsically linked to food, place and conviviality, qualities that resonate strongly in a more mindful, experience-driven world.

For us as a magazine, the year reaffirmed why independent, credible wine journalism is essential. In an age of social media noise and instant opinion, readers value perspective over promotion and insight over hype. Our goal is not to amplify trends blindly, but to interpret them, connecting India to the wider wine world while staying grounded in our own evolving reality.

As we step into the new year, there is clear optimism. The challenges remain, but so does the momentum. The next chapter will belong to those who invest in quality, authenticity and long-term thinking – whether they are producers, importers, sommeliers, consumers, or magazine publishers for that matter.

Here's to a year of better bottles, deeper understanding, and conversations that go beyond the label. Wine, after all, is never just about what's in the glass, it's about where it takes us next. As we enter our 22nd successful year, we look forward to engaging with our readers in more ways than one – through wine dinners and tastings – as well as new stories to tell, wines to recommend and ideas to explore from the ever-evolving world of wine.

Happy New Year!

Reva K. Singh



Reva K. Singh, Editor-in-Chief

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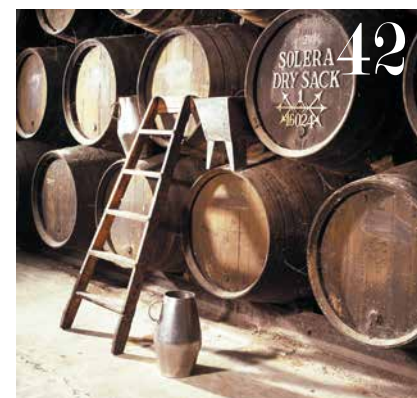
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Sommelier India – The Wine Magazine is written by some of the best wine writers in the world. SI's cast of contributors includes wine experts, food and wine writers, professional journalists as well as new writers. We regard our stable of regular contributors as our most valuable resource.



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Raymond Blake is one of Ireland's leading wine writers whose work has been published across the globe, including *The World of Fine Wine*. He writes principally on wine, and occasionally on food, travel, history, culture, education and classical music. He is also much in demand as a presenter at themed wine dinners, tutored tastings, and other events. He is the author of three wine books, the latest of which, "Wine Talk", was published in New York in

February 2022. He has recently been commissioned to write the Burgundy entries for the best-selling, Hugh Johnson's "Pocket Wine Book". He also works regularly with the London wine club, 67 Pall Mall, filming numerous items for the wine TV channel, www.67pallmall.tv.



Chris Boiling is a wine and travel writer who makes wine from rare grapes under the Crazy Experimental Wines brand. The idea is to carry out an experiment that will enhance these 'hidden gem' grape varieties from countries such as Georgia, Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, Albania, Italy and Spain. Chris has a degree in wine production from Plumpton College in England and has been making wines in his own tiny vineyard in northeast Slovenia for 16 years. The limited-edition Crazy Experimental Wines are new to the market but have already secured some listings in Michelin-starred restaurants and independent wine bars.



Gargi Guha is a lifestyle writer whose work spans travel, wine, food, craft

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Gargi holds a WSET Level 2 certification with a specialisation in Italian wines and is a guest lecturer at the V. M. Salgaocar Institute of International Hospitality and Education in Goa, where she teaches Food and Wine Pairing.



Elizabeth Gabay started in the wine trade in 1986, a time of exciting innovation and exciting discoveries, graduating as a Master of Wine in 1998. In 2002 she moved with her young family to live in southern France. Since then she has focused on writing, education and consulting with an increasing emphasis on rosé. One of the first women Masters of Wine.



Mira Advani Honeycutt is the co-author of "Sideways Uncorked: The Perfect Pairing of Film & Wine." Her coverage includes the fast growing wine region of California's Central Coast through her monthly broadcast "Wine Country" on KCBX Radio and her monthly column, Sip & Savor in the Paso Robles Press Magazine. She is the curator and writer of "Signature Wines & Wineries of Coastal California," curator of "The Winemakers of Paso Robles" and the author of "California's Central Coast: The Ultimate Winery Guide." Mira also contributes to SLOW Wine Guide USA, the Napa Valley Register and The Tasting Panel. She has chronicled the wine world for several international publications and covered international cinema for The Hollywood Reporter.



V Sanjay Kumar, an MBA in a previous life, writes fiction and has published five books with Hachette, Bloomsbury, Juggernaut and Akashic, USA. He is a partner at Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai. Wine for him is an immersive experience and he is fascinated by the wine world, a muse he has been exploring through the glass. His column, "Nosing Around", promises to get up-close and personal.



Joel B. Payne, an expatriate American who has lived in Europe since 1979, first in France, then in Italy and now along the Rhine, was thrice Germany's best sommelier.

Beyond a career as wine buyer, consultant and managing director of two large import companies and a négociant business in Bordeaux, he has been active as a wine journalist for over 35 years, including a three year stint as editor-in-chief of Meininger's Wine Business International. However, he is best known for his German Wine Guide, which has appeared annually since 1992. A founding member of the Grand Jury Européen, he was also the president of the international circle of wine writers, FIJEV, from 2007 to 2010.



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Ruma Singh DipWSET is a qualified journalist, editor and writer. Focusing on her passion for wine, she completed her WSET Diploma from London and works out of her base in Bangalore as a wine consultant and writer for several publications as well as her own dedicated website, Between the Wines. She is a wine judge and a columnist for *Sommelier India*. Connect with her at rumasingh.com and on social media @ [rumasi.wine](https://www.instagram.com/rumasi.wine) (Instagram).



Carol Wright is a freelance writer based in the UK but travelling the world. Carol has written 30 books, writes extensively on travel, food, wine and restaurants and has recently written her memoirs of a travelling life. She has been the chairman of the British Guild of Travel Writers twice and also chairman of an environmental charity.



Jon Wyand is a multi-award winning photographer and has been shooting wine as his speciality for 20 years. He has illustrated a number of books as well as two of his own on Burgundy. He works with magazines in the US, UK and Europe and recently won "Pink Lady/ Errazuriz Wine Photographer of the Year" award for the third time.

Oenophile's notebook

News, views and notes for the wine enthusiast Compiled by Reva K. Singh

Bordeaux's 1855 Grands Crus Take Centre State in India

For the first time in India, a landmark wine masterclass and tasting of Grand Cru Classé wines was held at the Embassy of France in November 2025. Eight leading Bordeaux estates were presented by the owners and representatives themselves, underlining the significance of the occasion. The delegation was led by Philippe Castéja, President of the Union de Grand Cru Classé de 1855, and featured Château Batailley, Lafon-Rochet, Giscours, d'Issan, Branaire-Ducru, Pédesclaux, Marquis d'Alesme and Château d'Arche of Sauternes.

The 1855 classification is unique. It was established at the request of Emperor Napoleon III to showcase Bordeaux's most celebrated wines at the Paris Universal Exhibition. The estates were ranked from first to fifth growths (*crus*) according to reputation and trading price (criteria that, at the time, were considered a direct reflection of quality) by Bordeaux brokers



Philippe Castéja, president of the Union de Grand Cru Classé pictured with Reva K Singh

appointed by the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce.

Nearly two centuries on, the Grand Cru Classé classification remains one of the most influential and enduring quality benchmarks in the world of fine wine. The presence of the distinguished delegation in India reaffirmed its continuing relevance, offering a rare

opportunity for us to engage directly with the wines, and the custodians behind the classification.

The exploration of these exceptional wines from Bordeaux's Médoc region continued later at Baluchi, where a special dinner orchestrated by Lalit Hotels' long-standing corporate sommelier, Charles Donnadieu, extended the conversation from tasting room to table. Carefully chosen mature vintages illustrated not only how well these wines can evolve with age, but also their ability to complement the intensity and complexity of Indian cuisine.

For India's growing community of fine-wine enthusiasts, Bordeaux is becoming more accessible and open to rediscovery. Events like these reaffirm the enduring relevance of its great estates, rewarding those willing to look beyond familiar labels and explore the depth and nuance of the 1855 classification.

There's more to wine than alcohol

The Brussels-based international programme, Wine in Moderation (WiM), has become increasingly relevant at a time when public debate around alcohol is growing more polarised. There is grave concern in some quarters that centuries old wine consumption is being lumped with the wider anti-alcohol movement. By supporting the WiM campaign, the wine sector makes a clear case for recognising wine as distinct from spirits and stronger alcohol beverages. Rooted in gastronomy, culture and conviviality, wine is traditionally consumed with food – and in moderation – rather than for intoxication.



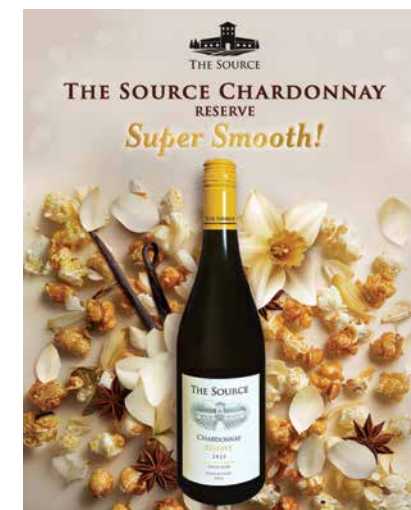
For Sommelier India, this distinction matters, as regulatory and social pressures intensify. While actively discouraging misuse, WiM's message that moderation, context and lifestyle are important allows wine to be discussed more intelligently within the wider anti-alcohol movement, without denying legitimate health concerns. Aligning with Wine in Moderation, we as part of the wine community underscore its commitment to responsibility and transparency, reinforcing wine's place as an agricultural, cultural and culinary product, not merely an alcoholic commodity.

Sula Vineyards: Sharpening the Focus on Wine, Tourism and Lifestyle

Sula Vineyards' most recent chapter signals a quiet but decisive shift in how India's leading wine producer is choosing to grow. Rather than chasing volume alone, the emphasis is now firmly on refinement – in the glass, in the vineyard experience, and in the way Indian wine is presented at home and abroad.

The latest addition to Sula's portfolio, Muscat Blanc, captures this intent neatly. Low in alcohol and highly aromatic, the wine reflects a growing preference for lighter, more relaxed styles that fit modern drinking occasions. Fresh, approachable and versatile, Muscat Blanc broadens Sula's appeal to consumers seeking flavour without weight.

Sula's growing premium line-up with wines such as Syrah, Dindori Reserve Shiraz, The Source Grenache Rosé and Sula Riesling has become familiar reference points for quality Indian wine, not forgetting the beautiful Source Chardonnay Reserve, its latest release. International accolades have further



reinforced confidence in Indian terroir and winemaking.

The most visible transformation beyond the bottle is wine tourism which has emerged as one of Sula's most dynamic growth areas. The launch of The Haven by Sula reflects a commitment to positioning Nashik as a serious wine destination. Set against vineyards and the waters of Gangapur Lake, the new boutique property expands Sula's

hospitality footprint while introducing spaces suited to both leisure travel and curated corporate gatherings.

Sula's presence on long-haul flights in compact cans marks a symbolic step for Indian wine, introducing it to an audience that may never have encountered domestic wines before. At the same time, collaborations with restaurateurs overseas have helped place Sula wines in gastronomic contexts emphasising food pairing, provenance and narrative rather than novelty.

Furthermore, Sula's measured approach of balancing premiumisation, with experiential and cultural relevance has reaped dividends. Events such as SulaFest contribute to making wine a lifestyle choice, blending music, food and vineyards into a distinctly Indian expression of wine culture.

Taken together, Sula Vineyards' wine focus is a shift from pioneering to refinement – and one that may well shape the next phase of the country's wine story.

WHICH WINE

Art Collection Nu

Here we spotlight not just one wine, but an entire range with Grover Vineyards' Art Collection Nu. The new collection represents a refreshed expression of the winery's established portfolio, bringing together familiar varietals under a cohesive, contemporary identity. The lineup spans both classic and aromatic styles, including Cabernet-Shiraz, Shiraz, Merlot and a Shiraz Rosé, alongside whites such as Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Riesling. The range is completed by a Late Harvest wine, continuing Grover's focus on accessible, varietally driven wines suited to the Indian palate.

Rather than introducing new wines, Art Collection Nu reframes Grover Vineyards' established styles for a changing domestic audience. Aligned with the winery's philosophy of producing wines that resonate globally while



remaining unmistakably Indian, the range adopts a distinctly contemporary aesthetic aimed at broadening its appeal for young and old alike.

As Sumit Jaiswal, Chief Operating Officer, Grover Vineyards, says, "The Art Collection has always been close to our hearts, bringing together art and fine winemaking in a way that felt uniquely Indian. With Art Collection Nu, we've reimaged that story for today – expressive, modern, and intended to make each bottle feel part of a shared moment."

Cellar 33: Connecting India to the world of Boutique Champagnes, Wines and Spirits

India's wine and spirits market is evolving at a remarkable pace, and among those contributing meaningfully to this journey is Cellar 33, a Bordeaux-based international export and marketing agency founded by Mattia Antonio Cianca DipWSET, an award-winning sommelier, and Amrita Singh DipWSET, a wine professional with a background in luxury fashion and brand management.

After debuting at Vinexpo India in 2022, Cellar 33 quickly identified India's potential as a dynamic growth market for artisanal producers. "India is one of the most exciting wine markets in the world today. Consumers are curious, importers are ambitious, and international producers are beginning to see the opportunity here," says Amrita.

Through Project India, its flagship initiative, Cellar 33 has built a bridge

between boutique producers and the Indian trade. At ProWine Mumbai 2023, the agency drew attention with one of the fair's largest boutique collectives, including a dedicated Champagne Lounge.

Momentum accelerated further in 2024, when Cellar 33 presented 25 producers, among them 14 Champagne growers, significantly widening India's access to grower Champagnes and artisanal sparkling wines. ProWine India 2025 further expanded this international focus with 35 new producers and a spotlight on South African producers, adding diversity and strengthening India's global wine connections.

In 2025, Cellar 33 launched nine Champagne producers through Sonarys Co-Brands, India's leading fine wine importer, and is expecting to introduce more Champagne and

other producers in 2026.

Beyond India, Cellar 33 has expanded the international reach of its portfolio, introducing producers to the United States, Italy, Australia, Israel, Singapore, Netherlands and a few other countries, supporting producers with tailored market strategies, logistics expertise and structured trade representation.

For Mattia, the vision goes well beyond distribution. "It's about storytelling, education, and giving boutique producers the chance to shine in a market that values authenticity and quality," he explains.

In just three years, Cellar 33 has established itself as a credible partner in shaping India's evolving wine and spirits culture. With its global momentum continuing to build, this appears to be only the beginning.



Taylor's Port wine bar and tasting room in Lisbon

Tasting Port at Taylor's by the River Tagus

Overlooking the River Tagus and Lisbon's new cruise terminal, Taylor's Port Wine Bar is the only place that serves port by the glass. It's well worth a visit and apparently very popular with visiting Indians. I saw quite a few there when I dropped into Taylor's Wine Shop and Tasting Room (taylor.pt) on a recent visit. Tastings include contrasting styles of port, tawny ports from 10 to 50 years old, and classic vintage ports from 1994. Groups have a special tasting room upstairs, but I sat in the brick walled shop and bar area and sampled five ports, starting with white port which spends less than five years in oak and is a pale golden colour. The bar makes a refreshing cocktail from this port with tonic, lemon zest and mint, paired with salty almonds. I was told the Late Bottled Vintage port made from a single harvest and spending 4 to 6 years in oak is similar in character to a vintage port but is less expensive and can be drunk sooner. The most expensive port on sale is a bulbous bottle containing an 1896 single harvest port costing 4,600 euros. Only eight barrels were made and just two were left to create this port. I ended with a tawny port aged in oak for 10 years, a natural partner to strawberries and crème brûlée. Chocolate and creamy cheese go well with these ports. The bar has a carefully designed snack menu to go with their ports that includes chocolate, truffles, local cheese, almonds and little custard tarts.

— Carol Wright

KOMOS Tequila Expands to Bombay: The Art of Tequila Refined

Luxury tequila brand KOMOS has officially launched in Bombay, bringing its refined, artisanal expression of tequila to one of India's most discerning markets. Blending traditional Mexican tequila-making with the finesse of European winemaking, KOMOS has already established a strong presence in Delhi, Haryana and Goa, becoming a favourite at five-star hotels and elite bars.

Aged in French oak and presented in hand-crafted ceramic decanters, KOMOS offers a range that includes Añejo Cristalino, Reposado Rosa, Añejo Reserva, and the celebrated Extra Añejo – the first and only tequila to receive a



KOMOS Luxury Tequilas – A favourite with discerning drinkers

perfect 100-point score from The Tasting Panel Magazine.

The Bombay debut was marked by an exclusive launch at Bar Paradox, attended

by tastemakers and high-net-worth Indians, featuring curated cocktails and immersive tasting experiences that reflected the brand's ethos of craftsmanship and modern luxury.

"KOMOS represents a new frontier of luxury spirits in India," says Prasan Chawla, Founder, Chason Beverages, while Ankur Chawla, Brand Manager, adds that Bombay's appetite for premium spirits makes it a natural next step for the brand. KOMOS is available at select premium retailers across Bombay, including Variety Wine (Juhu), Baba Wines (Matunga), World of Wines (Colaba) and the Hops Cork chain.

SI Wine Calendar 2026–March 2027

A chronological listing of key international wine fairs and exhibitions from early 2026 to March 2027

Wine Paris

When: February 9–11, 2026

Where: Paris Expo Porte de Versailles, Paris, France

What: A fast-growing international wine and spirits trade show, uniting global producers with key European and international buyers.

ProWein Düsseldorf

When: March 15–17, 2026

Where: Messe Düsseldorf, Germany

What: The world's leading international trade fair for wines and spirits, renowned for its global reach, strong business focus, and extensive producer participation.

Vinitaly

When: April 12–15, 2026

Where: Veronafiere, Verona, Italy

What: Italy's flagship wine fair and a global benchmark for Italian wine, showcasing the country's regional diversity and export strength.

London Wine Fair

When: May 18–20, 2026

Where: Olympia, London, UK

What: One of the UK's biggest and most influential wine trade events, bringing together producers, importers, distributors, retailers, and sommeliers from around the world.

Vinexpo Asia

When: May 26–28, 2026

Where: Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, Hong Kong

What: A major wine and spirits exhibition serving as a gateway to Asian markets, attracting producers, buyers, and decision-makers from across the region.

Vinexpo Bordeaux

When: September 14–16, 2026

Where: Bordeaux, France

What: Showcasing the Bordeaux region alongside global wine

producers, focusing on trade networking and international market development.

ProWine Mumbai

When: November 18–19, 2026

Where: Mumbai, India

What: South Asia's leading wine and spirits trade fair, focused on the Indian market and international producers seeking regional expansion.

Hong Kong International Wine & Spirits Fair

When: November 2026 (dates TBC)

Where: Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, Hong Kong
What: A major Asian platform for wine and spirits trade, education, and networking, with strong participation from global producers.

Vinexpo Tokyo

When: January 19–21, 2027

Where: Tokyo Big Sight, Tokyo, Japan

What: Japan's leading wine and spirits fair, connecting Asian markets with global producers and importers.

Wine Vision New York

When: January 25–27, 2027

Where: New York, USA

What: A boutique trade-focused wine fair highlighting small producers, innovation, and rare or collectible wines.

Vinitaly International

When: March 3–5, 2027

Where: Veronafiere, Verona, Italy
What: A mid-season international edition presenting fine Italian wines for global buyers and collectors

Dates marked TBC are subject to official confirmation and will be decided in due course

Your Questions Answered

Are Chianti, Valpolicella and Montepulciano only regions or also grape varieties? If only regions, then what are the grapes used in these wines and why are they not named on the label?

Chianti (DOCG) is a large wine region in Tuscany, divided into several subzones (like Chianti Colli Senesi, Chianti Rufina, etc.) as well as a red wine made primarily from the Sangiovese grape, which is Italy's most widely planted red grape variety. By law, Chianti DOCG wines must contain at least 70% to 80% Sangiovese (depending on the sub-zone). The balance may include other approved grapes, such as Canaiolo, Colorino, Cabernet Sauvignon, or Merlot. Valpolicella is a red wine blend from the winemaking region of Veneto near Verona made from Corvina, Rondinella, and Molinara grapes, with Corvina usually the dominant varietal.

Italy follows a terroir-first philosophy. Like France, the region, tradition, and style matter more than the grape name. That's why you see Chianti on the label, not Sangiovese. Again, in the case of Valpolicella, the Italian system focuses on region and it's the style (Valpolicella Classico, Ripasso, Amarone) that sets them apart.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is also a red wine from the town of Montepulciano in Tuscany made mainly from Sangiovese and



what you taste, but once opened, the seal advantage of the screwcap is lost. Some argue that screwcaps don't allow wine to age as gracefully (though new research shows screwcaps can age wine depending on liner type).

That said, there's no quality difference in the liquid itself, it depends more on the style of wine. Cork is often preferred for wines meant to age, while screwcaps are particularly good for fresh, aromatic whites and young reds.

I have a screwcap bottle, how long will it keep once I have opened it?

Once it is opened, finishing the bottle is a good rule to follow. If unable to do so, recap the bottle tightly and store it in the fridge. Store white and rosé wines for three to five days, light reds for two to three days and full-bodied reds for three to four days. If you use a wine preservation system like a VacuVin pump you can extend the life of the wine for up to a week or more. After this, the wine won't make you sick, but flavours fade, fruit dulls, and oxidation takes over.

To submit your questions

- Email your query to team@sommelierindia.com
- Include your full address and email
- To subscribe go to www.sommelierindia.com

other grapes. If, however, you see Montepulciano d'Abruzzo on a wine label, this means that the wine is made from the Montepulciano grape variety and comes from Abruzzo, not Tuscany. So Montepulciano is both a place in Tuscany and a grape variety grown widely in Abruzzo and Marche.

How does the quality of wine differ in a bottle sealed with a cork from a bottle that has a screwcap?

There was a time when corked closures were associated with expensive wines and screwcaps with cheaper wines, but no longer. A wine bottle with a cork comes with the romantic/ritual appeal of traditional bottle opening ceremonies. Cork allows micro-oxygenation (tiny amounts of air) to seep in, which can help fine wines develop complexity over the years. However, there is the risk of cork taint (TCA contamination) that makes the wine smell musty and dull.

Screwcaps provide an airtight seal, protecting wine from oxidation and spoilage and ensure consistency: what the winemaker bottled is exactly

SI PICKS

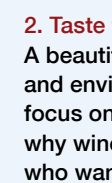
Six excellent Académie du Vin Library books to read in 2026

Chosen for a mix of basic wine education, region-specific depth, tasting insight, and enjoyable reading, many of these books are ideal to take on wine tastings or trips. They provide both context and stories behind what's in your glass. The Spurrier and Cynic's Guide books build broad skills, while the region-specific titles deepen your knowledge.



1. Steven Spurrier's Académie du Vin Wine Course

A modern classic updated for today's wine world, this book guides you through how to taste like a professional, understand grape varieties and regions, and learn the fundamentals of wine appreciation. Ideal for serious beginners and intermediate enthusiasts alike. ₹9,300



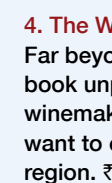
2. Taste the Limestone, Smell the Slate – Alex Maltman

A beautifully written exploration of terroir — the geological and environmental factors that influence wine. Maltman's focus on soil, rock and landscape helps you understand why wines taste the way they do and is great for readers who want science-meets-storytelling. ₹4,400



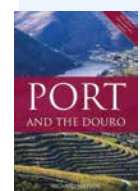
3. The Wines of California – Elaine Chukan Brown

One of the strongest deep dives into a New World powerhouse region. This book pairs detailed regional profiles with cultural and historical context, making it valuable for both wine travellers and those who want to understand California's diversity. Regular price ₹4,400



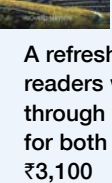
4. The Wines of Beaujolais – Natasha Hughes MW

Far beyond Gamay stereotypes, this authoritative regional book unpacks everything from traditional crus to modern winemaking trends in Beaujolais. Perfect for those who want to explore nuanced styles within a single grape and region. ₹4,400



5. Port and the Douro – Richard Mayson

A definitive guide to one of the world's most iconic fortified wines and its homeland. Mayson's work combines history, culture, viticulture and tasting notes to bring this storied Portuguese region vividly to life. Regular price ₹4,400



6. The Cynic's Guide to Wine – Sunny Hodge

A refreshingly witty and accessible take on wine that's perfect for readers who enjoy learning with a sense of humour. This title cuts through pretension but still offers substantive insights, making it great for both beginners and seasoned drinkers looking for a lighter read. ₹3,100

Visit www.academieduvinlibrary.com for more books, including titles from the Classic Wine Library. To order books at a discount email team@sommelierindia.com

Düsseldorf in the Spotlight as ProWein Unveils 'City Vibes'

ProWein Düsseldorf is set to enter a new, more urban chapter from 15-17 March 2026 with the launch of ProWein City Vibes, a reimagined city programme that reflects wine and spirits as a contemporary lifestyle. Formerly known as ProWein goes City, the refreshed concept aims to extend the world's leading B2B trade fair beyond the exhibition halls and into the heart of Düsseldorf.

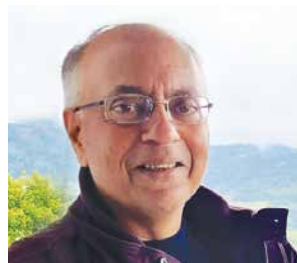
While the days remain focused on professional exchange at ProWein, evenings will now belong to City Vibes — an open, experience-led programme designed to connect trade visitors, local gastronomy and a wider, enjoyment-driven audience. "City Vibes builds a bridge from business to pleasure," says Marius Berlemann, COO of Messe Düsseldorf, positioning the city as a vital extension of the fair itself. Developed in collaboration with Düsseldorf-based agency Wellfairs, known for Gourmet Festival and Wein am



"ProWein goes city" is aimed at all wine lovers in and around Düsseldorf

Rhein, the concept strengthens Düsseldorf's role as a modern destination for food, drink and culture. Frank Schindler, Director of ProWein Düsseldorf, describes City Vibes as "colourful, stylish and modern," aligning with the brand's evolution towards a more human, international identity. The programme begins on 12 March 2026 with NOIR, a chic, French-inspired opening night, followed by five days of inventive events ranging from wine-themed speed dating and cinema nights to silent dance walks, artistic performances and curated gastro-hopping tours. Exhibitors and hospitality players are invited to participate, making City Vibes a collaborative platform where wine, spirits and the city converge.

COLUMNOSING AROUND



V SANJAY KUMAR

finds wine more interesting than whisky, although there's no accounting for personal taste, which can be full of surprises

Palate Preference

I made my usual announcement at a recent get-together where 'Patialas' were being poured into Glencairns. "I find wine more interesting than whisky." It was mistaken as a provocation. In truth, it was a plea of sorts in that macho group that measured manhood by the peg count.

My better half snorted. "Don't take him seriously," she said. "He finds women who drink whisky more interesting than wine." There was some laughter, not too much; they were watching her pour herself a slug of Double Wood Balvenie. She swirled and sniffed and sipped it without water or ice.

It is strange that at parties, women aren't asked if they would like some whisky. It is assumed they will prefer white spirits, rosé wine, or some delicate cocktail. My better half loves an honest dram; her go-to is Highland and not Islay. That choice extends to wine as well. She prefers rounded reds where tannins have integrated. Some Brunello is too smoky for her palate, just as some Syrah is too meaty.

Palate preference is an interesting subject. People surprise me all the time. Some wines are considered niche because they have peculiar characteristics. Take the Gamay grape and the Beaujolais region. Those who

like the Crus from this domain are very few. You won't get brownie points for scoring a Fleurie or a Morgon in most wine circles. But among connoisseur groups, you might get a respectful nod. There is a rustic air to Gamay; it wears a less cultured cloak than Pinot Noir. It carries a gamey note, and can surprise you with a carbonic tingle. Gamays can be tart, bitter, can taste young and God forbid, simple. Many find all this distasteful; a select few find it irresistible. Try a Lafarge Vial Fleurie or a Lapierre Morgon and then decide.

At the other end of the spectrum are American wines that have 15 % plus alcohol, overripe fruit, and dollops of new oak that can pretty much blunt acidity and obliterate tannins. These are big wines made primarily from Napa valley Cabernet Sauvignon fruit. Some are made from Zinfandel or Petit Syrah. They are dense, rich, plush, and a tad sweet. They are the preferred gig in many homes and elicit heartwarming responses comparing the wines to endowed actresses of yore. I mean, really?

There are times when I drink Coke, swig soda pop, or suck candy. But to taste some of that in a glass of wine? My recent



Balvenie Double Wood Scotch single malt whisky: Liked by men and women

experience with young Silver Oak, Austin Hope, and Caymus (US wineries) has been underwhelming. A Belle Glos Pinot had me scratching my head, its opulence was off the charts.

Syrah is another grape that some connoisseurs are against. The French version is a brooding, earthy, meaty red with some liquorice and pepper. It takes a while to integrate; till then, it can be rough around the edges. Is it possible that vegetarian palates are turned off by Syrah's meaty notes? In our part of the world, which hasn't had the best of Margaret River or Clare Valley, Australian wine means Shiraz, and Shiraz, poor thing, is dominated by Penfolds. Their ubiquitous approach spurns single-vineyard expressions and terroir specificity and blends from multiple sources. Some palates find that easy, predictable pleasure a little boring. The good news is that there is so much good Shiraz in Australia waiting to be discovered.

I suspect that what excites true connoisseur palates is uncertainty. The kind that Bordeaux reds have with vintage variability and uncertain drinking windows. The same applies to Nebbiolo wines that hold tannins for ransom and keep you guessing as to when you should uncork a Barolo. And the sweetness spectrum of Rieslings can confuse the best; the dry Trockens can wipe the enamel off your teeth, while the Spatleses and Ausleses can be sweeter than a gulab jamun.

I love tannins; I like any form of tannins, ripe or stalky. I find acidity bracing; I feel it gives a lift to an expression. I also find rustic Gamays interesting. Of late, I like cloudy skin-contact wines that have interesting hues and funky noses. In most parties, I am increasingly left alone, staring moodily into my glass of ubiquitous liquid they have served me that has no surprises. Does that make me a wine snob?

"What are you looking for?" someone asks me now and then. I have no clue. Wine's unvarnished soul? ❖

I suspect that what excites true connoisseur palates is uncertainty. The kind that Bordeaux reds have with vintage variability and uncertain drinking windows

Going beyond the usual wines

Shoba Narayan explores the wine and dine scene in New York with acclaimed master sommelier, Pascaline Lepeltier

Wine trends happen as a consequence of the economy combined with a knowledgeable, curious and open-minded drinking public,” says acclaimed sommelier, Pascaline Lepeltier. We are sitting at **Chambers restaurant** in New York, which she co-founded in 2022. With its extensive wine list containing over 2,000 labels, Chambers is well known in New York City for its wine. Much of it is built on Pascaline’s reputation as someone who seeks out and patronizes boutique, largely organic producers, who share her values of equity and sustainability.

“The age of extravagance has plateaued,” she says. “People are sensitive about price points. Yes, they will drink Burgundy and Champagne, but simply drinking high-priced wine is not enough anymore. Similarly, drinking or collecting wine is not enough.

Pascaline Lepeltier, master sommelier, known for her values of equity and sustainability



“People are sensitive about price points. Yes, they will drink Burgundy and Champagne, but simply drinking high-priced wine is not enough anymore” — Pascaline Lepeltier

People want to go beyond the bottle. They want to meet the winemaker over special dinners to learn the stories behind the wine. They want to taste artisanal wines.”

Some regions therefore have suffered: Napa and Bordeaux come to mind. And since people overall are drinking less, they are price-sensitive. So Burgundy for most is unreachable. Bordeaux and Napa are overdone is the perception. The wines Pascaline favours are from regions that have a history of winemaking but are lesser known: Eastern Europe, Georgia, Slovenia, Romania, Ukraine, Portugal (which has some 250 varieties) and Greece.

That night over dinner, I get a taste of her taste. Pascaline pours some unusual and interesting wines, and an exceptional sake — Daigo no Shizuku with 14% ABV. Cume do Avia Colleta No 10 is a red wine from the Ribeira region of Spain. This organic producer blends Galician varieties and this particular bottle contained grapes that I had not tasted before: 40% Caiño Longo, 34% Sousón, 26% Brancellao. When I mention Corsican wine, Pascaline pours a 2017 San Giovanni from Antoine-Marie Arena, an aromatic red blend, again containing grapes I hadn’t tasted: 50% Morescone, 50% Carcagholu Nero.

The evening is easy and we end up drinking largely white, since I am vegetarian. A white from Portugal, organic and bracing, Quinta di Serradinha 2023 has 85% Encruzado and 15% Arinto, the former a blending grape to counter the high-acidity of the latter. Having had Indian Chenin Blanc, which is largely weak and lackadaisical, I am surprised by the flint and peach in Le Berceau des fees (cradle



Bold and beautiful, Warren Suite Bar & Restaurant is designed by hotel veterans, Tim and Kit Kemp

of the fairies), a young and fresh Chenin from the Loire Valley’s organic producer, Domaine aux Moines. Its vigneronne Tessa Laroche plays an important role in Pascaline’s 2017 book about the Domaine.

“Chenin has a bitterness at the end,” says Pascaline. I try to search for it. Natural wine is a rising trend, and so we have Cante Gau Blanc from Pierre & Sylvia Michelland, a biodynamic producer in Provence. The grape, a Carignan Blanc, is delicious and since it is biodynamic, I feel that it is “healthy” and so end up downing the glass.

The glasses by the way, feel like Zalto but are ‘less expensive,’ says Pascaline. The brand they use at the restaurant is from Sophienwald. The Grand Cru range, particularly, is beautiful to behold. Meanwhile, Pascaline is running around the restaurant, talking with diners about their wines. “I love the interaction between wine and civilization,” she says.

WINE STORES AND RESTAURANTS: New York has a surfeit of sophisticated bars and restaurants that serve cocktails and wine with a point of view. **Firmdale Hotels** for instance, has

a series of boutique properties in the city that elevate the dining experience through design by hotel veterans, Tim and Kit Kemp. When I dined at the **Warren Street Bar & Restaurant**, the cocktails were a sight to behold, but they had to keep up with the decor which was bold and brilliant.

Restaurants are a great option but then, so are wine stores. **Leon & Son** in Brooklyn for example, is a wonderful neighborhood shop that regularly holds tastings, classes, and “meet the maker” events with winemakers. Similarly, Tribeca and Flatiron wine shops hold themed tastings that are terrific to explore regions or varieties. Discovery wines has masterclasses and focuses on natural wines without added sulphur. At **Astor** wines, I found a wine that Pascaline had praised. Savennières “Coulée de Serrant” 2021 from famed Loire Valley producer, Nicolas Joly.

Wine store or restaurant, the real trick in enjoying wines is to find a great sommelier who understands what you want, both in terms of taste and budget, and then goes ahead and opens your eyes to what is available out there. That is what Pascaline did for me. ♦

New York has a surfeit of sophisticated bars and restaurants that serve cocktails and wine with a point of view

COLUMN



Photo: Isharya Manthan Dave

GAURI DEVIDAYAL

speaks to a panel of consumers in India and discovers what they like to drink

What is India drinking?

Particularly in the premium segment, homegrown products are now even outpricing imports which shows a strong conviction about quality

Last summer, I was touring a winery in Tuscany and of the few hundred other visitors around, there was one other couple from Mumbai, armed with their haul of Super Tuscans. This is not about coincidences but a reflection of the increasingly discerning palate and curiosity around premium wines. The trend was validated by the speakers on the panel I was moderating at ProWine 2025, where we had gathered to understand what India is drinking.

There was consensus on one thing – Indians are beginning to prioritise quality over anything else. General Rajesh Chopra, Director General of the Indian Malt Whisky Association, explained that it is no longer about imported versus homegrown; consumption choices come down to what is a better product. Particularly in the premium segment, homegrown products are now even outpricing imports which shows a strong conviction about quality. The number of international awards and accolades being picked up by Indian brands is an endorsement of the calibre of a product coming out of the country, whether in the wine or spirits category.

Pawan Shahri, founder and CEO of Chrome Hospitality which is behind some of the top bars in Mumbai, explained that there is a misconception that the younger generation is becoming more health conscious and drinking less or seeking no/low alcohol beverages on menus. His experience from his bars reveals, to the contrary, consumers are in fact looking for well-balanced cocktails using quality spirits, with a story behind them. The guest who is well travelled, whether physically or digitally, is asking questions that reflect an awareness that bar owners haven’t seen before. Indians are not cutting out pleasure but the plethora of options available means that they are able to be extremely selective. Pawan also confirmed that tequila and mezcal are definitely overtaking the gin wave, a trend that most bartenders and importers have been talking about. Indigenous spirits like mahua and feni are being upgraded from country liquor to being a refined mainstream product, giving consumers an opportunity to experiment.

Going one step further, we are likely to start seeing more bars that pay homage to one type of spirit as opposed to being everything for everyone. For instance, Pankaj Balachandran,

co-founder of Countertop India has taken the risk with his rum focused Bar Outrigger and feni-agave focused Quinta Cantina, both in Goa. This is echoed by Anmol Chandok, Vice President at Chenab Impex, who reflected on the dining maturity we are seeing in India. Menus are moving away from being general and becoming more cuisine focused, and the wine list and cocktail menu have been paired with that. An Italian restaurant will tend to focus on more Italian wines along with aperitivos and digestivos, and Chenab’s niche imports of liqueurs and cocktail ingredients are catering to this demand.

Tier-2 consumption is growing quickly and tier-3 and 4-even faster. The spending power in smaller towns is often underestimated. Importer of Coravin devices, Chenab, is receiving orders from towns they least expected, including Jalgaon in Maharashtra and North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. Unfortunately, excise policy is yet to catch up to allow for imports and homegrown brands to be available more widely. However, the growing number of free trade agreements is a step in the right direction. In 2022, India signed an FTA with Australia, which has resulted in import duties being phased down significantly leading to reduced prices.

In conclusion, India is progressing from an imitation era to one of innovation, and reduced tariffs on imports will drive Indian brands to focus on quality rather than rely on a pricing advantage. The drinking culture is moving from aspiration to appreciation, from simply consuming to experimentation and curiosity. The rise of informed consumption is not a trend, but an exciting shift in demand that importers, bartenders, sommeliers and domestic producers need to keep up with and take seriously. ♦

Gauri Devidayal is co-founder of The Table, Kaspers and Mag St., some of Mumbai’s most celebrated restaurants, and the host of an F&B themed podcast, Speak Greasy.

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COLUMN



RUMASINGH

On how the Perrin family's decision to renovate Beaucastel, their flagship winery in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, was so much more than an architectural restoration

Where Earth, Wind and Terroir Meet

The family held an open competition soliciting designs from the world's top architects, and after much debate, the winner was declared: Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai

It was in late 2023 that I first heard about the Perrin family's decision to renovate their famous flagship winery in Châteauneuf-du-Pape: Château de Beaucastel. It was clear that this was no mere rebuilding of the winery but a reimagining of the estate itself, to make it future proof in a world where water would be scarce, climate would have changed. In a first, the family held an open competition soliciting designs from the world's top architects, and after much debate, the winner was declared: Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai, and his French colleague, Louis-Antoine Grégo of Studio Méditerranée. Their joint mandate for Beaucastel included expanding its limits physically and emotionally to include the elements that typify Châteauneuf-du-Pape's terroir – earth (the unique *galets roulés* of the southern Rhône), wind (the mighty Mistral) and water – increasingly in erratic supply.

I confess I spent hours delving into details of the project – it was fascinating. I spoke extensively to the architects, the cerebral Bijoy Jain and the pragmatic Grégo; and interacted with Charles Perrin, heading the project for the family.

The story gradually unfolded virtually before me: the golden earth, the river-buffed *galets*, the Mistral whipping through the vines around a golden-ochre winery. I had visited Beaucastel before, years ago, but this project stimulated my

imagination. So, when an opportunity arose to visit the south of France recently, I took a detour and drove towards Beaucastel.

For the many who 'ooh' and 'ahh' over wineries steeped in tradition, of centuries-old châteaux towering over manicured greenery, or breathtaking swirling pink-and-silver titanium roofs, Beaucastel might seem a letdown. There are no towering turrets here. It seems to rise out of the earth, and therein lies its magic. The original manor house is intact, but built into one of its ochre-yellow walls is a small door.

Through the door I went, feeling like Alice in Wonderland. Immediately I found myself in surroundings I had seen in the images of the new Beaucastel. Starkly simple, it seemed to merge with its surroundings, swaddled in the embrace of its surrounding bush-trained vines.

Beaucastel sales director, Maxime Simon greeted me at the door and talked me through the estate's early history, closely entwined with that of the region. As the name Châteauneuf-du-Pape suggested, it is linked to the Popes who moved briefly from Rome to the south of France centuries ago. "There can be no better marketing line than being named the wine of the Popes!" he laughed.

At the start, Beaucastel was simply a farm, and wine was one of its several products, including

almonds and olives. The story goes that King Louis XIV of France enjoyed stopping at Beaucastel to rest on his way to see the Pope. So pleased was he with Monsieur de Beaucastel's lodgings that he awarded him 100 hectares of land and the rights to collect taxes for the town of Courthézon. The Perrins' took over from the early 20th century. Third generation scion, Jacques Perrin was a visionary who converted to organic farming when the practice was far from fashionable. "The farmers had begun to plant Grenache: large, juicy berries with high alcohol. It was not easy to say no to pesticides," said Maxime. But Perrin stood firm. "Our job as farmers is to create life, not destroy it," he said.

Today, Beaucastel celebrates 50 years of turning biodynamic, but the years in between were not without hardship. Rain is not plentiful here, pointed out Maxime, "The Mistral is powerful – blowing at 70km an hour – and we experience it 150 days every year. It's a tough environment for making wine."

Yet Beaucastel thrived, even flourished, becoming one of the world's most famous wine estates, one of few to use all 13 permitted grape varieties for its red Châteauneuf. The Perrins went on to create several iconic brands, including the Brad Pitt-owned Château Miraval. But despite the pressures of expansion, the Perrin family vowed to stay grounded. Their wine and their family's future were of paramount importance. This vision of a future-ready Beaucastel was communicated to the architects: build from the earth itself, allow the elements to handle the energy load. "We are not trying to distract or impress the world, just inspire it," said Charles Perrin.

Inspiring Beaucastel is, seamlessly blending cutting-edge modern technology with nature's bounty. Its famous natural cooling systems harness the Mistral's power downwards into the winery, driven through wind towers that create a naturally air-conditioned environment minus the use of external power. The rain-harvested

water is channelled into underground cisterns, amplifying the cooling further. Inside, new concrete tanks and 5000-litre *foudres* tower over the original tanks built by Jacques Perrin.

The winery, mainly underground, is powered by solar panels because, says Charles Perrin, "If a guest notices the building before the wine, we've failed." Most striking of all are the 'rammed earth' walls, created from deconstructed old sheds on the estate, ground into gravel, and constructed into unpainted, open-faced walls. Grégo referred to it as 'taking terroir and making it vertical'. No steel or concrete was bought for the project. The €12 million project is all about historic techniques, transformed anew. The new winery had risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the old.

And then came the time for the tasting of the wines. Charles Perrin generously opened bottle after bottle. The **Beaucastel Blanc 2024**, a blend of six grapes matured in stainless steel and oak, showed notes of citrus, apricot, and honey with a saline finish. The **Beaucastel Vieilles Vignes 2021**, 100% Roussanne vines planted in 1909, was all honey, peach, white flowers, and flint – delicious. "This is best drunk young before 10 years, or then after 20 years," advised Charles Perrin.

We moved to the reds. The **Beaucastel rouge 2023**, bottled in July 2025, was Grenache-dominated, lively yet structured with balanced yet youthful tannins, while the cool vintage, **2018 rouge** showed developed flavours of dark berries, chocolate, and a long finish. Next up was the **2007 rouge**, a stunning vintage – all cherry, fig, and smoky notes with silken tannins. Just as I was leaving Charles disappeared into the cobweb-covered wine racks and emerged with Beaucastel's pride and joy – the **Hommage à Jacques Perrin 2021**. The 'homage' is a hat tip to their far-sighted ancestor's belief in Mourvèdre, the original grape of the region. The full-bodied wine showed stewed dark cherry, plum, forest floor, and wood smoke – a mere toddler in wine terms, but showing signs of greatness to come. ♦

Beaucastel thrived, even flourished, becoming one of the world's most famous wine estates, one of few to use all 13 permitted grape varieties for its red Châteauneuf. The Perrins went on to create several iconic brands, including the Brad Pitt-owned Château Miraval

PRODUCER PROFILE

RAJAT PARR

the Minimalist Winemaker

On a visit to Rajat Parr in Cambria, **Mira Advani Honeycutt** gets an insight into his uniquely personal take on winemaking

Harvest 2025 was coming to an end when I visited Rajat Parr at his Parr Collective Vineyard & Winery in Cambria located in the northern end of San Luis Obispo Coast AVA, along California's Central Coast. As I watched a half-ton bin of Savagnin Jaune was tipped into the press on the crush pad while the sommelier-turned-winemaker supervised a small crew of three others. After pressing, the juice is headed straight into barrel where it will naturally ferment with native yeast and age.

"Nothing is added in our wines," he declared.

This, in a nutshell, is Parr's signature — minimal intervention and a natural winemaking approach. The practice runs through his portfolio of four brands: Phelan Farm-Wines of the Pacific, Stolo, Brij and Scythian Wine Co, all produced at Parr Collective Winery in Cambria



Photo: Mira Advani Honeycutt

Rajat Parr pictured with a line-up of bottles of Phelan Farm-Wines of the Pacific



Striking Parr Collective signage with typography that recalls Hindi script

There's no pretense in Parr's craftsmanship – his wines strive for purity and honesty. Phelan Farm wines, for instance, surprise you with obscure varieties

(formerly known as Stolo Vineyards & Winery). As we walked around the crush pad peeking into other bins, Parr related that 2025 was extremely cool along the Central Coast. "A very cool, long, beautiful summer," is how he put it, which will give the wines high acidities and moderate alcohol. "Really fresh and vibrant and crunchy wines." A hallmark of Parr's collection of wines.

There's no pretense in Parr's craftsmanship – his wines strive for purity and honesty. Phelan Farm wines, for instance, surprise you with obscure varieties such as **Mondeuse, Poulsard, Altese, Trousseau** and **Pink Chardonnay**, all planted at Parr's Phelan Farm vineyards.

Then there are two brands produced with sourced grapes. The popular Brij brand is a workhorse, producing 1000 cases each of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Brij also includes small lots of unusual varieties like Assyrtiko, Gruner Veltliner plus the popular Chenin Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre – all sourced from organic vineyards along the Central Coast.

The Scythian Wine collection is dedicated to historic vineyards in Cucamonga (east of Los Angeles) from where Parr sources ancient Zinfandel, Mission and Palomino varieties. He also continues the Stolo tradition of a small production of estate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Stolo vineyards. Another label focused on Italian varieties is in the works for next year. "They're trendy now because a lot of different wine growers are looking for those varieties," Parr explained. "I try to make wines that I enjoy and are thought-provoking and interesting." Has Pinot Noir, his first love, taken a back seat? No, he said, he's still producing it along with its Burgundian cousin Chardonnay. "But also, other wines," he insisted.

Is there a lot of Pinot being made these days? "Yeah, a hundred percent, because if

you make Pinot it has to be with intent in the right place, in the right way." There's a lot of mediocre, uninteresting Pinot made in the whole world, he added. "So we try to focus and make small amounts of wines that are interesting and compelling. [They] give you a look into what really the place is, not just a Pinot Noir from anywhere." The total annual production across all four brands is 4,000 cases.

Parr grew up in Kolkata and moved to the UK at age 20 where he got his introduction to wine. "I had never had wine before. And I was like, wow, this is made from grapes? As a kid you eat grapes and you

don't think about it."

That epiphany came by way of his first sip of Bordeaux. For a winemaker known for his passion for Pinot Noir and obscure varieties, Parr still has great admiration for Cabernet Sauvignon. "In my top 10 list of the greatest wines I ever had, probably half will be Cabernet," he declared. Indeed, he is now in the 'Cab business.'

"People come into the tasting room asking for Cab," Parr admitted. So he wants to make the walk-ins happy. He took me over to one of the bins where Cabernet Sauvignon grapes were fermenting. Sourced from Paso Robles AVA, the small production will be sold at the tasting room. "We are making this exactly the



Rajat Parr with old French oak barrels in which some of the wines are fermented and aged at the Parr Collective winery in Cambria



Photo: Mira Advani Honeycutt

Grapes from the 2025 harvest, a year that was extremely cool along the Central Coast

A consummate purist, Parr was drawn to an isolated 11.5-acre vineyard planted in 2007 to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, a part of the 1,100-acre ranch homesteaded by the Phelan family

same way we do other wines with closed top fermenters. It will be made like Pinot.”

Parr originally thought he wanted to be a chef so he moved to New York to study at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) at Hyde Park. “While I was there I fell in love with wine.” He later moved on to San Francisco and worked with celebrity sommelier Larry Stone. “I worked as a sommelier for 18 years.” In between he dabbled in winemaking and worked the harvest with two now-deceased Pinot luminaries — Josh Jensen (Calera) and Jim Clendenen (Au Bon Climat). “They were old school and taught me well.”

Over the years he has picked up three James Beard Awards, curated four Wine Spectator Grand Award wine lists, co-authored the book, “Secrets of the Sommeliers,” and mentored countless young aspiring Somms and winemakers.

Eventually, his passion for Pinot Noir led him to winemaking when he launched his Parr label in 2004, sourcing fruit and producing wines at local wineries in Santa Barbara County. In 2011, he partnered with local winemaker Sashi Moorman to launch Sandhi wines in Sta. Rita Hills AVA, renowned for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The Domaine de la Côte label was added to their portfolio in 2013. (Parr has in recent years sold his interest in both).

Parr’s association with the tiny village of Cambria (north of Santa Barbara County) began when he came upon the Phelan Farm vineyard in a remote hillside, a mere three miles from the Pacific Ocean. A consummate purist, Parr was drawn to an isolated 11.5-acre vineyard planted in 2007 to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay which is part of the 1,100-acre ranch homesteaded by the Phelan family in 1851. He offered to lease the vineyard with a vision to preserve the integrity of this storied ranch and create a healthy eco-system

following his regenerative farming practices.

Parr retained some of the original Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines at Phelan Farm and decided to graft other vines over to cool climate varieties to take advantage of coastal Cambria’s marine-influenced climate. In 2017 and 2018, he began grafting a selection of some 15 varieties native to France’s Savoie and Jura regions, varieties ranging from **Mondeuse, Savagnin Vert, Savganin Jaune** and **Poulsard** to **Altese, Jacquere, Trousseau** and the popular **Gamay**.

Around the same time, he began his association with Stolo Vineyards & Winery, joining the team as its consulting winemaker in 2021, while producing his Phelan Farm wines at Stolo. Two years later he leased the property and began converting Stolo vineyards to regenerative farming while planting new vineyards. “Stolo winery is now called the Parr Collective Wines,” Parr said. All four brands are produced at this winery.

Parr is a committed naturalist. “Everything starts in the vineyard. I want to use a more holistic approach in the vineyard and embrace regenerative farming.”

In addition to using holistic preparations such as spraying raw milk to combat powdery mildew, Parr insists that nothing goes to waste on the ranch. “We feed the vegetable trimmings to the sheep and when I make almond milk I give the almond pulp to the chickens. I hate throwing it with trash.”

The minimalist approach in vinification includes using native yeast, no fining and no filtration. “Of course, in a perfect situation, which happens a lot here, there’s nothing added in the wine.” However, there are times when intervention is needed. “You have to make a judgment call if you’re going to add a small amount of sulphur, or we’ll rack this or blend that.”

As with many wineries, Parr admits that 2025 was a challenging year economically.



Photo: Scott Wills

Eye-catching, elegant Parr Collective wine labels

Using holistic preparations such as spraying raw milk to combat powdery mildew, Parr insists that nothing goes to waste on the ranch

“We were affected by 30-40%,” he commented on the recent slump in the industry caused by many factors, from health warnings in the media to oversupply of fruit and declining sales due to competition from other beverages and cannabis. “Customers dropped off. We had less people walking in the door.”

Parr feels these are generational changes. People are drinking less due to health or economic reasons. Plus, the traffic to Cambria (and other nearby coastal towns) has been impacted by the long-time closure of nearby Highway 1 due to road conditions. However, ever the optimist, Parr is looking at the bright side.

“I’m bullish about this area, we’re the only winery in Cambria. And the SLO Coast AVA has good energy. Harvest is great and I’m excited about what’s ahead.”

Parr’s singular vision follows the European model. “We farm the vineyard, make the wine and sell the wine. When you’re fully engaged with a vineyard from fruiting to picking, you have a different connection with it.” ♦

PICTURESTUDY

Eléanore Latour takes over at Maison Louis Latour in Aloxé-Corton

I started photographing Louis-Fabrice Latour almost as soon as his father retired. I had first, nervously and rapidly, made a portrait of Louis in 1979 standing in the courtyard of his offices in rue des Tonneliers in Beaune, probably the work of only a minute. These days I hope for longer. Louis-Fabrice was patient but happier the quicker the picture taking was over. I used to say “It’s better than the dentist...” but I’m not sure he ever agreed. I always managed to find something I liked and kept things simple. The quicker and more continuously you work, the harder it is for a reluctant sitter to call a halt. Some tried, Louis-Fabrice never did.

After the shock of his “disappearance” as the French refer to it, I had no idea who would take over but tried to be quick in securing some pictures of them. Well, Eléanore Latour came up with the unexpected excuse of law exams. I immediately realised I should be more patient and maintain the good relations I had. Sometimes a new generation can want to keep you at bay. Fortunately Bruno Pepin, Latour’s marketing director who I had got to know slightly during his days at Bouchard Père et Fils as I regularly visited Joseph Henriot, had now been at Latour and helped me get my timing right, and even took the role of chaperone when I secured an appointment with Eléanore at Latour’s iconic cuverie in Aloxé-Corton.

It seemed obvious to choose an important link to the Latour heritage and it has not changed since I first saw it 45 years ago. Eléanore emerged from her car just as I arrived, followed by Bruno to make the introductions. The idea that I was photographing the third generation seemed to interest both of us equally and she was keen to hear of my history with Latour.

When you look at a 26-year-young lady about to enter the world of wine under such circumstances, you must see the strengths and intelligence, not the youth and inexperience. It can’t be faked, she will be tested and found out so it becomes a negotiation of prejudices as well as illuminating the positives. There was likely to be an uphill battle, but Eléanore chose to take it on with little preparation save being her father’s daughter and that was perfectly apparent. Unlike his discomfort in front of the camera, she was absolutely at ease, quietly confident but under no illusions about the task ahead. Her intelligence, sense of humour and approachability will overcome much that lies ahead. Certainly photographers will be dealt with successfully, effortlessly and painlessly. That’s all I can say. The rest will follow. ♦

Louis-Fabrice Latour’s daughter, Eléanore is the first woman to assume leadership of the famed Burgundy Maison Louis Latour and the third generation to be photographed by **Jon Wyand**



Eléanore Latour, Vice President of Maison Louis Latour and the 12th-generation member of the family

CONFERENCE REPORT

A Napa Tribute to Old Vines

In a rare joint appearance in Napa, Jancis Robinson and Paul Draper recount the experiences that ignited their lifelong passion for historic vineyards and classic Zinfandel. Pam Strayer reports



Jancis Robinson and Paul Draper in conversation at The Old Wine Conference in Napa, California

Wine icons, Jancis Robinson, wine writer par excellence, and pioneering old vine vintner, Paul Draper, winemaker emeritus of Ridge Vineyards, entertained hundreds of wine writers, wine buyers and old vine enthusiasts on October 31 in Napa with an hour of riveting storytelling.

The topic? What made them each fall in love with old vines and, in particular, fandel.

The heavily producing grape, once thought to be native to America, was widely planted during the 19th century, and dozens of fandel vineyards still exist in California today. The Old Vine Conference held in Napa celebrated old vines from around the globe, with a grand tasting featuring wines from California, France, Italy, Portugal, Romania, South Africa and Spain.

Capping off the day of tasting, the

evening event featured the two in a conversation that entertained from start to finish as the two shared tales from two continents on the spells fandel cast on their lives.

The grape was to change each of their lives, they said.

For Robinson, Zinfandel was part of a formative experience starting when she was the honorary secretary of something called the Zinfandel Club in London. "Part of my duties was

to organize a tasting of all California wines that were then imported into the UK," she recalled, "and they suddenly proliferated in 1980 because the dollar was quite weak against the pound."

Organizing one such tasting, she met a man named Nick who was importing California wines and starting a restaurant, Escargot, featuring those wines. "Having an all-American wine list was quite the thing," she said, adding that Robert Mondavi got wind of the restaurant opening, joined in the celebration and it was all overheard by a columnist, "and the whole thing wound up as a story in the Sunday Times," she said.

Nick became her husband for the next 40+ years.

After sampling wines from dozens of California old vine zin producers during the afternoon walk around tasting, Robinson lamented that, as superb as their quality was, they couldn't seem to command the same prices that old vine Cabernet did.

"I was rather sad to see the price disparity between [old vine] Zinfandel and the few old vine Cabernets," she said. "This is just fashion and market forces in evidence. Isn't it that Cabernet just automatically gets a higher price, whether it's a better wine or not?"

"I would love to see less disparity, and the Zinfandels in particular, being recognized for the quality and the very, very special heritage connection that they have in the state of California," she said. (Adoring producers took notice.)

Robinson said she didn't immediately recognize the benefits old vines bring. "My interest in old vines began gradually, really...as I was tasting things, I was noticing that old vine wines were just better. They were more interesting. They were better balanced."

She talked about her dismay when she noticed them starting to be pulled out. That spurred her into activism,



Ancient vine from Bedrock Vineyard in Sonoma Valley with 135-year-old vines



Sonoma Valley vintner, Joel Peterson, a staunch advocate for Zinfandel. He long ago founded Ravenswood (now defunct) and today preserves old vines with his son Morgan Twain-Peterson at Bedrock. He also produces artisanal old vine wines at his boutique Once and Future brand

hoping to spur recognition of their value.

"After the movie *Sideways*, in Sonoma I came across quite a lot of instances where fabulous old vines were being pulled out to make way for fashionable Pinot Noir. So there's fashion again for you.

"That highlighted to me the need to encourage people to keep old vines in the ground, because they were making much more interesting wine than young vine Pinot Noir—much of it was being planted in not necessarily the right spots. So when I discovered that in 2011 a Historic Vineyard Society was formed, I was very thrilled and

very much supported it."

Her appreciation of old vines increased over time, with the recognition that "old vines not only produced better wine, but were more resilient, and certainly, obviously, withstood drought so much better because of their root structure. I'm told that they actually withstand wildfires better and withstand certain pests and diseases better," she said.

The Old Vine Conference is an outgrowth of a global movement that also hosts the oldvineregistry.org with its 8,000 vineyards over 35 years of age. The online resource also features links from each wine to wineseacher.

com to encourage people to find and buy the wines.

Winemaker emeritus of Ridge Vineyards, Old Vine champion Paul Draper, 89, never intended to make Zinfandel. The evangelist for pre-industrial winemaking discovered old vine Zinfandel totally by chance. While he and his colleagues were focused on Bordeaux grapes on Monte Bello mountain in Cupertino, near Apple's Silicon Valley headquarters, there was an old vine vineyard at the bottom of the mountain, owned by the Piccetti family that made a 1969 Zin from the vines, which experts now surmise had been planted in the 1890s.

"I couldn't believe this grape that I never heard of, never tasted, could be of this quality," he said. His revelation about the quality of old vines came shortly after.

His teachers were old Bordeaux wines — affordable back in the day, he said. "That was when the great wines in the world cost virtually nothing. I mean, first growths were \$35 a bottle when they were 20 years old." He and some friends (using a telex) bid on an 1864 year old Lafite, "And we got it for \$350. It was over years old and it was from the Queen Mother's Castle, Scotland."

After it arrived, they drank it and "it was unbelievably perfect," he said. "It had not faded in the least. The tannins had resolved. I considered it the greatest wine of my life—100 years old. Those wines have an ability to show something extraordinary. So there were instances like that that convinced me [of the value of old vines.]

The Piccetti whet his appetite for more old vine Zin, launching him on a new trajectory. "So in 1969, I started driving up to Sonoma and Mendocino looking for old vineyards," he said. Sonoma had 50 times more old vines than Napa, at the time, he said.

"I started driving around and stopping and introducing myself, finding out if we could buy so many tons and try the vineyard out and so on."

The Ridge team was already working with a vineyard that is still one of its star

attractions to this day — the Geyserville vineyard, planted in the 1890s. "Those wines were just to die for. They were all 19th century vines. Maybe two years ago, they were still absolutely perfect... So that showed the longevity of old vines' potential."

While he waxed on about the glories of old vine zin, he didn't gloss over the trial and error of methodically winnowing out the top old vine

The Ridge team only wanted vineyards that expressed a special character and could be made consistently as single vineyard wines. But single vineyard did not mean single variety as Ridge discovered many old vineyards were planted to field blends, and got a shock. "When we actually sent somebody into the Geyserville vineyard to identify the varieties, we found that there was less than 75% Zinfandel so technically we couldn't call it Zinfandel," he said.

Typically a Zinfandel grower, "complemented the variety with Carignan to give it firmer acidity, and with Petite Sirah, perhaps to enhance the body and the tannins," Draper said. "That combination is one that Ridge maintains today when it plants a new vineyard."

Ridge continues to make a Geyserville wine each year. The 2023 is priced at a modest \$65 in the US.

OLD VINES CONFERENCE

The talk was just the start of the Old Vine Conference which continued on November 1st with a full day of talks in Santa Rosa followed on November 2-4 by old vineyard visits and tastings in Sonoma County,

Contra Costa County and Lodi.

Four hundred wine professionals participated in the 2025 Old Vines conference, a five-day event that celebrated old vines and discussed ways to save the old vines. Scientific evidence from Spain presented during the event validated participants' widespread belief that old vines create deeper aromas and enhanced flavours. ♦



Field blend of Bucklin Old Hill Ranch wine from the Ancient Block established in 1885 Sonoma Valley

vineyards sites and plantings.

"Over 30 years at least we tried out something like a hundred old vine vineyards. At some we would work just one year and drop... We dropped the majority and focused on vineyards that consistently gave us distinctive, individual character from the climate and from the site and those soils."

WINES OF SOUTH AFRICA

Fifty Not Out – Hamilton Russell

Raymond Blake meets Anthony Hamilton Russell in Ireland at the 50th anniversary of one of South Africa's most celebrated wine regions founded by Anthony's father

Thursday, 27th February 1975 may yet come to be remembered as a red-letter day in the history of South African wine, for it was on that day that advertising executive, Tim Hamilton Russell paid 53,000 Rand to purchase 170 hectares of undeveloped land, well removed from the heartland of the South African wine industry formed by the Stellenbosch-Paarl-Franschoek triangle. It was the end of a long search for a cool, southerly site on which to grow the grape varieties for which Hamilton Russell Vineyards is now renowned: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

A little inland from the fishing port of Hermanus, in the appropriately named Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, which translates as Heaven on Earth, lay what was to become one of South Africa's most celebrated wine regions. Heads must surely have been scratched when news broke of the purchase, and it was to be some years before Hamilton Russell's prescience was acknowledged, both at home and abroad.

Fifty years later, to the day, his son, Anthony Hamilton Russell visited Ireland, home of his ancestors, to celebrate the anniversary with a series of tastings and masterclasses, culminating in a dinner that I helped to organise, themed to showcase a selection of his wines.

But what of the half-century book-ended

Few people have done as much as Anthony Hamilton Russell to raise the profile of South African wine in general, through decades spent travelling the globe, and spreading the message

by these dates? The first vintage, 1981, followed six years after the purchase, and a decade later in 1991 Anthony joined his father in the business, before buying him out and taking over completely in 1994. The 30-plus years since have been a period of continuous development and expansion, not only of the **Hamilton Russell** brand but also the associated labels **Southern Right**, launched in 1994, followed by **Ashbourne** in 1996. Keeping them separate right from the beginning was a sensible decision, for it ensured that the main brand was not diluted by its stablemates. Each has been successful but, in addition to those achievements, it can also be argued that few people have done as much as Anthony Hamilton Russell to raise the profile of South African wine in general, through decades spent travelling the globe, spreading the message that South Africa can produce something more refined than the heavy-hoofed wines of yore.

Understandably, most of the plaudits Hamilton Russell receives are for the refined, classic quality of his Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but equally worthy of commendation is his success with Sauvignon Blanc and Pinotage. I might even suggest that his achievement with the latter pair, particularly the Pinotage, outranks his success

with the two Burgundian grapes — an opinion that warrants some explanation.

Around the turn of the century many South African Sauvignons marched to a similar beat, where the nose promised the fresh, zippy flavours that characterise that grape, only for the wines to waddle across the palate in heavy-hoofed fashion. The grape's characteristic bracing acidity was being lost in a sea of overripe sweet fruit. In rugby parlance it was a running back forced to play in the forwards; a big superstructure was piled onto slim foundations, resulting in a wobbly, charmless wine of little merit. Lush and richly textured examples abounded, while there was only a paucity of vibrant, clean wines. Swallowing more than a sip or two of these distorted caricatures was beyond me.

Thankfully, those days are behind us and a slew of contemporary South African Sauvignons now tread with lighter feet, Hamilton Russell's own Southern Right amongst them. It is lively and balanced, managing, Janus-like, to look two ways at once: eastwards to the exuberance of the New Zealand template, and northwards to the more measured, mineral-driven examples from the Loire Valley's Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. It is a delightful wine that disappears out of the glass all-too-quickly. Think crisp fruit, mineral backbone and a moderate level of alcohol and you will get the picture.

If anything, Hamilton Russell's achievement with Pinotage is even greater. This is South Africa's very own grape — a cross between Pinot Noir & Cinsault that celebrated its centenary in 2025. Noted as a hardy, early ripening grape, some might also have regarded it, until recently, as a mongrel variety noted for swingeing, bitter flavours if not properly ripe, and little else. Only the most dextrous hand, in vineyard and winery, can wrest attractive, sweet-fruited charm from it.

Anthony Hamilton Russell once explained his advocacy of the grape to me: "Taking an



Anthony Hamilton Russell (left) and Raymond Blake pictured at Anthony's ancestors' home in Dublin

Hamilton Russell's achievement with Pinotage is even greater. This is South Africa's very own grape — a cross between Pinot Noir & Cinsault

international view of the South African wine industry ... it was inevitable that the wine world would want something from South Africa that it couldn't get from anywhere else. Pinotage existed as a grape and I was fascinated with the idea of trying to do something dramatic and special with it. There were sufficient great examples of it in existence, beautiful Lanzerac wines from the mid-sixties, that were long lived ... to show that the grape had amazing potential. We may have lost our way with it stylistically for a whole period of time, but I was convinced that something great and more classically styled could be made." He was right.

HAMILTON RUSSELL WINES

HAMILTON RUSSELL WINEYARDS

The Chardonnay and Pinot Noir have long been regarded as some of the best new world examples of these grapes, noted for restraint over power, style over structure, and intensity over concentration. The estate is like a pocket of Burgundy in South Africa. After Anthony took over in 1994 extensive soil analysis was carried out to identify the ideal locations for the vineyards, resulting in 52 hectares of the original 170 being planted today.

Chardonnay This is a suave, polished wine that exudes easy elegance. A firm mineral core is wrapped with softer, light tropical fruit elements, all held by a seam of fresh acidity. The texture is suave rather than lush and the palate resolves into a clean, reverberating finish.

Pinot Noir takes skill and dedication to release the genie from the Pinot grape. This one is a delight, intense but never heavy, with a delicious fruity tingle. Background smoky/earthy notes add complexity without

overwhelming the fruit. A little spice and savour add nuance and harmony.

SOUTHERN RIGHT

Southern Right takes its name from the Southern Right Whale, which is depicted on the label of every bottle and whose presence, in season close to shore, makes Hermanus the number one spot in the world for whale watching from land. The large property stretches to 448 hectares and if funds don't stretch to the 'big brother' Hamilton Russell wines this

Aerial view of Hemel-en-Aarde Valley, one of South Africa's most celebrated wine regions



Hamilton Russell Vineyards and the associated labels Southern Right and Ashbourne

pair make for worthy substitutes.

Sauvignon Blanc An essay in balance, this wine is never shouty thanks to the potentially strident Sauvignon flavours being held in check by careful vinification. It is a crowd pleaser, in the sense that it will have broad appeal, not that it should be consigned to inattentive quaffing at a large gathering.

Pinotage A lighter iteration of the Ashbourne, less compelling, though more immediately refreshing. It is a simple wine, in that it is not complex, and should be served a little cool to keep a 'polish' on the perky flavours. southernright.co.za

ASHBOURNE WINES

The Ashbourne property is situated right next door to the Hamilton Russell vineyards in the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley. Where exuberance might be the calling card of the Southern Right label, restraint and, above all, age-ability, are the twin pillars upon which Ashbourne has

established its reputation.

Sandstone blend Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon/Chardonnay

Sauvignon is the dominant variety here, with 66%, followed by roughly equal parts of Semillon (18%) and Chardonnay (16%). On the palate the fruit plays second fiddle to a textured, saline quality that cries out to be cellared for at least five years. Only then will the elements have settled and integrated.

Pinotage 'Redefining Pinotage' proclaims the website homepage – a bold statement rendered in upper case letters for added emphasis. Thankfully the wine lives up to this hype. It is a remarkably good wine, a below-the-radar treat that deserves to be better known. Its reputation, by no means poor, will surely be further burnished as the world gets to know its rich though not oppressive flavours. It may yet challenge the Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir for top spot in Anthony's portfolio. ashbournewines.com

And Finally, A Family Tale...

As an aside, students of 20th century European history will be fascinated by the story of Violet Gibson, Anthony Hamilton Russell's great, grand aunt. She was the daughter of Lord Ashbourne, who served several terms as Lord Chancellor of Ireland in the late 1800's. Rebelling against her family background, she converted to Catholicism and went to live in Italy. There, on 7th April 1926 she shot prime minister Benito Mussolini at close range, the bullet grazing his nose. On her second attempt at assassination the gun jammed and he survived. Having always suffered from mental instability she spent the remainder of her life in a British psychiatric hospital, forgotten about until recently when a plaque to her memory was placed on her former family home in Dublin's Merrion Square. It was unveiled in October 2022 and commemorates Gibson as "a committed anti-fascist". ♦

PASO ROBLES

Rising Star Cabernet Sauvignon

Paso Robles is stepping confidently into the spotlight with Cabernets of Napa-level quality, but at half the price, says *Mira Advani Honeycutt*



Selection of top Cabernet Sauvignons from Paso Robles, a rapidly growing wine region along California's Central Coast

California's Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon has long held pride of place in the global wine market. It is a wine everyone knows. But there's a new kid on the block — Paso Robles, a burgeoning wine region along California's Central Coast.

Home to some 200 wineries, Paso Cabs are rapidly gaining recognition thanks to the high scores they are receiving from wine critics and their ability to lure Cab lovers with both approachability and pedigree. Generous and fruit forward with a plush texture, these are certainly enjoyable, "drink now" wines. Yet the best Paso vineyards also deliver wines with the same structure, depth and age-ability traditionally associated with Napa Valley.

The region may or may not dethrone Napa from its spot at the top, but Paso Cabs are certainly giving it competition. Cab connoisseurs may soon be whispering PasoCab in the same breath as NapaCab.

Based on data from Circana (a global technology and data company that provides market research to brands) for the 52-week period ending 12 May 2024, Paso Robles is currently the second-largest appellation for luxury Cabernet Sauvignon, accounting for 21.5% of dollar sales. It is also seeing the third-largest growth in dollar sales, at 11%.

Paso shares similarities with noted Cab regions. It has Bordeaux's calcareous soil and Napa's sunny weather. Although hotter than Napa, Paso is blessed with its proximity to the ocean which creates dramatic diurnal shifts that swing from scorching daytime highs of 37°C to a chilly 10°C at night. This provides a longer hang time, allowing grapes to reach full maturity while retaining balanced acidity.

The uniqueness of Paso Cabs lies in its terroir, an exceptional topography that spans 11 sub-appellations, from the cool westside fanned by ocean breezes to the warmer eastside. Elevation can scale up to 2,200 feet. The diversity of some 30 soil series, including calcareous, clay, sandy, loam and silica, has

encouraged the planting of a whopping 60 different grape varieties over 40,000 acres. Yet Cabernet Sauvignon rules, accounting for 49% of plantings.

These elements combined offer winemakers a virtual spice box for crafting complex and structured Cabs — sun-drenched, rich and opulent with black fruit and cassis, expressing taut and muscular tannins, yet maintaining an elegance through a balanced acidity.

Paso Cabs came on the radar when JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery's founder Justin Baldwin received a 90-plus score from noted wine critic Robert Parker Jr. for his 1987 Reserve Cabernet. A banker and weekend winemaker, Baldwin's love for Bordeaux wines brought him to Paso after exploring Napa and Sonoma.

"Paso and Cabs were made for each other," declared Paso legend Gary Eberle, one of the first to plant Cabernet Sauvignon in the region. He planted about 160 acres at the old Estrella winery in 1973, which grew to 700 acres. In 1983 he established his namesake

Paso Robles is currently the second-largest appellation for luxury Cabernet Sauvignon, accounting for 21.5% of dollar sales. It is also seeing the third-largest growth in dollar sales, at 11%

Paso Pioneers, Gary Eberle seated left and Jerry Lohr on the right. Standing left, Niels Udsen and Lawrence Lohr, right





Karl Wittstrom, co-founder of Ancient Peaks Winery at the Margarita Vineyard planted by the well-known Napa vintner, Robert Mondavi in 2000

winery which continues to gather barrels of awards for Cab and other varieties.

“I’m very biased, but I think the Cabs coming out of Paso from good producers are as good as anything in the state of California,” he added. “They’re more fruit forward and, when well-made, better balanced than a lot of Cabs out of Napa that tend to be on the bombastic side, tannic and heavier.”

Paso’s unique terroir for Bordeaux varieties was recognized by Napa’s own Cab guru, the late Robert Mondavi. After buying Cab from

his friend Eberle for several years, in 2000 he leased a portion of the sprawling 14,000-acre Santa Margarita Ranch in the southernmost part of Paso’s AVA in 2000. A land rooted in ancient seabed soils and influenced by cool marine air funneled through the Santa Lucia Mountain range. He planted the 1,000-acre Margarita Vineyard predominantly to Bordeaux varieties. When the Robert Mondavi Winery was sold in 2005, the vineyard eventually reverted to its three partners, who then launched Ancient Peaks Winery.

“What sets Paso apart is its remarkable diversity of soils and climates,” commented Karl Wittstrom, one of Ancient Peaks partners. “The terrain creates Cabernets that balance richness with freshness.”

Comparing Napa and Paso Cabs, Ancient Peaks’ founding winemaker Mike Sinor commented: “Paso Cab is a wine that mirrors Napa’s refinement and longevity yet speaks with its own voice – bright, balanced, and unmistakably Paso with a sense of place.”

Yet an identity crisis took hold of the nascent wine region back then. First Zinfandel, then Syrah and other Rhône varieties laid claim to being Paso’s star attraction. Nevertheless, Cabernet remained the area’s most planted variety, though much of its fruit wound up in Napa Valley Cabs. (Yes, that is legal.)

As Paso Cabs were gathering kudos, along came brothers Daniel and George Daou. They shifted Bordeaux-style blends into high gear when they established the Daou Family Estate in 2007 (now owned by Treasury Wine Estates). They transformed the Adelaida District’s steep 200-acre expanse of earth and wild grass into 120-acres of Bordeaux plantings. Founding winemaker Daniel Daou gave Paso Cabernet an elevated profile, crafting structured wines layered with velvety fruit, framed with powerful tannins and a richness that glides across the palate.

Meanwhile, passionate local Cab growers

and winemakers decided that they had had enough of the region’s identity crisis. In 2012, they founded the non-profit Paso Robles CAB Collective – the CAB standing for Cabernet and Bordeaux – in the belief that Paso has perfected some of the best red Bordeaux varieties in the world. The organization was the brainchild of the Daou brothers joined by local Cab growers. Soon even die-hard Rhône-style grape growers were adding Cabernet to their vineyards to ride the “Cab sells” bandwagon.

I recently met with Eberle and his longtime friend, another Paso legend, Jerry Lohr at Eberle Winery. As we savoured an Eberle 2023 Cab, Lohr recalled that one of Gary’s Cabs had so impressed him in the 1970s that he decided to

Paso Cab is a wine that mirrors Napa’s refinement and longevity yet speaks with its own voice – bright, balanced, and unmistakably Paso

expand his vineyard operations to Paso.

Jerry Lohr, founder of J. Lohr Vineyards & Winery, first planted Burgundian varieties in Monterey County (north of Paso Robles) in the early 1970s before beginning his Bordeaux plantings on Paso’s Eastside in 1986, increasing his total vineyard acreage to 3,000 acres. J. Lohr’s popular Seven Oaks Cab, priced at an affordable US\$15, serves as the winery’s workhorse, accounting for over a million cases of its 1.6-million case annual production (with a small portion bottled as high-end Cabs). With global distribution in 44 countries and a portfolio of 41 estate wines, the J. Lohr brand ranks as the 21st largest family-owned winery in the US.

Paso Robles’ identity is clearly more focused

J. Lohr Vineyards planted on Paso’s Eastside in 1986 with a total acreage of 3,000 acres





Doug Ayers, proprietor of Allegretto Vineyards, pictured with a bin of harvested grapes. Below: Castoro Cellars Vineyard – Cab plantings account for half of Castoro's 1,600-acre vineyard, considered the largest certified organic vineyard along the Central Coast



today. "People come here for Cabs," said Austin Hope, owner of Hope Family Wines known both for Rhône-style blends and Cabs. The defining characteristics of his Cabs are "our tannin profile," he said in a phone conversation. "They are more fine, grainy and long, not abrupt."

Distributed in 55 countries, with a portfolio of six brands, the Hope Family Wines winery produces 800,000 cases annually, including 600,000 cases of Cab. A selection of its cabs, priced between US\$15 to \$65, will soon be available in India. When comparing Napa and Paso Cabs Hope noted that "Napa tends to be a bit more savoury and firmer on tannins; ours has more fruit characteristics and long integrated tannins."

"We started seeing people love Cab and we followed them," Niels Udsen told me at his winery Castoro Cellars, where initial Zinfandel plantings were soon joined by Bordeaux varieties. Now, Cab plantings take up half of the 1,600-acre vineyard which is considered the largest certified organic vineyard along the Central Coast, and makes up half of its 50,000 annual-case production. "Paso Cabs are fruit-forward and come across friendly, not super tannic," Udsen added.

"They tend to age well. We have wines from the 1980s that taste very well."

For many years, Napa producers quietly sourced Cabernet grapes from Paso growers to blend into their Napa Cabs. Today, they're allowed to blend only 15% from other regions to maintain Napa AVA designation. Paso fruit has so captivated Napa vintners for its quality and value, that several have launched second brands crafted from Paso fruit, including Decoy Limited from Duckhorn, Bezel from Cakebread Cellars and Textbook by Pey Family.

"The Paso programme was a no-brainer for us," remarked Textbook winemaker Abigail Estrada, "It's an affordable luxury." Priced at US\$27 a bottle, it's sourced from across Paso's sub-appellations, quite the contrast to Napa Textbook Cabs which are priced from \$45 to \$80. "It's juicy and lush, take it home and enjoy it tonight and don't feel guilty about it," Estrada commented. Which is not to discount its age-ability. She suggested 5 to 10 years. Paso Cab takes up half of Textbook Cab's total annual case production of 30,000. "It's amazing to see it take off. Our timing is good in this wine industry slump."

Duckhorn launched its Decoy Limited Paso Cab in 2022, priced at \$30 and produced from its estate vineyard in Paso's San Miguel appellation. Similarly, targeting a younger market, Cakebread released its Bezel Paso Cab priced at \$29.99 nationwide in 2025. "Younger drinkers were looking for something high-quality and delicious," said winemaker Jane Dunkley in an email.

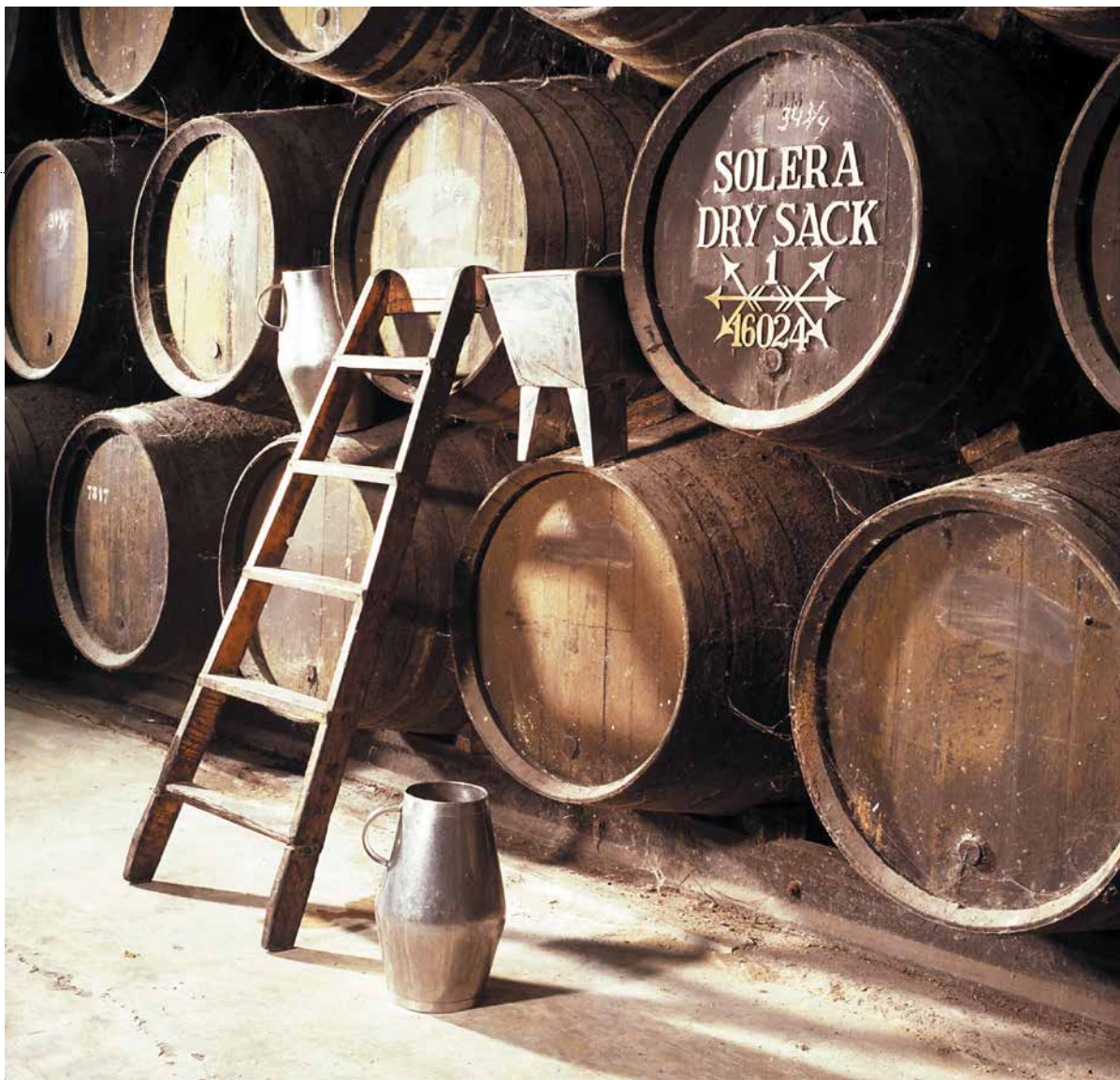
For Dunkley, the draw to Paso lies in its long growing season and wide diurnal swings during ripening. "[Paso Cabernet] tends to be a bit more red fruit forward with plush textures, warm spice and a dried herbal lift (bay-leaf) that is characteristic of the region," she wrote. "It delivers quality without complication – vibrant and made to fit



Austin Hope of Hope Family vineyards, known for Rhône-style blends and Cabs

seamlessly into everyday life."

Paso's noted winegrower Bill Gibbs put it this way: "No one is ever going to confuse Paso Cabs with Napa in a blind tasting because they are wines made in different places. But you get the same quality for half the price and that's very attractive. By that I mean the same scores from the same critics. I'm not opposed to an incredible value. So that makes the Cabs of Paso a huge value to someone who is into high quality wines." ♦



Solera of dry sack sherry. The solera system is a pyramid arrangement of barrels with the oldest sherry in the bottom row

The Enduring Charm of Sherry

Spain's long-lived fortified sherries are coming back in vogue as fresh food wines, states **Carol Wright**

Sherry, the fortified wine produced from white grapes around the city of Jerez de la Frontera in Andalusia in southern Spain, is noted for its longevity. Wine has been made in the area since 1100 BC. The recent archeological excavations in the area have unearthed a white wine in a burial urn dating back 2,000 years, making it the world's oldest surviving wine. The previous record holder was a 1,700-year-old wine discovered in Germany.

Columbus and Magellan on their voyages of discovery stocked their ships with sherry.

In 1587 Francis Drake boosted exports by looting 3,000 barrels of sherry (the equivalent of 1,740,000 bottles) after sacking Cádiz. By 1771 the top sherry vineyards had been documented long before Bordeaux charted theirs. In the 19th century, sherry was one of the world's most important wines. But in the 1970s over production of a cheaper "cooking sherry" led to a decline in its fortunes. Vineyards were ripped out and their area diminished from 22,000 hectares in 1978 to around 7,000 ha today.

The sherry vineyards around Jerez de la Frontera lie on chalky soil or *albariza* baked under summer temperatures exceeding 40°C. However, the area is close to the cooling influence of the sea, producing an effect summed up beautifully in a poem by British poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, who said that sherry "puts the mouth in mind of the sea". British poet laureates, by royal decree, receive part of their payment in sherry, and Duffy's stock of sherry carries this phrase on her bottle labels. In the past, sherry vineyards were never rated, spoken about or visited. There were no vineyard vistas on labels just company names.

Although sherry's popularity is declining and sommeliers often find it difficult to interest clients in it before, after, or even with a meal, it remains at the heart of production in Jerez. One producer even considered putting sherry in wine bottles and serving it in wine glasses, as opposed to the traditional small, slender flute called copita. The young in Spain drink *rebujito* or sherry mixed with lemonade. In Britain, Croft Twist is popular, a canned sparkling fino sherry of elderflower, lemon and mint cordials.

Amid efforts to preserve traditional sherry, local wine producers are making still white wines from sherry grapes and extending the varieties grown. Though still without a DO classification, and known by the old term of *vinos de pasto*, or food-friendly wines, they are becoming more widely recognised and are helping to secure sherry's future. Meanwhile, sherry continues to hold the affection of Jerez locals. It is a comforting wine for them, drunk mid-morning with biscuits in the *bodegas* housed on streets narrowed against the heat. The *bodegas* are like little villages that once housed workers. Gonzalez Byass recently converted several workers' houses into a boutique hotel called the Tio Pepe. The *bodegas*, although centres of wine production, are hospitable, offering tours and tastings. Highlights are the Tio Pepe Cellars' and the horse show. into a boutique hotel called the

Tio Pepe. Gonzalez Byass commemorates Tio Pepe (Uncle Jo) who in 1841 created what is now the world's best-selling fino sherry, named in his honour.

A bachelor, Uncle Jo hosted friends in his private cellar and trained mice to climb little rope ladders for a drop of sherry. These days a glass of sherry and a piece of cheese are put out each night for the cellar mice. At Williams and Humbert, the massive bodega now owned by the Medina family, of which Paola Medina is winemaker and master blender, includes a fully equipped equestrian centre, dressage arena and exhibition ring seating 500 people, where weekly shows are held.

Amid efforts to preserve traditional sherry, local wine producers are making still white wines from sherry grapes and extending the varieties grown

Dating from around the second half of the 19th century, the *bodegas* rise to a height of 15 metres. Their height provides a cushion of protective air over the barrels which helps counter the effects of global warming while creating a cool microclimate that needs no intensive cooling systems. Within these dark caverns, the sherry ages in 600 litre oak barrels under a covering of flor, a natural yeast. Many barrels are signed by celebrity visitors, from the Beatles to Martin Luther King, while others once sold on to Scottish whisky distillers, have now become an important financial asset.

Sherry consistency is achieved using the solera system; a pyramid arrangement of barrels with the oldest in the bottom row. Successive years of younger vintages are placed in rows above with the youngest at the top. The wine is taken from the bottom row for bottling and the barrels are topped up from the row above, a process continuing up the rows.

Julian Jeffs, one of the world's leading authorities on sherry, says in his classic book, "Sherry", published in the 1960s, "Sherry is a very perverse wine; until it is fully mature, no one can tell quite how it will develop... no two butts will turn out exactly alike." For this reason, the wines in barrel are constantly watched and regularly sampled.

Sampling sherry in cask is no easy task. Balancing on the top solera rows needs the agility of acrobats. To get the wine out of the barrels, a venencia is used. This is a metre long flexible stem (originally made of whalebone, now plastic) with a hook at one end to prevent it slipping into the barrel, and a slim 50cc cup at the other (once silver now stainless steel). Pushed through the cask's bung hole, it is dipped down through the flor layer to scoop up a flor free sample. Once out, the sherry is poured in an arm high stream into a narrow topped copita glass without spilling a single drop. This extremely skilled operation aerates the sherry, releasing its aromas before it hits the glass so that clarity and smell can be judged and marked on the cask.

The different styles of sherry developed in the soleras derive mainly from the Palomino grape that flourishes in the chalky albariza soil. Pedro Ximénez and Muscatel grapes are also used. Of the many shades of sherry, fino is the palest, light and varying in dryness. Fino can develop into nutty flavoured Amontillado, deeper in colour and aged in cask for eight years. Palo Cortado is darker still, crisp and costly. Oloroso is the darkest, often blended with sweet wine to create sherries known as Creams. Pedro Ximénez is mahogany shaded and sweet white Manzanilla, made in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, is dry, aromatic with a salty tang. Vintage sherries are those harvested separately and aged in sealed, tamper-proof casks. Prized is the 30-year or older, VORS (Very Old Rare Sherry). En Rama sherries, meanwhile, are unclassified and unfiltered, drawn fresh from the cask each year.

A basic pairing guide is fino with soups, salads, ham and vinegary foods; amontillado with spicier dishes; oloroso with richly sauced meats; and Pedro Ximénez with puddings and strong cheeses. Sherry can be drunk through the meal. As Williams and Humbert state, "We work to promote the consumption of these

"We work to promote the consumption of these wines as table wines, not only as aperitif wines. Sherry has proved to be a wine of enormous versatility. There is a sherry for each dish"

wines as table wines, not only as aperitif wines. Sherry has proved to be a wine of enormous versatility. There is a sherry for each dish."

At the same time, change is coming to sherry: new grape varieties can be grown, and vineyard areas extended. Grape varieties of the early 20th century such as Perruno and Uva Rey are being revived. A group of nine producers; Territorio Albarizo (named for the area's white chalky soil) is behind the restoration of early 20th century viticultural ideas. Emphasis is back on the vineyards among which the most noted are Macharnudo, Miraflores and Carrascal. Interestingly, before the mid 20th century, Jerez wines were not always fortified.

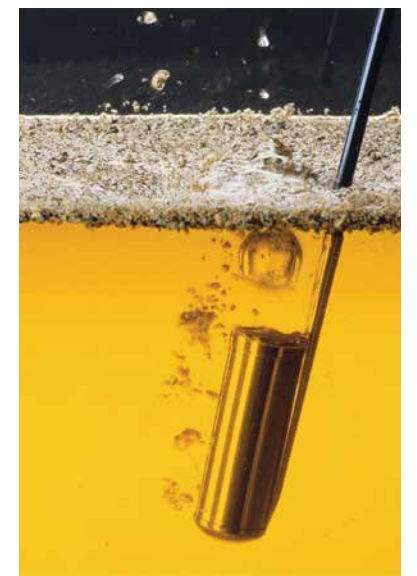
Territorio Albarizo believes unfortified wine is the way to express terroir. Attention is now given to vineyards, with names now appearing on labels of hand crafted unfortified wines. These can have a lower alcohol content compared to the mandatory 15% for sherry, and the "new" wines have drawn comparison with white burgundies, although these new wines represent a very small portion of the area's wine production. The chalky nature of the soil makes itself felt in the freshness and "chalky mouthfeel".

Some producers leave a portion of the grapes to dry in the sun, adding greater complexity and layered texture on the palate. Along with stainless steel tanks, old sherry casks are also used for ageing, imparting a faint hint of sherry into the wines. The Palomino grape remains the leading source of juice for both sherry and the newer wines. As Tim Holt, export manager at Barbadillo put it "Palomino is a very malleable grape. It's like tofu. You can do what you like with it."

Its flexibility and ability to cope with the area's fierce summers and chalky terroir means producers can craft both long-lived fortified sherries as well as "food wines" that are fresh without being acidic, and they may well provide the commercial clout to keep sherry in business. ❖



Some producers leave a portion of the grapes to dry in the sun, adding greater complexity and layered texture



Above: The cathedral like interior of a sherry bodega; right, sherry samples collected from below the covering of natural yeast or flor
Bottom: A classic pairing of ham with fino sherry; right, below: harvesting sherry grapes from chalky albariza soil



Dare to Dream in Pink

The Mirabeau story in Provence sounds like a fairy tale, but behind the scenes lies a very different tale – one of struggle and risk-taking says **Ruma Singh**

Over 20 years ago, Stephen Cronk was based in his London home with a thriving career in the telecom sector. He had three young children with his German-born wife, Jeany, and life was just dandy. Then it all changed.

The 2008 economic crisis hit the UK and it got Stephen thinking about a change. Which involved leaving the safety of his corporate life to take a life-changing risk for himself and his family and a 180-degree career change – liquidating all his assets and a move to a new country, France – all to make wine.

Fast forward 15 years, and today Maison Mirabeau is feted as a classic Provence rosé and a global success. But the story begins many years before this shift. Stephen fell in love with wine during a gap-year in Australia, something he knew little about.

“I didn’t come from a family particularly interested in wine so I had no connection to it and everything to learn. During my travels, I not only discovered that I enjoyed wine, I became passionate about its sense of place and its people.”

Stephen decided to return to the UK to look for work in the wine industry and started a distribution business, selling wine to restaurants and clubs in London for a time, before returning to the fast-growing tech sector. “I wanted to start a family and build my financial capital,” he confesses.

When Stephen was offered a promotion, he decided to ask for redundancy instead. His wife Jeany played a role in this decision. Jeany had spent her childhood summers in the south of France where her family had a second home and where she developed a love of the southern lifestyle and everything pale pink, drinking

rosé from the Cote d’Azur.

Jeany became convinced rosé had a future beyond being just a summer holiday wine. Both husband and wife were curious to see what life would be like in the rural hillside of Provence, beyond St Tropez. The timing proved right. Provence was in the midst of a fast-developing rosé boom, a wine region that offered the couple a perfect mix of the historic and the modern. “We felt that it would suit us well as newcomers, and give us the opportunity to make an accessible luxury range that we felt the UK market was missing.” Of course, it was not rosés all the way. The early days were difficult and full of struggle, Stephen recounts.

“Our children did not speak French at all, and they had to adapt without their friends to a new school system. The admin was almost insurmountable and the standard answer I got was, “Non, monsieur,” but the silver lining came through “awesome and unexpected breaks.” The children made friends quickly, Jeany joined the school parents committee and they met people who understood their vision and introduced them to potential growers and bottling partners. Angela Muir MW joined the team to oversee quality and blending operations, which helped them maintain high standards, essential for the premium market they were targeting.

How did Mirabeau get its name? After a lot of research, admits Stephen. The name broadly translates to “beautiful view” and is well known in Provence, as it’s also the name of a local aristocrat, the Comte de Mirabeau, who was a prominent member of the National Assembly for Aix-en-Provence. “We loved the meaning. Provence has gorgeous views, plus the wines are so visually appealing in their luminous



Stephen and Jeany Cronk who left London to follow their dream of producing rosé wine in France

pink colour,” says Jeany. “To our surprise we found it wasn’t trademarked so we got the all clear in a matter of months.”

Maison Mirabeau launched its first cuvée, Mirabeau Classic in the UK in 2011 with the 2010 vintage which was a major milestone. The launch was a success gaining a loyal following in the UK, and expanding eventually to other countries. “We called it just ‘Mirabeau’ And since 90% of Provence’s production is dedicated to rosé winemaking, we decided to specialise in specific styles of rosés and stay away from other styles.”

Life proved to be hectic from the get-go, confessed Stephen. “There weren’t any restful periods in the early years, but we understood

Provence was in the midst of a fast-developing rosé boom, a wine region that offered the couple a perfect mix of the historic and the modern

that early days are always make or break.”

They grabbed every opportunity that presented itself with both hands in terms of PR and innovation. Some very unusual tactics, Stephen explains, included “turning up in London in my battered 2CV to sell wine at festivals, inviting journalists to the office in our spare room and feeding them with our three young kids at the terrace dinner table.”

Success came slowly but steadily, and within three years they were looking at producing their next cuvée, Pure. Then came another bold step – the decision to rapidly expand their portfolio even as their business was still growing. “We had a lot of energy,” Stephen says, “and we were excited by the trends we could see crystallising, from newer formats to

lower alcohol wines, including spirits.”

Mirabeau pioneered the launch of its pink gin at a time when the trend was just taking off. It was the fastest growing gin in the UK when it launched, inspired by the range of flora in Provence that offered the opportunity to make something distinctive.

“We were pioneers in many of today’s well-accepted innovations, sometimes so early that it didn’t really work until the rest of the market caught up,” he admits. Their canned rosé is now very successful but it didn’t really pick up until three years after the launch. “We realised we needed to be more precise and there was no point innovating for the sake of it. So we are really careful with what we do now, and what we leave for another day.”

Being at the right place at the right time played an important role, too, Stephen says. “We very clearly hit the zeitgeist with the Provence style at the right time, with a lighter, more visual, more fun and accessible product than traditional French wine.”

The Provençal pale rosé offers quality, yet is easy to understand and suits creative branding. Provence contains some of the coolest wine places in the south of France within its borders, so Jeany and Stephen had little doubt that the “specialness” and appeal of these products was here to stay. “The fact that large luxury beverage companies and winemakers have adopted the style indicates that it is no passing fad.”

A question consumers often ask is why Provence rosés are so expensive.

“Provence rosés tend to be pale, fresh and highly aromatic,” Stephen says, “a quality that has often been copied but rarely matched by others. It’s an expensive and time-consuming process to maintain this standard. We are also in a region with very high land and human capital costs, so it’s not possible to make wine ‘cheaply’ here.”

Vineyards in Provence are not very large



The Mirabeau portfolio comprises a variety of rosé wine styles and gin

compared to other successful regions. Yet, on the scale of finer wines, Provence rosé is very accessible and can be an everyday pleasure with real quality.

“The darker and more structured styles are fairly rare here,” Stephen points out. “Although some houses ferment and age their wine in oak, often with a high percentage of Vermentino, the white variety we are allowed to co-ferment in our rosés. Our own estate wine, Mirabeau La Reserve, is fermented and aged in oak, using 500-litre barrels that have been lightly toasted and some very special 225-litre barrels, toasted using lava and jade stones.”

Stephen is very proud of this more complex and expressive wine, which is served with stronger flavours such as roasted meats and cheese, and not overly chilled. “These are styles for wine lovers who want to explore the possibilities for rosé, and not necessarily for everyone,” he says.

Consumers often think that rosés make

Provence rosés tend to be pale, fresh and highly aromatic, a quality that has often been copied but rarely matched by others



Hands-on in all aspects of the business, Stephen and Jeany work with the team during the blending process



Stephen and Jeany taste barrel samples of their wine as it ages in the cellar

for pleasant drinking, but cannot be taken seriously as a wine style, unlike whites, reds and sparkling wines. Stephen's take was that it's usually the wine trade that did not take rosé seriously. "Of course, within all colours there exist wines that are made industrial-style or are uninteresting to drink, and rosé is no exception." So while rosés are rarely aged, they are technically possible to age as rosé champagnes show.

Stephen says, "We know a fair few very accomplished wine consumers who love a Provence rosé when the moment is right and Provence pretty much has a place now on every wine menu. It's only a matter of time before the rosé style evolves, but its sweet spot will probably always be as a young and joyful wine."

Having developed an exciting wine and lifestyle business, the Cronks are also very interested in building a brand that supports a better world. A devastating wildfire that swept

through 7,000 hectares of the Var region, including part of their own vineyards in 2021, has underlined the urgency to move forward.

"To that end we have achieved B Corp status and farm regeneratively at our own estate, as well as slowly converting our grape growers to regenerative farming," Stephen says. "We know it will help with the challenges of climate change and will contribute towards a better equilibrium. We believe that there is real joy in drinking something that you know is made in a way that is truly in tune with nature." ♦

GETTING THERE

The estate, Domaine Mirabeau is near the historic village of La Garde-Freinet, Golfe de Saint Tropez, Provence, about 1¼–1½ hours by road from Nice Côte d'Azur Airport and 1¼ hours from Marseille-Provence Airport. Its location makes a convenient base for exploring the French Riviera, while staying away from its crowds and coastline bustle.
Access: Car recommended for visiting the estate and exploring the surrounding wine region

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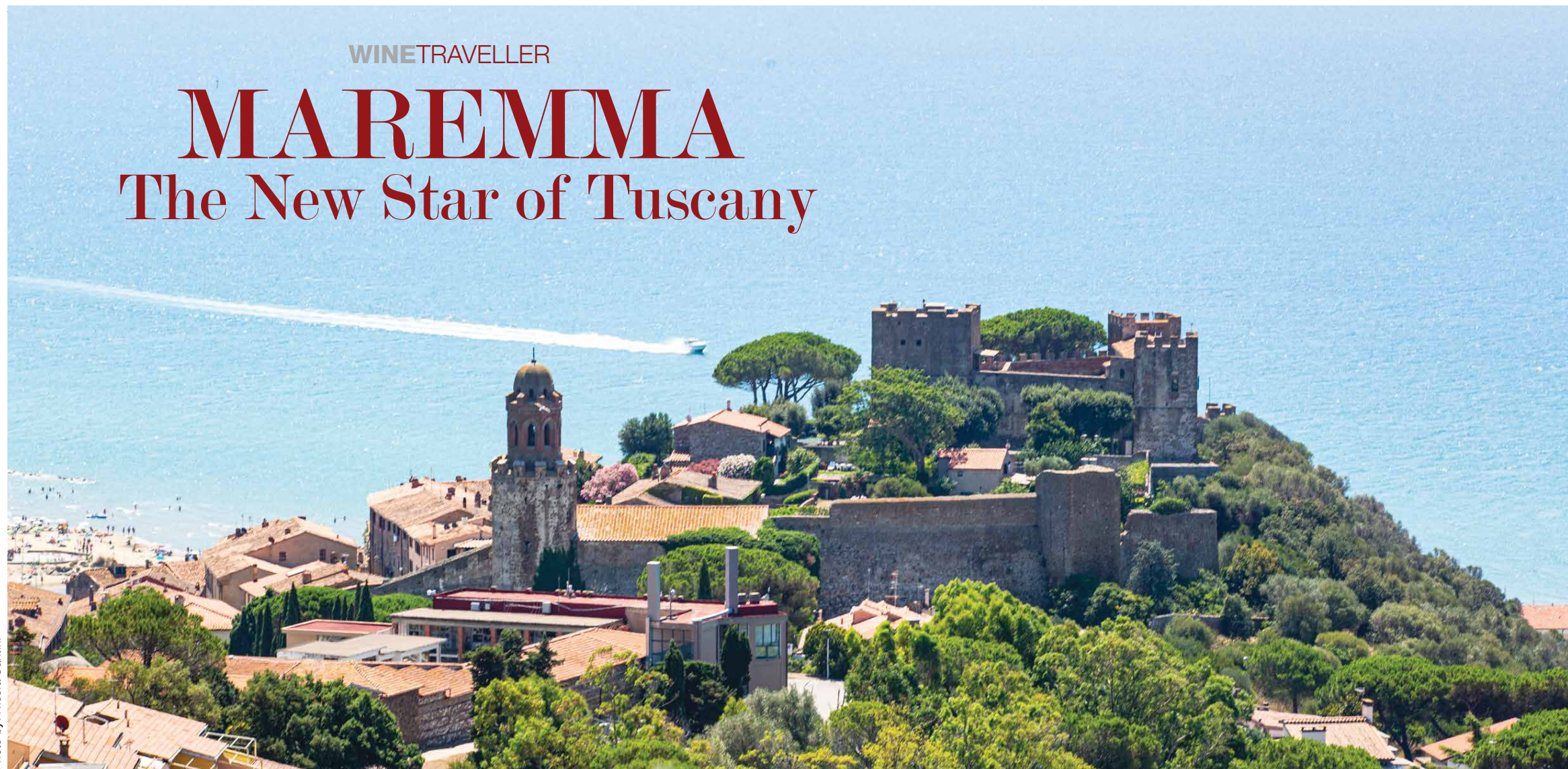
VIOGNER
CHENIN BLANC
SAUVIGNON BLANC
RIESLING
LATE HARVEST
MERLOT
CABERNET SHIRAZ
SHIRAZ
ROSÉ

WINETRAVELLER

MAREMMA

The New Star of Tuscany

Photo by: Nicola Santini



Long overshadowed by its famous Tuscan neighbours, Maremma is a region worth visiting not only for its remarkable wines and cuisine but also its natural beauty and unspoilt landscapes, writes **Gargi Guha**

Tuscan Maremma is a poetry of land, sea, nature, culture and history, I think to myself. Vast stretches of cultivated land, dense with vines fill my line of vision. A soft sea breeze gently cradles a sun-drenched August morning. The air is crisp with a whisper of salinity from the coast, which I discover later, translates beautifully into the wines, especially the white Vermentino.

I am at Le Mortelle estate located in the heart of lower Maremma in Tuscany, not far from the town of Castiglione della Pescaia. Le Mortelle, named after the estate's symbol, the wild myrtle – a fragrant shrub that grows along the coast of Maremma – is owned by the formidable Marchesi Antinori, one of the oldest family businesses that go f back nearly 700 years. The property consists of 270 hectares, 175 of which are planted to vineyards. The

The town of Castiglione della Pescaia in Maremma

winery is a seamless convergence of tradition and modern architecture, built partially underground to reduce environmental impact, and its cylindrical three-level structure is a design masterpiece.

A marvel called Maremma Stretching along Tuscany's southern coast, Maremma was once an untamed land of marshes and Mediterranean scrub, which has emerged as one of Italy's most captivating wine regions. Maremma is where ancient traditions meet a restless, modern energy. Here, vineyards roll down to the Tyrrhenian Sea tempered by the sun's intensity, and share space with olive

orchards and woodlands. The area is free from the ravages of over-industrialisation. There's a certain coastal ruggedness to Maremma that seeps into its wines. The terroir is a study in contrast: volcanic soils rich in minerals, limestone hillsides and sandy plains, all yield wines of surprising depth and elegance. Sangiovese, locally known as Morellino, finds a softer, more sensual expression here. It is **lush** with ripe red fruit, yet grounded in earthy minerality. Well-known international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah thrive in Maremma, producing bold blends with a distinctly Tuscan soul. Interestingly, although Maremma is bigger, it existed quietly in the shadow of the better-known Bolgheri.

Bolgheri gained cult status in the 1970s when premium, expensive red wines that did not adhere strictly to traditional, Italian DOC/DOCG regulations like Tignanello created by Antinori in 1971 and Sassicaia from Tenuta San Guido, became famous under the luminous brand called "Super Tuscan". Anyone of importance in the wine world took notice of Bolgheri and its immense potential, while Maremma went unnoticed.

Quietly thriving in the shade of such fame, Maremma was considered a wild area for quality winemaking. While it may lack the pointed refinement of Bolgheri, it is now producing some noteworthy wines with international varieties as well as a range of local wines such as high-quality Vermentino and the signature, Morellino di Scansano DOCG.

Morellino di Scansano – a gift of terroir Bold and **lush** fruits leap out of Morellino di Scansano, the flagship wine of Maremma, where the lead variety is 85% Sangiovese, along with other non-aromatic Tuscan black grapes. The Morellino di Scansano wines that featured in the Gambero Rosso Vini d'Italia 2025 guide represent the terroir of coastal

southern Tuscany, showcasing a fresh, rustic, and fruity character such as **Morellino di Scansano Madrechiesa Riserva '21**, a well structured 100% Sangiovese with a bouquet of red berries, herbs and spices while the **Morellino di Scansano Riserva 2020** by the MorisFarm company combines notes of myrtle, which abound in these parts, with spices and floral hints. The **Morellino Vigna Bersagliere Riserva '18** packs in a full spectrum of ripe red fruit aromas with subtle notes of freshly wilted flowers and smoky undertones.

The ancient flavours of sea and land Maremma's success is not just confined to viticulture and wine. An Etruscan and Roman treasure trove, the whole of Maremma is rich in ancient heritage. And no where is this more evident than in its cuisine

An Etruscan and Roman treasure trove, the whole of Maremma is rich in ancient heritage. And no where is this more evident than in its cuisine

lamb dish, made more aromatic with the use of junipers, rosemary, thyme and other local herbs. Another dish that is quintessentially Maremma, is **Acquacotta**, or cooked water. This is a humble broth-based, bread soup that was originally peasant food, but is now a beloved local staple. Made out of stale bread, beans, tomatoes, onions, eggs and pecorino cheese, Acquacotta was a quick-fix meal for travelling shepherds and fishermen.

Originally from the town of Pitigliano, **Tortello Dolce di Pitigliano**, is a delicious sweet, puff pastry filled with ricotta, sugar and herbs, which is baked or fried. Another dish from here, especially popular in the Jewish community is the **Sfratto di Pitigliano**, a biscuit with orange zest and a sticky, honey-walnut toffee filling.

Natural wonders Beyond the vineyards, the region's natural formations hold immense appeal for visitors, drawn by the unspoilt beauty of this region. The first place to soak up the beauty of the abounding greenery is Maremma Park, also known as the **Regional Park of the Uccellina**, which spans the

Uccellina hills. Covering 17,000 hectares, this is Tuscany's largest natural park and best experienced on foot to appreciate its rustic charm. Stop every once in a while, to breathe in the scent of pines and enjoy the sweeping views of the nearby isles of Elba, Montecristo and Giglio. After the park, soak in the charm of **Saturnia's** hot springs. These amazing, natural springs, fed by a waterfall that flows into travertine pools below, are open all day and are free to access.

Perched on a tuff cliff, **Pitigliano** is an enchanting, medieval hill town, with tumbling honey-coloured houses that look enthralling at sunset. The town's historic Jewish Quarter, known as Little Jerusalem, has quaint cafes, a restored synagogue and a kosher bakery.

For a peek into Etruscan culture, visit **Sovana**. This former Etruscan settlement has a graceful Romanesque cathedral at its heart and a charming piazza. The winding lanes seem frozen in time. The Vie Cave, a mysterious network of dramatic, sunken pathways lead to Etruscan tombs hidden in the woods.

By showcasing the region and highlighting its diversity – not only in winemaking, but also in tourism, agriculture, history and culture – the Consorzio Tutela Vini della Maremma Toscana has gone from strength to strength over the past decade. Francesco Mazzei, president of the Consorzio, says, "I believe the Maremma's viticultural potential is as huge as it is exciting."

Maremma's magic is the slow rhythm of coastal life. Its wines capture the scent of wild herbs and the sea glimmering in the distance. This isn't just a place that makes great wine; it's a place that is its wine. Raw, beautiful and thrummingly alive. Maremma Toscana has matured, with robust production, rising exports and notable critical acclaim. And it won't be long before the rest of the world sits up and takes note of Maremma's immense potential in viticulture and wine tourism. ♦



Photo by: Enrico Caracciolo

A former Etruscan settlement, Sovana is known for its Romanesque cathedral



An agriturismo in Tuscany is a type of working farm that offers accommodation to tourists

GETTING THERE

The easiest way to get from Florence to Maremma is by car which takes about three and a half hours, or by train, which takes four hours.

Where to Stay Situated on a hillock, Tenuta Fattoria Vecchia is surrounded by rhododendrons, olive groves, and secluded meadows. The charming agriturismo has 13 rooms, a large garden with a swimming pool, shady trees and a helipad. Cost: Rs.14,000 per night.

Night view of Maremma Pitigliano, an enchanting, medieval hill town



Photo by: Archivio Ambito Maremma Sud

VDP 2025 TASTING

GROSSES GEWÄCHS

No longer hidden treasures

In late August 2025, the VDP's annual Grosses Gewächs preview in Wiesbaden brought together leading wine critics from around the world to taste. **Joel B Payne** was there for *Sommelier India* and offers his perspective on Germany's finest Grands Crus

The 2025 tasting, held from 24th to 26th August at the Kurhaus in Wiesbaden, showcased 483 wines from the country's top vineyards, giving the international press a first look at the new releases before their official launch on 1st September. What might once have been a cakewalk is now far more challenging, because Germany is more complex than when I began tasting the country's wines back in the early 1980s. On the positive side, though, *Grosses Gewächs* has slowly laid the foundations for a return to German roots, which were traditionally based on site rather than the ripeness of the grapes at harvest. More importantly, it has also had a considerable impact on the market since its inception in 2002 and this success can easily be documented in statistics.

From the 108 *Grosses Gewächs* produced by 78 estates in 2002, the number has soared to just over 500 by 201 estates today. Despite this growth, these wines still represent less than 3% of the VDP's total production. Moreover, as these

elite estates themselves make only 2% of German output, the almost two million bottles sold last year are but an insignificant fraction of total volume. However, they (like their counterparts in Burgundy) are the standard bearers of quality for the entire country and are now being imitated by other estates. As the old adage states, imitation is always the sincerest form of flattery.

While many consumers still equate German wine with the off-dry and subtly sweet Rieslings that they know as Kabinett and Spätlese, the Grosses Gewächs are all dry, and given their bracing acidities, often taste bone dry. Yes, there are still a few well-known estates like **Joh. Jos. Prüm** and **Egon Müller** who bottle only sweet Rieslings, but even they are experimenting with drier versions. However, for most wineries, dry wines now represent the vast majority of their production and many make nothing else. Consumer preference has partially driven this trend, but climate change has certainly facilitated the transition.

To name but two, Willi Schaefer's 2024 Graacher Domprobst Riesling Kabinett from the Mosel and Dönnhoff's 2024 Niederhäuser Hermannshöhle Riesling Spätlese from the Nahe are both outstanding wines from the current vintage, but they are now outliers, viewed by some as icing on the cake. In addition, although the lion's share of all bottles classified as Grand Cru are still made with Riesling, varieties such as Silvaner, Weissburgunder (Pinot Blanc), Grauburgunder

While many consumers still equate German wine with the off-dry and subtly sweet Rieslings that they know as Kabinett and Spätlese, the Grosses Gewächs are all dry, and given their bracing acidities, often taste bone dry



Photos: Courtesy VDP Peter Bender

The VDP Grosses Gewächs preview at the Kurhaus, Wiesbaden

(Pinot Gris), Chardonnay, Spätburgunder (Pinot Noir) and Lemberger are growing in both volume and reputation – and they are all dry. In fact, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir now account for a larger share of total vineyard plantings than Riesling, turning Germany, tongue in cheek, into a “little Burgundy”.

Not surprisingly, the tasting at the Kurhaus (a historic Art Nouveau spa that now houses a casino) in Wiesbaden was organized first by grape variety, then by region of production, followed by vineyard site and finally by vintage, allowing those present to comparatively taste wines from the same variety, site and vintage from as many as six different producers.

Many of the whites were from 2024 and most of the reds from 2023, but this was not obligatory. Some estates keep their wines longer in oak or prefer to release them only after

further bottle age, with even a few from the 2020 vintage being shown to highlight their ability to age gracefully. The only stipulations are that the wines must never have been officially shown and also be the current vintage being sold at the property.

Although each journalist was allowed to taste any of the wines in his own desired order, the catalogue began with Silvaner, which was only classified as a Grosses Gewächs in Franken. My three favourites were the 2024 Sulzfelder Maustal (97) from Luckert followed by the 2023 Stettener Stein (96) from Weingut am Stein and the 2024 Randersackerer Pfülsen (96) from Schmidts Kinder, all three of which showed that in spite of frost, rain and disease, it was possible to produce great Silvaner in an otherwise difficult vintage.

FRANKEN While Franken can make good Riesling as well, they seldom reach the sheer level of quality obtained along the Rhine. However, other varieties do thrive on the Main River. Among the ‘top ten’ in their respective categories in this year's edition of my annual guide at *Vinum*, four deserve particular mention: the elegant 2023 Weissburgunder “R” from Fürst (94), the restrained 2024 Sulzfelder Sülzfelder Berg Weissburgunder (95) from Luckert (95), the 2023 Chardonnay “R” (96) from Fürst and the same estate's classic 2023 Bürgstadter Hundsrück Spätburgunder (96).

After Silvaner, the section on Riesling opened with 59 wines from Mosel. Yields were low in the 2024 vintage due to spring frosts and an early, wet summer that induced downy mildew, especially on the Saar and Ruwer, subregions that essentially produced no Grosses Gewächs. On the other hand, the Middle Mosel shone brightly, with four Grands Crus that scored 97 points and figured in the ‘top ten’ for all of Germany in my guide: the 2023 Uhlen Roth Lay from Heymann-Löwenstein, the 2024 Trittenheimer Apotheke from Franz-Josef Eifel, the 2024 Pündericher Marienburg Falkenlay from Clemens Busch and the 2024 Berncasteler Doctor Riesling Grosses Gewächs from Schloss Lieser.

RHEINGAU The Rheingau followed the Mosel with another 54 Rieslings, one of which stood out and became, with 99 points, our highest score for the entire year, the 2024 Rüdesheimer Schlossberg from Peter Jakob Kühn. While none of the others quite made it into our ‘top ten’ for all of Germany,

there were four contenders that I particularly liked for what my colleague Stuart Pigott, writing for James Suckling, emphasized as their “precision and terroir expression”. These were the 2024 Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen from Spreitzer, the 2023 Rüdesheimer Berg Rottland from Wegeler, the 2023 Silberlack from Schloss Johannisberg and the 2023 Hochheimer Hölle from Künster.

NAHE Of the 24 Rieslings classified as Grosses Gewächs on the Nahe, I scored two with 97 points, noting in particular their vibrant acidity and crystalline structure, placing them among the finest examples of the vintage: the 2024 Monzinger Auf der Lay from Emrich-Schönleber and the 2024 Bockenauer Felseneck from Schäfer-Fröhlich.

RHEINHESSEN Although Klaus-Peter Keller no longer shows his wines in Wiesbaden, there were 36 Riesling Grosses Gewächs from Rheinhessen at the tasting, drawing attention to the stylistic diversity across this large appellation, from the Rheinfront in the north across from the Rheingau to the upper hills of the Wonnegau in the south bordering on the Pfalz. My colleague Paula Sidore, reporting for Jancis Robinson, speaks of a certain “opulence” in this region’s wines, underscoring how Riesling continues to reflect Germany’s varied landscapes. My favourites here were the 2024 Niersteiner Pettenthal (98) from Kühling-Gillot, which took home the bronze medal in our ‘top ten’, followed by the 2024 Nackenheimer Rothenberg (97) from the same estate, the 2024 Zeller Kreuzberg (97) from Battenfeld Spanier and

the 2024 Westhofener Morstein (97) from Wittmann

PFALZ With 71 Rieslings, the Pfalz showed the largest number of Grosses Gewächs at this year’s presentation and, with Rheinhessen, the largest diversity, from the warmer Mittelhaardt in the north to the cooler Südpfalz near the Alsatian border. Moreover, a number of younger producers are edging ever more towards reduction, which provides the wines better grip, but diminishes the succulent fruit that once made them so charming in their youth. My colleague, Matthias Mangold, commented that many of them should have been decanted before the tasting. Nonetheless, four stood out at both the event in Wiesbaden and our final tastings two weeks later in September: the 2024 Königsbacher Idig (97) from Christmann, the 2024 Forster Pechstein (97) from Dr.

Although Klaus-Peter Keller no longer shows his wines in Wiesbaden, there were 36 Riesling Grosses Gewächs from Rheinhessen at the tasting, drawing attention to the stylistic diversity across this large appellation

Bürklin-Wolf, the 2024 Kallstadter Saumagen (96) from Rings and the 2024 Kallstadter Saumagen (96) from Philipp Kuhn.

What truly, though, sets the Pfalz apart from the other regions that have such a great reputation for Riesling is that their Pinot Blanc and Pinot Noir can also be first rate. Five further Grosses Gewächs from this appellation also figured in our ‘top ten’ in their respective categories. Were I to add the wines from Koch and Metzger, both of whom are not members of the VDP, that number would rise to eight. Among the Weissburgunder, my call went to three Grands Crus: the 2024 Birkweiler Mandelberg (96) from Rebholz, the 2024 Birkweiler Mandelberg (95) from Wehrheim (95) and the 2024 Laumersheimer Kirschgarten (95) from Knipser, with the first two being unique in their unoaked expression of the variety. Two Spätburgunder also stood out from the rest of the pack for the approachability, the 2023 Königsbacher Idig (97) from Christmann and the 2023 Siebeldinger Im Sonnenschein (97) from Rebholz, which my colleague Anne Krebiehl, representing Vinous, described as “fruit-driven yet elegant, with a lighter profile compared to the denser 2022 vintage.”

AHR Although it is, with only 520 hectares of vineyard, one of the smallest appellations in Germany, the Ahr is very well known for its Pinot Noir. Unique in style, the vines grow on weathered slate similar to that on the Mosel, giving them an edge not found on the chalkier soils further south. Three wines there, all from the Meyer-Näkel estate, garnered our highest ratings, with the 2023 Walporzheimer Kräuterberg (98) taking gold amongst all German Pinot Noirs. However, both the 2023 Dernauer Pfarrwingert (97) and 2023 Ahrweiler Rosenthal (97) from the same estate also received well merited accolades. With almost 13,000 hectares, Germany is, after Burgundy, one of the largest producers of Pinot Noir in the world, with more vineyard area than Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Argentina combined. Most of this acreage is

Wine critics and tasters from around the world at the Kurhaus, Wiesbaden taste 483 wines from the country’s top vineyard sites



Photos: Courtesy VDP Peter Bender



The stunning Schlossberg vineyard in Rüdesheim is one of the most famous grands crus in Germany

in Baden, which, with neighbouring Württemberg, combines to form one of the largest federal states in Germany.

BADEN AND WÜRTTEMBERG Although Huber did not show his famous Wildenstein this year, my three favourite Grand Cru in Baden were the 2022 Ihringer Winklerberg Wanne Häusleboden (97) from Dr. Heger, the 2023 Malterdinger Bienenberg (97) from Huber and the 2023 Oberbergener Steinriese (97) from Franz Keller. From Württemberg, the 2023 Fellbacher Lämmeler Kaiser (95) from Aldinger and 2023 Fellbacher Lämmeler (94) from Schnaitmann garnered my highest marks.

Like the Pfalz, both of these regions are also known for other varieties. In Baden, they are Pinot Gris and Chardonnay; in Württemberg, it is Lemberger, a grape that is called Blaufränkisch in Austria.

While few consumers associate Chardonnay with Germany, the results can be astonishing and essentially no one does it better than Julian Huber in Malterdingen. His two Grands Crus, the 2023 Hecklinger Schlossberg (97) and the 2023 Malterdinger Bienenberg (97) took gold and silver in this category in our guide book.

Many readers will turn up their nose at Pinot Gris, which the Germans call Grauburgunder, as they think only of the

Few readers in India will have tasted Blaufränkisch, much less Lemberger, and I doubt that they will be imported any time soon. But for those travelling to Europe the variety is well worth ordering

cheap plonk being turned out as Pinot Grigio in northern Italy, but this luscious variety, a mutation of Pinot Noir, can be very good. Witness the 2023 Ihringer Winklerberg Hinter Winkelen Gras im Ofen (95) from Dr Heger and the 2023 Döttinger Castellberg (94) from Martin Wassmer.

Few readers in India will have tasted Blaufränkisch, much less Lemberger, and I doubt that they will be imported any time soon. But for those travelling to Europe the variety is well worth ordering when you find one on a restaurant wine list. Like Cabernet Sauvignon, they can be closed and quite tannic in their youth, but evolve nicely with time. Here are my favourite Grands Crus from this year's tastings: the 2023 Fellbacher Lämmeler (95) from Aldinger, the 2023 Schweigener Ruthe (94) from Neipperg, the 2023 Cleebonner Michaelsberg (94) from Dautel, the 2023 Stettener Gernhalde (94) from Haidle and the 2023 Fellbacher Lämmeler (94) from Schnaitmann.

In short, and to the point for readers who may not often see these wines in India, while the 2024 Rieslings are marked by high natural acidity making the wines lively but sometimes demanding, the 2023 Pinot Noirs offer charm and accessibility, with both vintages reinforcing the importance of Grosses Gewächs as a benchmark for German viticulture. These are wines that balance tradition with depth, purity and precision. Moreover, they serve as cultural ambassadors for the country's vineyards.

Next year's tasting in Wiesbaden will be held from the 23rd to the 25th of August 2026, further reaffirming the Grosses Gewächs' role not only as a technical showcase, but also as a cultural event, where leading voices help shape the global perception of German fine wine. ♦

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RED, WHITE, ROSÉ,
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BOTTLES AS GIFTS, HOW TO CHOOSE
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CROWD PLEASERS, **WINE EXPERT**
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OLD v NEW WORLD, **ROBINSON**
DECANTING, THE TASTING RITUAL
MATCHING FOOD AND WINE



Vienna is the world's largest wine city with vineyards within its boundaries that shape its horizons and provide areas for open-air leisure. Although wine was made here as early as 500 BC, it was Roman Emperor Probus (232-282 AD) who started serious wine growing in the city. Wine then formed part of a Roman soldier's pay and this wine was produced in Italy which meant it had to be transported to soldiers in far flung corners of the Roman Empire. Probus, to save costs, brought Italian vines to Vienna and had wine produced on the spot. In time Vienna's viticulture expanded both inside and outside its walls. Even today the city's smallest vineyard remains on Schwarzenbergplatz mainly producing **Gemischter Satz**, Vienna's signature wine that is currently experiencing a revival of popularity.

In the Middle Ages Vienna's wine became so sour that drinking it was forbidden. It was called 'cask eater' as it could dissolve the hoops binding barrels. Honey or saffron was often added to improve the taste. When 19th

century phylloxera destroyed almost all the vines, new vine stock was imported from America by Baron Babo who imported and set up a wine school. In the 1980's there was a further replanting of the city's vineyards. Wine has since become important economically and is supported by the city authorities who have declared the vineyards to be specially protected areas.

In earlier days it was the Imperial court who looked after the wine industry. In 1784 an imperial regulation, still in force, organised the serving of the wines in taverns. It was decreed pine branches should be hung outside, something which still indicates a typical Viennese wine tavern.

There are two types of tavern, the *Buschenschank* and the *Heuriger*, though today the differences are less noticeable. The *Buschenschank* have a legally protected status for vineyards selling their own wines. They only serve cold foods and are open on selected days in summer as outlined in that 1784 decree. *Heuriger*, meaning both a wine tavern and the young wine, can be open year

VIENNA

City of Wine

Carol Wright shines a spotlight on Vienna, famous for its city vineyards, wine taverns and coffee houses

Wine tasting with music at a winery overlooking Vienna

round and serve hot food. They are often set in historic buildings like the Mayer am Pfarrplatz below the Vienna hills which dates back to the 17th century. Seasonal menus can be eaten here with a Pinot Noir from the tavern's own vineyard. Beethoven lived here in the 1820s and wrote his famous Ode to Joy music here. The Heuriger are not only venues for wine tasting but provide vineyard hiking trails with views down over the Danube or of city skylines. Some Heuriger are very modern such as Johannes Wilschko's tavern which has a lounge looking out on the vineyards.

About 700 hectares of Vienna's area is covered by vineyards. Wineries from 400 individual vineyards produce about 2.4 million litres of wine each, year mostly for local consumption. White wines form 80% of the production and the vineyards are mainly located in former villages

Seasonal menus can be eaten here with a Pinot Noir from the tavern's own vineyard. Beethoven lived here in the 1820s and wrote his famous Ode to Joy music

incorporated into the city in the 1900's. In 2015 a law stipulated that Vienna's vineyards must be used only for wine growing to keep them from being developed for housing and other buildings; in effect putting the vineyards on a heritage listing.

The most popular white wine varieties made are **Gruner Veltliner**, **Rheinriesling**, **Weisburgunder**, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay and among the increasing number of red wines **Glauer Zweigelt**, **Blauer Burgunder**, plus more international types like Merlot, Pinot Noir, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Many grape varieties including Pinot Noir do well on the vineyard slopes grown in a mixture of clay, limestone, and sandy soil. Cool northern winds give wines a fresh and fruity tang. Around 30% of Vienna's vineyards are organic

The wine served in the taverns is usually **Gemischter Satz** ('field blend'). This blend

can be a combination of up to 20 grape varieties from the same vineyard harvested and pressed together. Originally growers of Gemischter Satz balanced degrees of ripeness and acidity of their grapes to get a consistent quality and guard against poor harvests. The resulting wine is fresh, fruity, multi-layered and complex and if bad weather affects some varieties of grapes, the blending means more reliable yields for the winemaker.

Gemischter Satz has been undergoing a renaissance spurred by the WienWein Group of six leading, city wine producers including Cobenzl, Mayer am Pfarrplatz, Edimoser and Christ. The wine has become regulated by law and the name, Gemischter Satz, can only be used for wines pressed from at least three grape varieties from a vineyard in Vienna. No single grape variety can make up more than 50% or less than 10% of the blend. It has had DAC status since 2013 and last year was added to the EU list of wines with protected appellation of origin. It has also been included in the Ark of Taste by the Italian based, Slow Food Foundation promoting biodiversity and intended to protect high quality, traditional foods.

Among Vienna's wine producers, Cobenzl in the Vienna woods with views of the city and Danube, has 60ha of vines and is one of the city's most important wineries, owned by the City of Vienna for 110 years. The production is organic using sustainable cultivation, pheromone traps for pest control, solar water heating and green electricity. The vineyards have panoramic views around Vienna and visitor attractions include a wild boar park, children's farm, two restaurants, cafe and own-honey production. At the 2024 Vienna Weinpreis event the vineyard won 31 gold medals. Production focus is on traditional Viennese wine varieties such as Gemischter Satz, Gruner Veltliner, Weisburgunder and



An elegant Viennese coffee house that also serves wine with light food in the evenings

Riesling. Cobenzl also make rosé and Sekt sparkling wines.

As well as wine taverns, Vienna's wineries are increasingly updating their buildings and offering visitor facilities. At Rainer Christ's winery and heuriger, stone, exposed concrete, glass and wood have been used in a new cellar building. At another winery, a hotel has been included where guests can look out on the extensive brick cellar vaults. At Edimoser's heuriger the superb buffet is noted alongside the wines.

As well as wine tasting, Gobel is another heuriger with a modern setting in Vienna's only cellar alley and this is the place to find quality local red wines. Even royal palaces are home to wine cellars as at the Palais Coburg with six different themed wine cellars. The palace includes a hotel stocked with 60,000 bottles dating back to 1727 and the wine cellar is open to the public with daily tours and tastings and a 'wine stroll' with glass of champagne in hand. ♦

The wine served in the taverns is usually Gemischter Satz (field blend). This blend can be a combination of up to 20 grape varieties from the same vineyard harvested and pressed together

Amador, a three-Michelin-star fine dining restaurant in Vienna, located in a 17th-century winery



Coffee Houses in Vienna

In addition to its many wine taverns, Vienna also offers over 800 coffee houses. These also serve wines though mostly in the evenings along with light foods. During the day they are the perfect spot to drop in and order from 64 different coffee styles. These include **Einspanner**; a double espresso topped with thick cream to keep the warmth in and served in a glass mug with handles. Originally devised to keep carriage drivers' hands warm, the **Fiaker** is similar, but with added schnapps or cherry brandy and served in a small wine glass. A **Melange** is an espresso with hot water and hot milk topped with milk foam, **Kapuziner** is black with cream added to the colours of a Capucine monk's robes, a **Teeshall** is coffee with milk served in a tea cup, a **Johann Strauss** is a large mokka with

whipped cream and apricot liqueur while a **Kaiser Melange** comes with beaten egg in it. All of them come with a glass of water and no pressure to leave.

Listed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, the coffee houses have been described as 'a sort of democratic club, open to everyone for the price of a cheap cup of coffee where every guest can sit for hours with this offering, and go there to talk, to write, play cards, receive post and above all consume an unlimited number of newspapers and journals'. It is also described as a place 'where time and space are consumed, but only the coffee is found on the bill'!

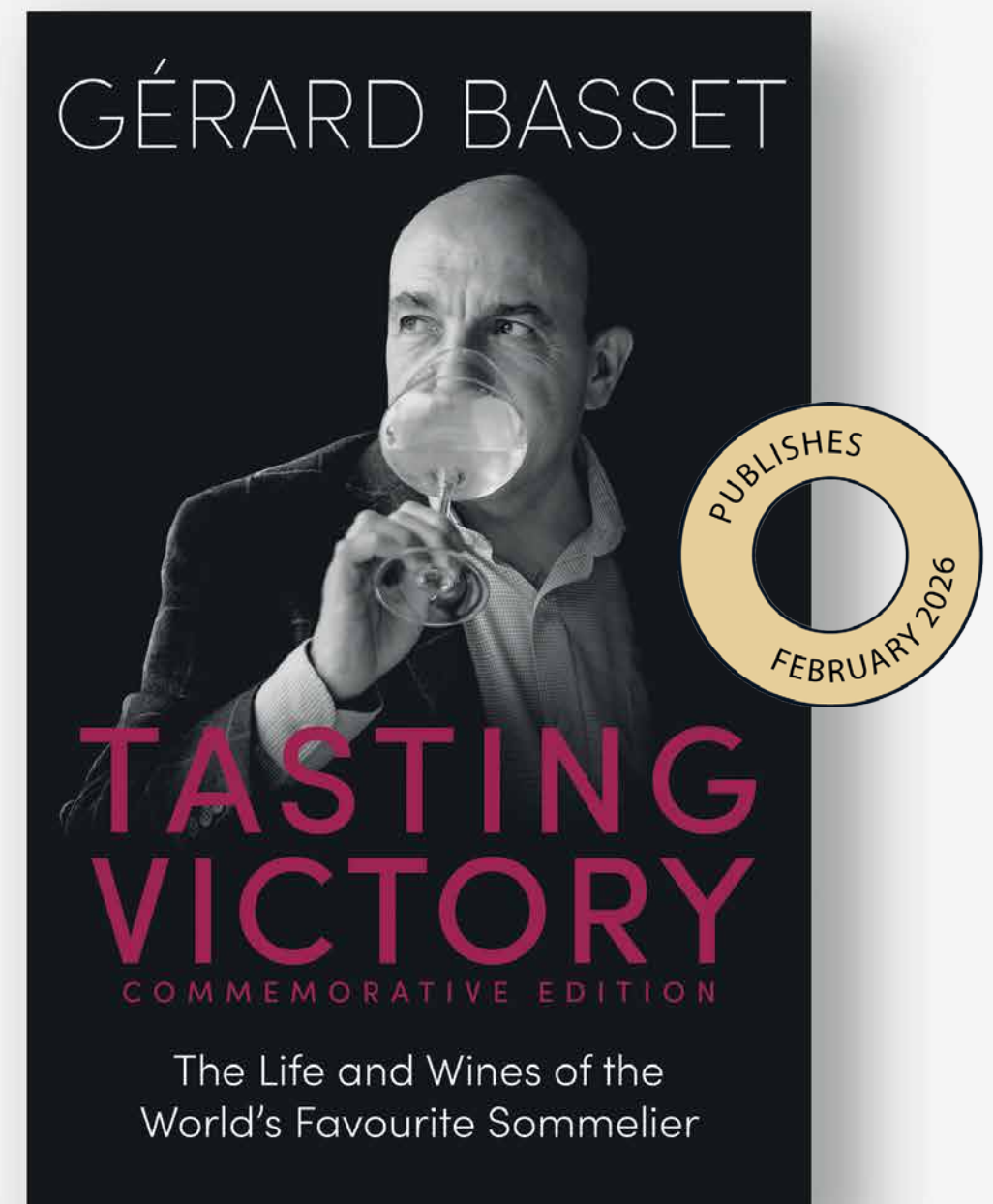
Among the immense choice of Avenues, **Cafe Sperl** has a 19th century setting of stucco ceilings,

dark woods, marble tables and crystal chandeliers. **Demel** founded in 1786 is the place for the cake lover, with a rococo blue and gold decor and waitresses in black dresses and white aprons serving over a 100 different cakes including the famous torte chocolate sponge coated with apricot jam and chocolate. **Cafe Hawelka's** walls are covered with paintings donated by impoverished artists. It is open till midnight. **Cafe Landtmann** in Biedermeier style with many mirrors perfect for people watching is where musicians from Mahler to McCartney have had coffee and it was Sigmund Freud's favourite. At **Cafe Central** piano music is played and some coffee houses like **Cafe Pruckel** and **Cafe Schwarzenberg** offer evening concerts.



Vienna's numerous coffee houses are splendid and elegant

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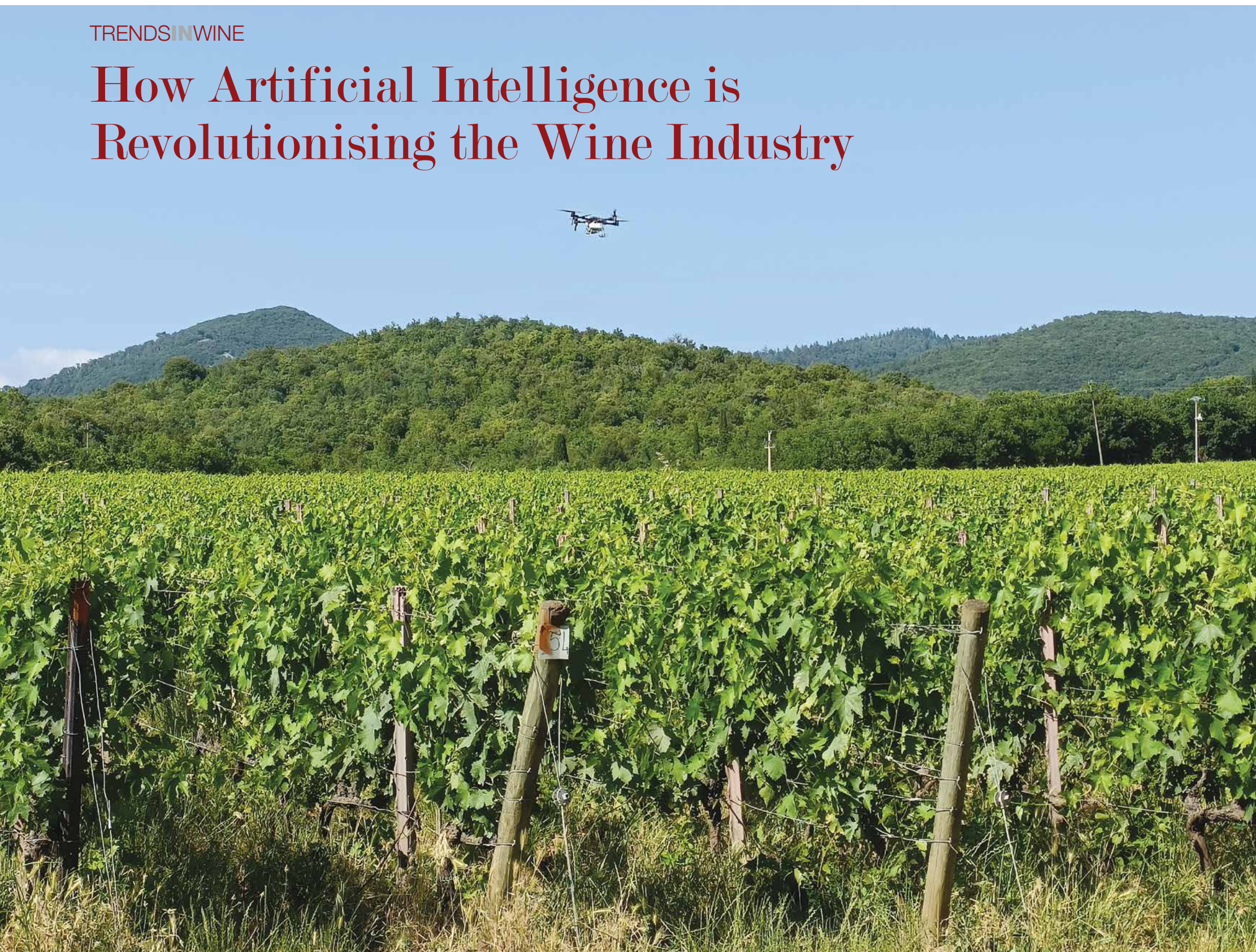


Memories of the world's best-loved
sommelier – in his own words



TRENDS **IN** WINE

How Artificial Intelligence is Revolutionising the Wine Industry



A drone – possibly carrying a camera – flies over the San Felice vineyard to collect data for AI to turn into something actionable

Photos courtesy: Cropsy Technologies, JoJo's Vineyard and Cork Supply

Wine writer and winemaker
Chris Boiling examines the increasing
use of artificial intelligence in wine
production

The distinctive hum of a drone interrupts my thoughts. I'm strolling past a large vineyard, on my way to a much smaller – and potentially more interesting – plot in Tuscany's Chianti Classico region. The small vineyard, San Felice's 1.6ha Vitiarium, contains 105 ancient grape varieties at risk of extinction. The vineyard that has my attention now is a typical parcel of Sangiovese. They sit side by side. The juxtaposition makes me wonder about tomorrow's technology and if it can really improve what's in our wine glasses.

I watch the drone hover before going up and down a row of vines. Drones are being trialled for spraying in many parts of the world but the aim of this camera-carrying drone is to collect huge amounts of data in seconds. So, the exciting, thought-provoking part is not the drone or its LiDAR camera, it's the use of AI (artificial intelligence) in turning this data into something actionable to reduce inputs (water, pesticides, fuel), and improve fruit and fermentation quality.

With AI seeping into so many aspects of our lives, it's not surprising to find it growing in the wine industry. Here, it offers tools that boost efficiency and reduce costs while simultaneously improving wine quality and sustainability. From disease detection in vineyards to optimising fermentation in cellars and enhancing cork quality, AI is gradually reshaping nearly every step of the winemaking process.

Here's how...

The information being gathered by the drone will help in the early detection of diseases, such as powdery and downy mildew. AI models trained on large datasets of infected versus healthy vines can identify symptoms before they're visible to the human eye. Algorithms can analyse the high-resolution images for leaf colouration, vein structure, and spectral data to spot early signs of disease or stress.

Tractors and robotic crawlers that may be working on other tasks can also use high-tech cameras to scan vines in real-time, analyse the data with AI and highlight potential problems. A New Zealand startup, for example, has created an AI vine scanner that provides early warnings of mildew infections – allowing a vine-specific approach to treatment decisions. The scanner, made by Cropsy Technologies, mounts to any vehicle passing through the vineyard and can analyse up to 8,000 vines an hour. The benefit is that early, targeted sprays help to reduce chemical use and the environmental impact of viticulture.



Above: Cropsy AI-powered vine scanner that attaches to a vehicle to detect early signs of diseases such as mildew. Right: A prototype of a grape-harvesting robot seen in Greece uses AI to identify ripe, healthy bunches. Facing page: Cork Supply using AI with a scanner to view the internal structure of corks and identify their OTR (Oxygen Transmission Rate)

The real-time images of grape bunches can also help wineries forecast grape production with greater accuracy. In Chile, Viña Concha y Toro is using a combination of drones, multispectral imagery and AI to forecast grape yield so it can better plan harvest schedules, tank requirements, and crew numbers. AI can also use the images to estimate the leaf area of the vine canopy. Growers can then identify zones with too much or too little foliage, enabling better-informed decisions regarding pruning, irrigation and canopy management. Overgrowth can increase disease risk and worsen grape quality. Brian Malone, a vineyard manager in California says, using multispectral images that highlight vine stress zones has enabled Jackson Family Wines to “pinpoint how much and when to water” – reducing water usage by about 20% in one estate.

In Chile, Viña Concha y Toro is using a combination of drones, multispectral imagery and AI to forecast grape yield

ATTACKING WEEDS In China, the Hg LaserWeeder trundles up and down test fields in Yunnan and Heilongjiang provinces – zapping weeds automatically with a laser. Equipped with an AI-powered vision system, the robot can recognise thousands of crop and weed varieties, allowing it to eliminate weeds

without damaging crops.

Xiong Bian, lead AI algorithm engineer at Huagong Technology Industry, predicts this robot “will replace chemical herbicides... the number one soil killer”. An advanced version of the Hg LaserWeeder features 32 laser heads that can destroy up to 320,000 weeds an hour. It is due to go into mass production in 2026.

In England, I visit one of the world’s most high-tech vineyards. JoJo’s Vineyard in the Chiltern Hills, Oxfordshire, is establishing itself as a testing ground for the latest vineyard innovations by seamlessly integrating drones, sensors, robots, and decision-support software.

Co-owner Ian Beecher-Jones puts all the AI-assisted advances in perspective for me.

“The question of AI in vineyards is an interesting one,” he states. “I can wear my tech enthusiast hat and say it’s brilliant and will make a huge difference to what is going on in the vineyard and we will have a better wine as a result. On the other hand, I can say it’s nowhere near full development and it’s not returning value at the moment as the tools to action the information from the AI tools are limited. Both views could be considered correct depending on who you talk to. I

think the realistic position is somewhere in-between.”

He believes the new technology is great at acquiring and analysing data, but there is a “blockage” in applying the knowledge in the vineyard. He cites conventional sprayers as examples of blunt instruments but is excited by the potential of drones for spraying.

Ian tells me: “When we get to the position of taking data from the vines in real time, aligning that with automatically collected data from a drone, AI tools blend the two along with soil type data and detailed structural data such as variety, clone, rootstock, pruning style, etc, creating a nutritional plan which can be put into a drone for automated application from mixes made up automatically without an operator being present in the vineyard, then we will be able to truly say we have a vineyard that is AI managed and controlled. All this sounds science fiction in many ways, but I hope that we will be testing something at JoJo’s in 2026 that will demonstrate this and pull it together.”

MOVING INTO THE WINERY

AI is also helping to improve the quality of wine by lending a hand in the winery. Grape sorting systems with AI-powered cameras

separate grapes that are the perfect colour (ripeness) and size from the rest and discard diseased berries.

Smart fermentation systems use real-time data from sensors (temperature, pH, Brix levels, CO₂ production) to train models that predict the trajectory of fermentation. AI algorithms can adjust temperature curves, nutrient additions, or aeration schedules to avoid stuck fermentations and optimise flavour development.

During the maturation process, AI can be used to monitor micro-oxygenation and barrel ageing conditions using sensors, ensuring the wine develops the desired characteristics without the risk of oxidation or spoilage. Predictive models are available to help determine the optimal ageing duration and timing for racking or bottling.

There are also a few examples of AI assisting in the blending. Machine-learning models analyse chemical profiles and sensory data to predict how different components will interact when blended. This allows winemakers to experiment with different combinations virtually before physically blending the wines.

In Denmark and Germany, scientists have been conducting a feasibility study to predict Vivino quality ratings of white wines

During the maturation process, AI can be used to monitor micro-oxygenation and barrel ageing conditions using sensors



Photo Courtesy: Cropsey Technologies, JoJo's Vineyard, Cork Supply.

Ian Beecher-Jones, co-owner of JoJo's Vineyard in England, integrating robots and software for producing more sustainable wines

by analysing 145 volatile organic compounds identified in the headspace above the wines, as well as details like ethanol concentration, density and the content of various sugars and acids – and feeding this data into machine-learning algorithms. The aim is to see if it's possible to develop a comprehensive tool for assessing wine quality without tasting it.

FINISHING TOUCHES

AI is seeping into cork production, too. AI-powered machines are being trained to 'sniff' out trace amounts of TCA (2,4,6-trichloroanisole). These machines can analyse each cork in milliseconds for faults and also grade them for elasticity, density, and visual defects.

In Portugal, acclaimed winemaker Dirk Niepoort released his beloved Vinha do Carril

red wine from a century-old vineyard above the Douro River last summer with a 'Legacy' cork. This cork, from Cork Supply, harnesses AI to produce what Cork Supply's founder and president Jochen Michalski calls "the pinnacle of natural closures".

Electromagnetic imaging technology screens the internal structure of every cork for features that are not visible to the naked eye. An AI algorithm then correlates the internal structure with its OTR (Oxygen Transmission Rate), the rate at which oxygen enters the bottle. The non-invasive technology detects outliers that can allow up to 5-10 times more oxygen to enter than other corks. These corks are instantly discarded.

I REACH THE VITIARIUM

In San Felice's Vitiarium I reflect on traditional viticulture and the grape variety that this project helped to resurrect, **Pugnitello**. I have come to Tuscany to help the revival of this ancient, tricky, low-yielding, beautiful red grape by making it in amphora, the ancient, low-tech way without any AI input.

The thing holding me and many other small winemakers back is the cost of the high-tech equipment. Many tools are being commercialised at a price point that favours mid to large producers. But I can see the benefits. AI is no longer a futuristic concept in the wine industry. When applied thoughtfully, it helps winemakers and grape growers detect problems earlier, make precise interventions, optimise inputs and manage fermentation more predictably. The result is better wines, fewer wasted resources, and a smaller environmental footprint.

I decide to dip a toe into this world. I ask ChatGPT to write a business plan for my unique collection of small-batch wines featuring rare grapes like Pugnitello. It does so in seconds. Then it offers to create a label and price the bottle!

At that price, I will be able to afford a drone in five years. ♦

SommelierINDIA WINE MAGAZINE



WINE TRAVELLER

A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago Tour

Ben Bernheim on his personal experience of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Spain, which is also one of the world's great wine tours



A moment of rest on the pilgrimage route where vineyards, villages and fellow walkers share the long road west to Santiago de Compostela

The Camino de Santiago also known as the Way of St James is a network of ancient pilgrimage routes across Europe that lead to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, where the remains of the apostle St. James are said to be buried. This pilgrimage route has drawn Catholics and wanderers from across the world for over a thousand years. Originating in the Middle Ages, today over half a million people walk the route every year, many of them starting from halfway across Europe.

The impact of the Camino is massive. Crossing northern Spain, towns have sprung up to service pilgrims, cathedrals have been built, and vineyards planted. The pilgrimage's connection with wine is considerable, as the route passes through many vineyards, and walkers across the centuries have been hungry and thirsty. The most famous route, the French Way, or Camino Frances, crosses the Pyrenees and northern Spain, meandering through the vineyards of Navarra, Rioja and Bierzo. Another famous route, the Portuguese Way, crosses through the Douro and Vinho Verde.

This is not just a spiritual journey, it is one of the world's great wine tours. In April, I walked 800km from Saint Jean Pied de Port in France all the way to Santiago, and onwards to Finisterra - Europe's most westerly point. Along the way, I stopped to visit churches, vineyards, wineries, and wine bars.

One of the south of France's emblematic grapes, Mourvèdre, was supposedly brought from Spain by returning pilgrims. Its Spanish name, Monastrell, hints at its monastic connections. Along parts of the Via Tolosana, just outside the formerly Roman city of Arles, it is locally known as the Plant de Saint Gilles, after the Abbey of Saint Gilles, one of the major stopping points on the route between Santiago de Compostela and Rome. The wines come under the Costières de Nîmes AOP. They are mostly rosé and red,

blends of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre on clay-limestone and the southern Rhone's famous galets roulés (rolled pebbles). The Camino continues to Spain along the foothills of the Massif Central, avoiding most vineyards in the Languedoc, until it reaches the almost impassable (and mostly vineyard-free) Pyrenees.

As soon as the pilgrim's way crosses the mountains, the vineyards of Navarra begin almost immediately, nestled into the foothills of the Pyrenees, descending towards the Arga and then Ebro rivers. The climate here ranges from mountainous in the north, with cool, wet Atlantic-influenced winters and hot summers, to Mediterranean in the south, approaching the Ebro river - where a few vineyards even border on the small Bardenas Reales desert. Vast forests of gnarled deciduous trees give way to small towns on sun-drenched Mediterranean hillsides.

Historically Navarra produces structured, full-bodied rosés from the Garnacha (or Grenache) grape. A few estates are worth stopping at along the way, and Bodegas Irache famously provides a fountain of red wine entirely free of charge for thirsty pilgrims - they famously get through 100 liters a day. Most pilgrims cup their hands to drink - only the most devoted few use an empty water bottle or bring a glass.

Of particular note is a rather exceptional wine bar in Puente La Reina (a small town built around the historic pilgrim bridge that crosses the Arga river, a meeting point for different paths that converge here after the Pyrenees), the Vinoteca Ganbara, with an exquisite local wine list, local food - and a beautiful medieval setting.

Continuing westwards along the Camino on dusty farm tracks and the occasional roadside, across the Ebro river is Spain's most famous wine region - La Rioja. One of Spain's gastronomic and viticultural capitals, the Santiago pilgrimage cuts right through

The pilgrimage's connection with wine is considerable, as the route passes through many vineyards, and walkers across the centuries have been hungry and thirsty

La Rioja, passing through Logroño, Nájera, and Santo Domingo de la Calzada – a city at the edge of Rioja, founded to shelter pilgrims. Vineyards line the way, and a few estates have their cellar on the path itself. Every pilgrims hostel and restaurant serves generous pitchers of wine, and some wineries even welcome weary pilgrims in for tastings. Bodegas Alvia in particular is worth stopping at for their warm welcome and excellent range of single-vineyard wines, and rather lovely whites.

Rioja is famous for its big, aged reds. Gran Reserva wines must be aged for at least five years before release, including two years in barrel. Traditionally, the barrels are American oak, but today they are often a mix of French and American. Nowadays, the wines are mostly made from Tempranillo, but Garnacha, Graciano, Mazuelo (Carignan) grapes are all found in old field blends. Viura

Every pilgrims hostel and restaurant serves generous pitchers of wine, and some wineries even welcome weary pilgrims in for tastings

was historically blended with the red grapes to make a dark rosé or Clarete (especially in the Najerilla valley, through which the Camino passes), but is also made into some excellent age-worthy oaky whites. Rioja's wines are big, serious, classic age-worthy wines that have earned their place on any wine list.

The Calle de Laurel is a famous street for tapas bars and good wine, but Wine Fandango is a quieter, more relaxed atmosphere for some of the best Rioja has to offer. I was lucky enough to have Andrew Halliwell, winemaker at Bodegas Obalo, show me around the best wine bars. Most pilgrims stop here for a few nights – it's impossible not to meet people at every bar that you've passed along the way. Culture and history lovers should stop at the monastery of Santa María la Real of Nájera. The cloister is a beautiful oasis of peace and spirituality after the bustle of urban Logroño. Nearby, but away from the path itself are the

twin monasteries of Yuso and Suso in San Millán de la Cogolla, worth the long detour for their beauty.

To the immediate west of Rioja there are few vineyards. Vast fields of wheat without trees, vines or interruptions continue, forming an unmissable but interminable part of the pilgrimage, a straight, flat and unwavering path that continues for days. Tiny villages and churches are the only landmarks, sleepy except for the remarkable Easter parades around the Semana Santa, or holy week. This part of Castille and León is more famous for their hot chocolate than for their wine!

Eventually, the monotonous meseta (as the area is known) gives way once again to hills, and the hidden gem of Bierzo, seemingly surrounded by tall mountains on all sides. Bierzo is a fertile valley of orchards and vineyards lining the Sil river, sheltered from the Atlantic winds by the Serra dos Ancares mountains. Tiny parcels of old bush vines jostle for space with small orchards. Its wines are predominantly made from the red Mencía grape. It is a wonderfully light, fruity grape best suited for elegant and refreshing summer reds.

There is a wide range of estates offering tastings, many of them making excellent and affordable wines. Anibal de Otero is one of my favourites. Some rosé is made, also from Mencía, and a small percentage of the DO is white wine, made from Godello. Slate soils are common on the steep slopes of the mountains surrounding the Bierzo basin, with heavier clay soils more common closer to the river Sil.

Across the mountains, exposed to the Atlantic winds and rains, is Galicia, and the end of the Camino de Santiago in the city of Santiago de Compostela, which sprung up around the pilgrimage site and is today a bustling city with a truly vibrant food-and-wine scene. At the north-western

Map of the Camino de Santiago wine journey



Tracing the pilgrimage route across northern Spain, from Rioja and Bierzo to Galicia and Albariño country

corner of the Iberian peninsula, Galicia is famous for its crunchy whites, especially from Rias Baixas, made from Albariño (also Alvarinho), the same grape as Vinho Verde, a short distance to the south in Portugal. These wines are citrusy, refreshing, energetic, and pair fantastically with the abundant fresh fish found on local restaurant menus. The area feels unlike anything else in Spain or along the Camino: it is more humid, more maritime. Lush grass and eucalyptus plantations dominate the hilly landscape. Small stone cottages line the path, surrounded by green fields full of cows. If you make it all the way to Finisterra (the 'end of the world' in Latin), do stop by Etel & Pan, a burger restaurant with a good selection of local Albariño and freshly caught fish.

The Camino de Santiago is a huge undertaking, with the Camino Frances alone representing nearly 800km of walks. It isn't just a pilgrimage, it's an insight into the history, culture, and wines of northern Spain – but if you can't take a month to walk it, half a dozen bottles of wine from along the way paint the same picture of journey, and a different source of reflection. ❖

Camino Frances, alone representing 800km of walks, isn't just a pilgrimage, it's an insight into the history, culture, and wines of northern Spain



The Camino's universal symbol, guiding pilgrims along the route through northern Spain's vineyards, villages and open countryside

RESTAURANT **REVIEW: GOA**

A French Bistro redefines Assagaon's culinary charm

Inside the quiet elegance of The Assa House and Loulou Cocktail Bar



The striking interior of The Assa House at Assagao, North Goa

In the hushed back lanes of Assagaon, the afternoons are quieter than the evenings, a tad scented with *susegad* perhaps, Goa's very special flavour. And, past the spiritual and philosophical centre of Casa Pallotti, this quietness seems a bit more sacred, as I make my way across. The greenery includes a well-manicured, wraparound garden and the unassumingly restrained façade I am about to enter. A beautiful veranda with fans whirring slowly overhead and elegant checkerboard tiles below are a charming space for a relaxed tête-à-tête. I am in Assa House, a fetching French bistro that opened its doors in Goa in 2022. Ensnared snugly inside it, and accessible via a secret flight of stairs is Loulou, an intimate cocktail bar

that quietly redefines elegant evenings out in Goa, with jazz evenings and a thoughtful cocktail programme.

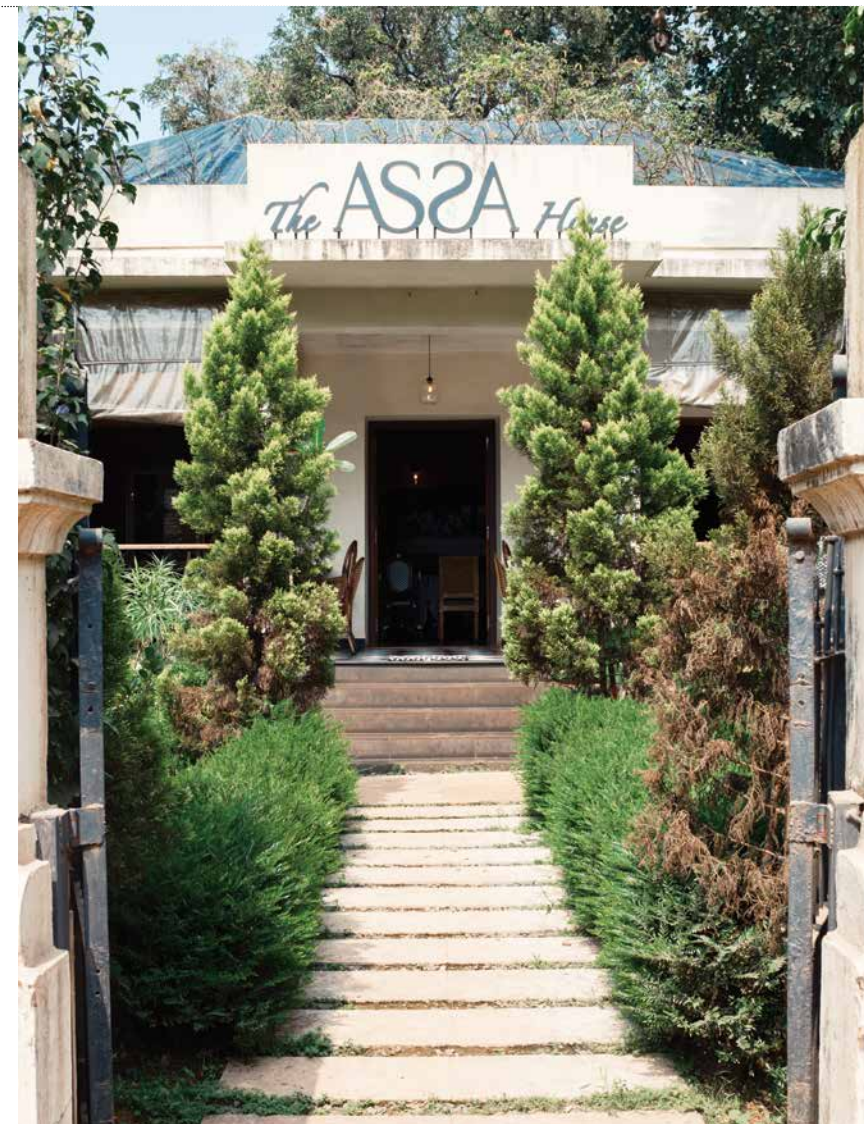
At Assa House the design philosophy is about crystallising nostalgia, allowing memory to breathe in a space that seems remarkably lived-in, and yet intentional. While the façade is unassuming, one steps onto a sunny veranda, and then inside the beautifully restored house

with interconnected rooms just like a home. On entering, one is hit by a pop of colour with warm tones of red and salmon while vintage chandeliers cast a soft glow. Original Mangalorean tiles that once lined the floors of old coastal homes were restored and lovingly reset. The room adjoining it, is an understated shade of bluish-green. A gleaming black bar-top at one end adds character in the most charming way.

One can immediately discern the thoughtful intentionality of the team that created Assa House – Nitin Wagh, Riya and Shubham Sethia. They had sensed a gap in Goa for an elegant French bistro style place.

“When we opened Assa House, we wanted to create something here that was inspired by global dining. We wanted every guest to feel important and enjoy fabulous food with a feel of the French Riviera,” says Nitin, whose strong leaning towards aesthetics, lent the place its creative flair along with the celebrated Pavitra Rajaram, the creative force behind Nilaya Anthology..

The menu at Assa House is classic and contemporary, with a quintessential French touch. I tried the classic French onion soup and truffled



Above: The Assa House entrance. Bottom: An artfully presented dish of shrimps



mushroom velouté; both delicious and soul satisfying. The former was comforting, while the mushroom soup was lush and velvety with truffle aromas. Their famous goat and blue cheese éclair topped with black olive tapenade and caramelized walnuts is a winner. I happen to be a lover of ceviche (marinated raw fish) but found the sea bass coconut ceviche lacking a little in flavour. The tagliatelle mariscos served with a smattering of seafood, however, was simply delicious with the smoky notes of paprika truly hitting the spot.

Chef Kriti Pinto trained at the Tsuji Culinary Institute and Ritsumeikan

University in Kyoto which formed the basis of her culinary foundation. Given her Japanese culinary sensibilities, the dish that truly encapsulated it all, was the savoury mango tart, a painting on a plate. Served with hot honey, blue cheese and delicate segments of ripe mango, it tasted as beautiful as it looked. A vivacious play of bright flavours, cleverly juxtaposed with the creamy cheese. The meal ended with the chef's masterstroke – an artfully created dense, dark chocolate rocher with umami flavour served with a generous raspberry coulis. Chef Kriti is also a skilled barbecue pitmaster, and a



Goat and blue cheese éclair. Bottom: Dense, dark chocolate rocher with raspberry coulis

line-up of burgers and sandwiches are the newest entrants on the menu.

Assa House's version of the Coromandel Thali, is a conversation between Puducherry and Goa; both shaped by the tides and its colonial past. The vegetarian Coromandel Thali pays homage to the region's lush produce and delicate spices, whereas the seafarer's plate is a nod to fishing hamlets, spice-laden trade routes and jewels from the sea.

Cocktails at Assa House are imaginative. If you're looking for a daytime cocktail, look no further than a Limoncello Spritz or a Botanic Mist with gin, yuzu and fresh basil. But come eventide, an Assa Negroni hits exactly the right note. There are some delicious zero-proof cocktails too for the sober curious.

Loulou, the cocktail bar, situated above a flight of stairs behind a nondescript door inside Assa House, is dark and velvety and has a moody,

seductive feel to it, much like a lady's boudoir. With only 18 covers, the place is lit by flickering candles, with an antique John Broadwood piano gracing a corner, which Nitin reveals belonged to one of his grandmother's friends.

Created by Tulleehe, the cocktail programme includes Bimbli Spritz, which features pickled bimbli, gin, and gingerale. With multiple interpretations of the well-loved picante, I chose the Mandarin Picante, featuring a citrusy and fiery twist on the classic style, with homemade orange and grapefruit marmalade. There are cocktails with a Goan slant too, like the Veroni-ka, with

Malabar tamarind and an aged feni.

The food at Loulou is easy to graze and interesting, with its familiar as well as creative spin. Like edamame with a vivacious *thecha* salt or an Orleans roll, with shrimp salad and Emmental cheese.

In the end, what makes Assa House so compelling is not its architecture, nor its design, nor even its immaculate restoration. It is all of that, and more. Assa House isn't trying to recreate a bygone Goa. It is crafting a new one; rooted in memory, but also bold enough for what is personal. This is a home that welcomes you not just as a visitor, but as a character in its unfolding narrative. ♦

—Gargi Guha

GETTING THERE

The Assa House

House no. 127/1, Survey no. 1239,

Bouta Waddo, Assagao,

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RESTAURANT REVIEW: MUMBAI

Where Art and Appetite Meet: Kaspers Arrives in Bandra

The team behind The Table brings a blend of inventive food, thoughtful wines and artistic whimsy to Bandra's newest restaurant



Artistic, whimsical and effortless — that's the first impression of Kaspers as one steps in from a bustling Bandra lane. By the time you're ready to leave, the restaurant feels endearing and unforgettable, with its signature cherubs following you home in the form of a charming crayon box. The latest venture by Gauri Devidayal and Jay Yousuf — the duo behind The Table and Mag St. — Kaspers is poised to become Bandra's go-to spot for great food and an even better vibe.

Barely a month since opening, the restaurant is already buzzing. Its guests range from casual diners and birthday celebrations marked by flamboyant desserts to romantic date nights and lively catch-ups with friends. Kaspers celebrates craft in every form—food, design, art and storytelling. It is, in many ways, a collection of stories: those behind the food, the paintings, the frescoes, the cocktails and the memories guests create within these walls.

The name itself is a tribute to Polish-American artist Kacper Abolik, who spent a month painting frescoes across the ceilings and walls, giving the space its distinctive charm. His cherub—now the restaurant's icon—

appears everywhere, from the ceiling to the butter plate. Adding to the playful spirit, table napkin flowers and a box of crayons await at every table, coaxing guests to awaken the child within.

At its core, Kaspers brings together the cities that the restaurant and Chef Will Aghajanian love most. Think Florence, New York and Paris, all converging in the heart of Bandra. The white, blue and red chipped mosaic floor recalls old-world Mumbai, as do the pillars in vintage poster prints evoking a quieter era of Fiat and Ambassador cars on the city's streets. The sky-blue ceiling with delicate frescoes nods to Florence, while a dramatic red velvet curtain leading to the restroom evokes Parisian decadence. Step into the Yves Klein Blue painted bathroom, and you realise

how the designers have transformed the washroom into an artistic space.

The menu is global yet deeply personal. It reflects Aghajanian's experiences across kitchens, cities and flavours. Classic bistro traditions appear reimagined through seasonal produce, playful ideas and evocative memories. Expect a vegetarian Bouillabaisse Toast; Taleggio and Spring Garlic Arancini; Spinach Pie; Morcilla de Kerala with Queso Fondito Potato Rosti; and Buffalo Tenderloin with Sauce Chateaubriand.

"Kaspers is for people who've travelled the world, but it's still extremely approachable," says Aghajanian, who has cooked at Mugaritz in Spain, Per Se in New York and co-run restaurant Horses in Los

Angeles. "It's everything I love about dining — great food, simple drinks, attention to detail and an energy that lingers long after you've left the table."

His travels take delicious form on the plate. The Lemon Pepper Chicken Wings alla Grenobloise blend memories of lemon-pepper wings at Magic City in Atlanta and a variation of the classic Florentine petti di pollo al burro (butter chicken) from Trattoria Sostanza, finished with a Grenobloise sauce of browned butter with capers, lemon, and parsley. Similarly, the Mud Crab Gratin with lamb brain and Bengali dijonaise is Aghajanian's elevated tribute to a classic Mumbai *bheja* fry or *ghotala*. The touch of mustard comes from the Bengali staff

meals he once shared with line cooks at The Table — a flavour memory that now finds refined expression at Kaspers.

Among the menu's other specials is the Pasta alla Patra (named after Chef Biswanath Patra) served with red chilli vodka sauce, parmesan and basil. There's also the Pasta alla Nicolas, a meatball-stuffed rigatoni in arrabbiata and basil created as a tribute to Chef Nicolas "Kaka" from The Table. For vegetarian diners, the Portobello Pithivier au Poivre brings a classic French bistro favourite to the table with a thoughtful, locally attuned twist.

Curated by Gauri Devidayal, Kaspers' wine list features 12–15 labels with selections rotating every few months. To make wine feel approachable, every label is also available by the glass. "We have two styles of sparkling — the Mont Marçal Cava Brut and the off-dry Filipetti Asti Dolce. The Cava pairs beautifully with iced oysters, while the Asti Dolce was introduced specifically to accompany the day's special thinly sliced pork cuts and the 'Thick Cut Bacon', which has already become a crowd favourite," says Devidayal. The white wines have been chosen to complement the salads and lighter dishes — in anticipation of Kaspers' upcoming lunch service.

"The Paul Mas Sauvignon Blanc works wonderfully with the Sea Bream Tartare and the lemon pepper wings," she adds. For heartier plates, including the popular Kaspers Burger and the Buffalo Tenderloin, bold reds like the Michel Torino Malbec and Donna Laura Chianti are ideal. A selection of medium-bodied reds is also available for pairing with the diverse pasta offerings.

Cocktails follow a similar ethos



Chef Will Aghajanian, flanked by owners, Gauri Devidayal and Jay Yousuf

with timeless classics given a signature Kaspers twist. The Garibaldi Campari — strawberry, beer and fluffy OJ — pays tribute to Italian general Giuseppe Garibaldi, with its vivid red echoing the "red shirts" worn by his followers. The Ortiz Margarita, made with tequila, mezcal, Cointreau, Lillet Blanc and Maldon salt, is named after Aghajanian's friend, Chef Ortiz from New Mexico.

A grand meal must end on a sweet note, and Kaspers brings The Table's beloved Tiramisu to Bandra — bigger,

bolder and boozier — as the Coffee Cake Tiramisu. Sip a glass of off-dry sparkling wine before stepping back into the lively bustle of the Bandra lane that Kaspers now calls home. ♦

—Aditi Pai

GETTING THERE

Kaspers, Shop: 7/8,
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