



## The Old World and the New Worlds Apart?

*Warren Winiarski*

Some recent important comparative tastings between wines of the Old World and the New have challenged the assumption that these wines, arising from such different origins, can be judged by the same standards of excellence. Indeed, notwithstanding the botanical identity of the grape type, a question has been raised about whether the same criteria of excellence can be applied to wines of both worlds, or else whether the "worlds" are so different that their wines must be judged by different standards.

It would appear, then, that the key to this question could be reduced to the topic of "quality," that sometimes mysterious aspect of wine which make some wines stand out from others. What is it, we ask ourselves? All international competitive tastings presuppose that it is possible and desirable to judge the wines of many countries and to identify those which, in the opinion of the judges, possess "quality" to a greater or lesser extent. The judges, in their evaluations, assume that there are standards for wine quality which transcend the particular, national, and regional characteristics of origin and allow the wines to be compared according to those standards. Naturally, we need to reflect on that assumption.

The title of this essay suggests a polarity of approach. Is it really a polarity? Is the difference between the Old World and the New rather a difference of focus or emphasis? In this discussion, I take the point of view that there is a common *unity*. Relatedly, I endorse a viewpoint which says that wines can be understood and appreciated independently of their origin and that the distinction between the Old World and the New World is not as significant as



the distinction between the “regional” and “classic wines” from whatever origin.

I use the word ‘regional’ in a sense a bit different from, but not unrelated to, the typical use in the wine trade today where, it is used to describe a class of wines lower than the classed growers or the top-selling wines from a given winegrowing area. The reader will discover the difference in due course.

The history of wine itself suggests a common origin and an elaboration of the same tradition. It suggests continuity, not disjunction. Where did our history begin? Some place in the East, it is said. How far east is not clear. Egypt certainly; perhaps beyond. There is viticultural evidence suggesting that the ancestors of *Vitis vinifera*, so important to us, reach back to the Orient.<sup>1</sup> Our conscious history of the West seems to begin with Greece and Rome, from Rome throughout the Mediterranean basin, then northward across Europe, even to the “scepter’d isle,” and from thence, on imperial prows, to the great colonies in the New World: America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and beyond. I stated colonies but, of course, this is not meant specifically in a political sense. Rather, the colonizers are the bearers of vines and the art of winemaking.<sup>2</sup> They are going forth even today with the former colonials returning to tend the vines of the Old World. And of course, very recently, the Old World Europeans are coming again to the New World to prospect for vineyards, to plant their vines, and to make their wine on soil which has another flavor and flies another flag. They are serving Bacchus, who has been called a wandering god. It is obvious that the sugar of grapes is like the aroma of flowers. It acts as an attractant to promote the spread of the vine’s life wherever it can. You can see, then, by this transoceanic dispersion, how much more effective is the transformed sugar of the grapes. In spreading the joy of wine across the great seas, a remarkably satisfactory association of humans and fruit is born. I perceive, then, wherever the vines have spread, modifications of a common stream and not disjunction.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Patrick E. McGovern, Stuart J. Fleming, and Solomon H. Katz, *The Origins and Ancient History of Wine* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> George M. Taber, *Judgment of Paris: California vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting that Revolutionized Wine* (New York: Scribner, 2005).



The same appears to be true if we let our imagination play a bit to consider the first winemakers we can imagine. I suppose they might have been bees and birds. I can assure you that both are remarkably attentive little things. They observe the smallest changes in the vineyard relating to the ripening of the grapes – just as any good winemaker does. And when they discover a certain sugar level in the berries they certainly appear to be able to communicate what is taking place to others who are equally interested in the process. Soon, hordes of fascinated wine lovers are gathering to sample and, no doubt, to pass the word. I have tasted some of their wines. They are not bad at all, but they do not age.

Another thing to observe about the winemaking of birds and bees is that the wines they make are not stored and they do not travel from their place of origin. They are both made and consumed on the spot on the perfect vessel of the grape with its waterproof skin. And last, we may observe that their wines are made in a way that might be called traditional in the extreme. Each year the wines are made in exactly the same way. There are no changes in procedure – as far as she can observe – to accommodate changed circumstances, conditions, and grape character.

Therefore, to gather up these somewhat paradoxical observations, how does human winemaking differ from that of the birds and bees? In the first place, the wine humans make normally lasts for more than one season: there is a preserving aspect to human art. Second, humans are collectors and gatherers: they bring their grapes from the fields and collect them all together in larger waterproof vessels where the wines come to be (i.e., humans increase the batch size). Also part of this second difference, and even more important than mere collection, they select very carefully from the grapes available to them (i.e., they exercise choice in accordance with goals). Finally, they are always changing their actions in accordance with the changing circumstances of the place, the time, and the grape material: they are guided by purpose, vision, and inspiration to modify what is given. They are always deliberating and matching means to ends. These characteristics apply wherever humans make wine, at least to some extent.

The earliest written account of wine we have in the Western tradition is the one in the Bible. The Old Testament tells that directly



after the flood waters receded, Noah planted a vineyard.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this was not the first form of agriculture mentioned in the Bible. But the discipline of winegrowing (viticulture) as opposed to the mere gathering of fruit to use in one form or another is a particularly long-range form of agriculture; furthermore, it requires long-term, stable conditions. In the Covenant of the Rainbow, by which it is signified that earth-wide flooding will not reoccur, that needed stability and protection is promised. Now the Bible says that Noah planted the vineyard and drank the wine. It does not say that he made the wine. I puzzled over this curious omission for some time. Some of my friends who understand these things suggested a rule of reading this account which made sense. The rule is this: when the Old Testament is silent about an important topic, the silence is as important as what is said explicitly. They speculated that the silence is meant to indicate that Noah did not make the first wine but that it was a Divine Gift.

Now if the first wine did not come about by human forethought, then the first vineyard was not planted for the sake of wine. Otherwise, this would imply that Noah knew what wine was, and according to this account, he did not. However, afterwards, knowing the character of wine, humans could tend their vineyard both for nourishment from the fruit and to provide for the making of wine, which was another kind of nourishment. There is another question that follows upon this. Was the knowledge, skill or art that made possible the transformation of fruit to wine possessed in a perfect form by Noah in the beginning? Behind this question lies much of the difference between the Old World and the New. I shall mention it again later.

We should also observe that in the course of the biblical narrative, wine did not come in the Garden of Eden. Wine does not belong to humans as humans, but to humanity that has been expelled from the Garden. It belongs to a fallen humanity, which has needs and must toil by the sweat of its brow, in all those places which are *not* the Garden of Eden. Some of us call those places vineyards.

Let us not look at them. Grapes, of all the plant edibles, seem to be unusually sensitive to the region and to the circumstances of their

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 9:20-1.



growth. Unlike carrots, which are pretty much the same wherever they are grown, grapes and the wine they produce reflect their origin and their care to a high degree. Thus, in every place where vines are grown, they will express the regional character of soil, the climate, and other natural circumstances. They will also betray the work of the wine grower through his intent and his methods. Furthermore, in some places, favored because of the special character of the soil, climate, and those other natural circumstances, the wines seem to possess another possibility beyond expressing the regional character. These wines seem to lend themselves to the possibility of transcending the merely regional and reach what might be called the classic dimension.

This possibility of ascent might perhaps be the source of a tension between two current, different views of winemaking. First, it is a *useful* art insofar as it is *preserving* – like jelly and cheese making – because it preserves for another year the sunshine and the life of a year before: It later makes that preserved life available as nourishment. Second, it is also something like a fine art because, like music, its product is particularly *evocative*. This is so because it gives pleasure not through the satisfaction of any need but because of things like harmony, balance, complexity, and completeness. There is an old view that distinguishes between pleasures that come about through replenishment (as the pleasure of food seems to come about through removing the pain of hunger) and other pleasures which are not preceded by any obvious pain like hunger. Such pleasures, like those derived from music, were called unmixed pleasures.<sup>4</sup>

And so, from this double root of the art of winemaking, it seems that there come about two alternative ideas about “quality” or “excellence” in wines.

There are the wines which possess “quality” because they seem to represent the character of the soil and the climate of the region. Indeed, by a remarkable power of association, these wines seem to be able to express much about the unique place where they originated. We are attracted to them because they reveal their originality. We do like what is “our own.” There is a “comfort” in regional wines because

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book X, Chs. 1–5; Plato, *Philebus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, available at [classics.mit.edu/plato/philebus.html](http://classics.mit.edu/plato/philebus.html) (accessed June 20, 2007); John 4:7–16, 6:35.



they conform to what is "our own." They are good, here and now, precisely *because* they are like the here and now. There are charming, intimate associates with local circumstances, not only such as soil and climate, but even steeples, church bells, trees, villages, and history.

On the other hand, in some places where grapes are grown, there exists a potential for the wine to take another direction. For, in addition to liking what is "our own," we are attracted to the "best." I call this the "lure of the classic." In this instance, there is even some negation or moderation of the merely regional qualities of wine in order to avoid parochial associations. These wines possess "quality" because they take their bearings by considerations such as harmony, balance, proportion, scale, magnitude, and euphonic relationship of parts. It is clear from the enumeration of these qualities that there is no attempt, in this class of wine, to focus on or to enhance regional characteristics.

There is a related topic which must be addressed, and that is the perceived conflict between "traditional ways" and the "ways of innovation" in winemaking. The topic is related but is not identical to the one regarding the "regional" and the "classic." Each side to this discussion offers virtues which the other side sees as faults. And the faults on the other side are seen as aspects the other finds worthy of following. In the following description of the two sides, I will make statements as an advocate for each.

What, then, are the virtues of the traditional ways? Tradition, in its purist form, offers stability and continuity. Furthermore, it is inward and rooted. It says that the "old" is the good and the "new" is the bad. As it says this, it acts as a limitation to change, and it would prefer to resist change. It looks backward and beyond that. It says that, if the old is the good, then the oldest is the best – for, "the oldest is older than the old." A simple proof of this is as follows: The classic answer of a traditionalist to the question, "Why do you do it that way?" is, "Our fathers did it that way, and, if it was good enough for them, then it is good enough for us." An even more classic response is, "because we have always done it that way." There can be nothing older than always: always is forever.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Consider Shakespeare, *King Lear*, II.2. 278–381.



Now, however salutary and desirable it may be to take one's bearings by tradition in politics, morals, and customs, some reflection will show that the traditionalist view, in its pure form, is a questionable authority in the arts (especially in the useful arts<sup>6</sup>). There are a few arts which are not improved by practice. In fact, the useful arts seem, by their nature, to be progressive: they need tending from successive generations who learn and correct and correct again. If it were not so in winemaking, we would be learning the art from Columella, whose 2,000-year-old writings on wine and vineyards offer astonishing insights but are useful mainly for principles and not for practice.<sup>7</sup> Only those arts which have accomplished their purpose perfectly – without excess of defect, and it is said that there are some of these – can be said to be at an end. A desire to maintain tradition, then (about an art), supposes that tradition supplies *the* truth and the final answer.

Recently, a noted practitioner of the winemaking art in the Old World said: "We do not follow tradition as such, we do not follow bad habits, we do not follow tradition for the pleasure of being traditional, but we experiment so that we can know whether the tradition was right or wrong. And we found that it was right."<sup>8</sup> This appears to say, if I understand the man correctly, that "right" or "wrong" is a higher standard than tradition. His statement suggests that, as far as art is concerned, the traditional must be judged, used or modified in light of the higher standards. And so he appears to have concluded that in this useful art at any rate, what we are seeking is what is "good" and not the "old" as such.

I believe this interpretation of his words may surprise him; but I believe it may also be revealing and helpful. For to take one's bearings simply by the past means that the past must have discovered *everything* which is good and important about a practice or a discipline or an art. It would also mean that there is nothing of importance that is to be found in the present or in the future. That is, it assumes that the past has a fullness and a completeness to which

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders and T. A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1981), Book II, Ch. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Columella, *On Agriculture*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1941–55).

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Drouhin, "Directions in French Winemaking Symposium," American Institute of Wine and Food, 1986 (unpublished).



nothing can be added. It is finished. Such an assumption or conclusion would not appear to provide the impulse to make great wine.

The above conclusion brings us to the innovators' point of view. The innovators seem to take a position diametrically opposite to the traditionalist: the "good" is not in the past, but rather in the *future*. The "now" is but a stepping stone to some future perfection. They seem to say "we can make wines better (at some future time), if we 'know a bit more' or if we gather in the results of more experiments and data." They regard the past and tradition as fetters and shackles to the perfection that might come about through change. They welcome change. Perfection in the arts, they say, comes about by being free to speculate, to wonder and to try new things. Science, they say, is essentially progressive and they use science in the service of improvement. Besides, they ask, "what, essentially, *is* tradition?" And they have their own answer: is it not, they say, essentially the accumulation of trial and error? New things embedded in acceptance? Is it not concretized or sometimes even fossilized innovation?<sup>9</sup>

This innovationalist point of view provides for the relentless pursuit of technological improvement – what some would call, I think, the antithesis of being guided by culture. It is certainly powerful in the New World. But it is not absent in the old. Some of the most far-reaching investigations and discoveries are coming from studies in the laboratories of Old World industry and universities. I mention only the better-known studies of vine and root stock physiology, grape vine canopy management, clonal selection, disease-free cellular propagation, gene splicing, etc.<sup>10</sup> Remember that it was Louis Pasteur, an Old World fellow, who first discovered the mechanism of yeast fermentation.<sup>11</sup> All of this fundamental research supposedly in the service of improving the art of the Old World: science in the service of art. It appears, however, that there is a danger of a certain technological sterility and uniformity from this knowledge when applied. Science, like numbers, is universal: it does not admit of the charms of the local and the here and now. The wines produced by science

<sup>9</sup> Robert Mondavi with Paul Chutkow, *Harvests of Joy: How the Good Life Became a Great Business* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), pp. 197–8. (Compare the approach between Robert Mondavi and Andre Tchelistchef).

<sup>10</sup> Drouhin, "Directions in French Winemaking Symposium."

<sup>11</sup> Louis Pasteur, *Studies on Fermentation* (1879), trans. F. Faulkner and D. C. Robb (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969).





as such seem to obliterate the qualities we find endearing and lovable. Perhaps that is why the dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists would prefer to see some so-called "flaws" remain in their work (i.e., the ones they are used to and which are their own). They dread the thought of the success of what has been described as "perfection without a purpose."

In conclusion, I would like for you as the reader to think about this: the contemporary practice of the art of winemaking appears to be a blend which combines elements of both points of view. The Old World appears to emphasize tradition, the New World appears to emphasize innovation.

However, some of the traditionalists of the Old World preach tradition but practice the most rigorous scientific technology behind the casks and the cobwebs. On the other hand, some of the most vociferous innovators in the New World make pilgrimages to the ancestral shrines. And they both do what they do in the service of "quality," that mystery some of whose aspects we have explored.

What of the future for these two points of view and of the Old and New World of wine? I think we may safely surmise that they will draw closer together. The innovators will look to tradition to see if there is not something they have overlooked or forgotten. But they will not look to the past as past and therefore as authoritative. The traditionalist, who strictly speaking must regard the past as authoritative and therefore as embodying wisdom which cannot be exceeded in the present or the future, will nonetheless be looking – perhaps cautiously, distrustfully, reluctantly, even if inevitably – at what is revealed by inquiry. But he will do that in the light of self-confidence in a perfection already attained.

