

SNOW ON WINE

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ARE YOU A TERROIRIST?



The **NEW** vs **OLD** World Wine Debate

The February SES tasting, “The Sideways Effect: Pinot Noir from Around the World,” was well enjoyed (110 members and guests). Alexandra Barber from Wanderlust Delicato and Alex Van Amburg of Southern Glazers Wine and Spirits did a wonderful job of presenting the nine all Pinot Noir wines, and pointed out that Pinot Noir is the most terroir evocative of all grapes. Many SES members commented on the marked differences in aroma and taste between these wines. Some preferred wines with more fruit and some were drawn to the more savory or earthy notes. Many members liked each terroir style but for pairing with different foods. It would be difficult to design a wine presentation which could better demonstrate the effect of terroir. Leave it to the French to invent ONE word to describe everything that affects how a grape turns out: soil type, temperature, wind, precipitation, slope angle and aspect, and probably other things. And a wine known by it’s terroir is the hallmark of what many call the OLD world style.

Throughout Europe wines are most commonly labeled by the geographic region they come from. Think of Burgundy, Bordeaux, Chianti, or Rioja. To be sure, each producer in a given region must follow specific rules (enforced by government inspection) for that appellation as far as grape type, and other factors such as restriction on watering, yield in tons per acre, and even harvest dates, in order to be so labeled. So terroir is reflected fairly consistently across a region, and in sub-regions or specific villages even more so. Few French, Italian or Spanish wine drinkers think about or even know what the grape variety is, but they know what a Vouvray or a Beaujolais will taste like. So knowing the wine by it’s terroir is characteristic of OLD world style.



Here in the NEW world of wine (think USA, Argentina, Chili and Australia), folks want to know first and foremost the grape variety (i.e. Chardonnay, Merlot, Syrah) or type of grape blend (i.e. GSM, Cab/Merlot, etc). After that producer or brand, and lastly the region or AVA. Many of the branded wines we drink really have no identifiable terroir. Not that any of us drink “Charles Shaw” or Two Buck Chuck (TBC), but their Cab or Merlot is a blend of bulk wines from many



producer’s all over California (and probably elsewhere). Sure it is usually quite drinkable and generally tastes like it’s name sake grape, but of layers of flavor, complexities, or regional character it has none. And as we go up the typical supermarket wine shelves in price there are other TBC like wines -- maybe a little smoother or more flavorful. Take “Barefoot Cellars,” a brand founded in 1965 by California winemaker Davis Bynum. Cute bare feet on the label had appeal and they feature a “medal” or award on every bottle. It developed a big following and sold well, so in 2005 Gallo bought the brand. They expanded volume and product lineup and filled those bottles with wine blended from some of the thousands of tanks in their giant Modesto, California wine factory.



Gallo, the world’s largest wine producer, has similarly purchased over 150 wine brands (and has over 1500 individual wine products). Someone recently said to me, “I haven’t seen much Gallo wine recently”. Every wine bottle has a UPC bar code and under it a product number. If the first six numbers are **085000** it is a Gallo product even though there is no “G” word on the bottle. We’re likely drinking Gallo waaaay more often than we think. So the NEW world style gives us a huge selection of well made drinkable wines at a good price, but devoid of a connection to the earth or any given culture or identifiable terroir.

Now, here in Washington we have hundreds of truly independent small wineries, some of the best right here in Spokane, or with tasting rooms here. They are making wines from designated vineyards at “Barrister”, “Winescape”, “Robert Karl”, “Va Piano”, “Maryhill” and others, and those wines show very identifiable terroir. So while we see much NEW world style wine here, there is a bunch’o terroir driven wine right here to taste, buy and enjoy. A case could be made that Walla Walla “rocks” Syrah or Red Mountain Bordeaux variety wines are all about OLD world style. Wines connected to a place and identifiable winemaking style, and right here in the NEW world. And if California’s Gallo is the largest wine producer in the world, we in Washington have COSTCO, which I’ve been told, is the world’s largest wine retailer.



It is common for me to “run into ole wine buddies” in a Costco wine department. Wines there range in price from about \$5 to \$95 a bottle. There are pallets of inexpensive branded wine from all over the world – Portugal, Italy, New Zealand, and Argentina to name a few. Clearly New world wines with little or no identifiable terroir character, but good clean soundly made wine which are a pleasure to drink – nice fruit, great balance and they “punch” well above their cost. Then they have

wines of smaller wineries, often vineyard specific bottlings -- terroir driven wines. And likewise some amazing “Kirkland Brand” wines, private labeled from Chianti, the Rhone, etc. which are astoundingly good and show typical terroir character. These latter two groups are really OLD world style wines, driven by terroir, even if some are labeled by grape variety and brand. So COSTCO seems to be hedging it’s bet in the OLD vs NEW world style debate.

For the COSTCO members among us, just perhaps, which row of the wine department one frequents most might answer the question “are you a terroirist”? Now you can find me in every one of the rows. I love great terroir driven wines, wines which take me on a flavor journey to lands Julie and I have visited. Wines which develop wonderful complex layers of flavor with bottle ageing. These wines are my definition of OLD world style. But I love a good bargain as well – a soundly make, well balanced fruit forward wine selling for \$8 or \$9 but tasting like \$18 or \$20. Wine to drink today or next week at latest! My personal definition of NEW world wine. And does the debate have a winner? For me, both styles have a place – I call it a draw!

Every day pick what works best for you and your wining and dining friends and family.

Reference:

- 1) Veseth, Mike, Wine Wars II, The Global Battle for the Soul of Wine, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Lanham, Maryland, 2022, Pp 1 – 205.