

Understanding wine

by Michael Tabone

RECENTLY I was invited to a tasting of Australian wines, when someone asked me what I thought of new world wines compared to those of the old one.

I have always held that one should try to avoid making comparisons between the two, since they are so different. The beauty of wine is in its diversity, and clearly the bulk of new world wine has a style and character that is very different from the wines of France, Italy or Spain.

Of course there are exceptions but if one is to make comparisons I believe there are two fundamental differences that are very apparent – one to the novice wine drinker, and the other to the more passionate.

The first clear and distinctive difference between the old and the new world is, not surprisingly, in the flavour and taste. Many young people owe their first good wine encounter to the easy drinking wines of the USA, Australia or Chile, which when good are abundant with primary, ripe, fruity flavours that very often are typical of the grape variety that makes up a particular wine.

The buttery, banana flavours of Chardonnay, the spice of Syrah and the blackcurrant of Cabernet Sauvignon are nowhere offered so direct than in the new world. Very often these wines are heavily flavoured with oak tannins that are well integrated, which makes them appear easy and uncomplicated. They are versatile and affordable wines which have gained great popularity, especially among young, new wine drinkers in the 'wine bars' and *enoteche* of Europe.

On the other hand, in the old world tend to produce wines that are slightly more complicated to understand and appreciate. The bulk of our good wine is graced with hidden fruits and sometimes nuts or herbs. It is not so direct, and very often needs

a certain amount of bottle age, not only to open up, but also, in some cases, to become approachable. Especially in maturity our wines become extremely complex, showing great changes of flavour and sometimes earthiness, which are not attributed to the grape varieties that make up that wine.

For example when you taste a Chateau Musar from Lebanon, which is predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon, it is uniquely Lebanese. It very often is reminiscent of leather, tobacco, etc, but more importantly, it is so unique that sometimes it reminds tasters of other wines such as Chateau-neuf du Pape or Amarone, which are made from completely different grapes.

The difference in styles and flavours is there for everyone to taste and smell. Weather conditions, climate, winemaking techniques, etc., all contribute to this diversity, but there is a more fundamental contributing factor that makes wines from Europe and the Mediterranean so different from the new world.

For many centuries we have based our wine ideology on the concept of what the French call *terroir*. *Terroir* is a combination of factors that give a vineyard and therefore its wine a particular character. Vineyard position, microclimate, soils, subsoils, grape varieties and the winemaker all contribute to make a particular wine unique and different from another.

Over the years we have learned that a vineyard in Saint Emilion produces wines that are different from those of a vineyard in Pomerol – a few kilometres away. A Barolo is dif-

ferent from a Ghemme, although made with the same grape variety.

This concept of *terroir*, together with regional and political reasons, have been the basis of the wine legislation and promotion of wine in the old world. Chianti is known all over the world, but very few people know what grape variety makes this wine from Central Italy. The same can be



SAINT-EMILION, France – a town with a great wine-making history. A fine example of old world mentality and traditions kept alive by the Jurade, seen here parading through the cobbled streets of Saint-Emilion to celebrate the flowering of the vine.

said about Rioja or Sancerre.

On the same lines we would not dream of calling Château Petrus, "Merlot of Pomerol" or "Syrah of Hermitage" instead of "La Chapelle". The French protect this concept of *terroir* with all the power that international wine legislation gives them.

When a few years ago the Australians started calling white wine produced from Chardonnay, "Chablis of Australia", French winemakers from Chablis were up in arms about it and managed to stop the Australians from using the name of Chablis. They argued that although both wines were made from the same grape variety the wines could never be the same because the *terroir* in Australia is different to the one in the Chablis region of Burgundy in France. The same happened when Penfolds started promoting a wine made from Syrah as Grange Hermitage.

Since then the new world has adopted the policy of promoting wines by the varietal that makes up that wine. If you look at an American bottle of wine or a Chilean one you will immediately notice that the greatest importance is given to the grape variety followed by the company that makes the wine. Sometimes this is followed by details of aging or territorial names. Of course this is not always the case and wines from small vineyards where the *terroir* is exceptional are becoming more available.

Wines like Balmoral from Australia or Opus One from the USA are made using old world ideology, but still the grape variety is given great prominence on the label. It is mainly because of this that Chardonnay, Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon have become household names.

Another huge fundamental difference is a matter of size. Vineyards in

the new world tend to be huge estates and it is common to find 600 or 700 hectares in one parcel. Because of their size, these vineyards are run on commercial lines and concerns.

New world winemakers are proud of the fact that they have managed to build such enormous estates and that they are able to produce so much wine. They will talk to you about conglomerates and public limited companies, marketing and market research, state-of-the-art equipment with computer controls, etc.

On the other hand, to us Europeans the fact that a wine comes from a tiny vineyard which is still owned and farmed by the same family who has owned it for 200 or 300 years sounds very appealing. When we visit these places in Italy or France we like to meet the uncle or the grandmother. We appreciate the fact that the wine was made using an old wooden vat and that there are chickens or ducks running around.

We hear of many occasions where wines from the new world compete at blind tastings with wines from the more traditional wine producing countries. We also taste Italian wines that are made to taste like French. Occasionally we also come across old world wines that are made to taste as easy and direct in the style of the new world.

I believe that a wine should be allowed to express the land it was grown on and for this reason a wine from Saint Emilion should be judged on the Saint Emilion characteristics it has. Similarly, a wine from the Mediterranean should be judged on how herby and concentrated it is.

Irrespective of how many points or medals and commendations a wine gets, winemakers must remain true to their roots and produce wines that are typical of the area the vines are grown in. Without a doubt I feel that this should be the basis of all judgment of wine which is free from personal opinion and gives the true wine lover the diversity so many *terroirs* have to offer.

The French and Italians have come up with a new term for all this – *tipicità*, and it is this, I feel, that should be the basis of judging wine. If a wine does not have this 'typicality' it can only be described as a copy or a fake.

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