

Food and drink

The chicken story



Michael Tabone

The benefits that agri/industries have brought to the financial and supply aspects of the food and drink chains are nothing short of astonishing. Production is faster, bigger and guaranteed more than ever before.

Just take as an example the local chicken industry. Can you imagine the demand from Air Malta's food suppliers, the health department, domestic and the catering industry? It must be colossal.

Not only does the poultry industry have no problem with meeting this demand but rather astonishingly it has managed to keep chicken meat available to all because of its low prices. Yes, the chicken industry with all the modern, high tech, agro/medical and chemical advances is truly efficient. It's a shame that the result of all this efficiency is that today very few people know what a chicken should taste like.

This problem was highlighted at a lunch during a recent wine trip to Sicily with a group of wine lovers and wine professionals. Hosted by Azienda Agricola COS near Vittoria whose wine philosophy is now firmly and encouragingly focused on natural wines that reflect their origins, we were served pieces of free range, naturally grown chicken which was very simply fried. I could see that everyone was enjoying their food. Happy, smiley, content but slightly confused faces that could not figure out what meat they were eating. This chicken tasted so much like chicken that most people did not know what it was.

Technological, agrochemical and scientific developments in the wine industry are also creating a real danger of altering people's perception of what wine should taste like. Cultured yeasts, fermentation enzymes and flying winemakers/consultants among others, are leading to the standardisation of wine and the destruction of the 'typicity' of many wines whose quality criteria is based on specific geo/cultural and climatic conditions. We are already seeing untypical, meaningless wines which unfortunately are gaining more popularity.

Unless we do something about it now, a dull and boring future based on standard wines with varying degrees of concentration and alcohol will be upon us. In the quest to identify blueberries and blackberries in wine, consumers will overlook diversity, elegance, finesse and drinkability.



While I am the first to protect the notion of subjectivity and that each and every wine drinker has a right to an opinion, people who work with wine have a responsibility to ensure the future of real wines. At face value I suppose that the most apparently logical group of professionals carrying this responsibility are the winemakers themselves. But in an extremely competitive wine world, there are many reasons why winemakers can be excused for searching headlines and glory outside the boundaries of 'typicity'.

On the other hand, I make no excuses for wine professionals. The influence and importance of someliers, opinion makers and educators in the wine world of today is unquestionable and many young newcomers to wine look for their inspiration.

God forbid, some international and more importantly for us, local wine professionals want us to believe that the future of wine lies in the branded, industrial plonk simply because young newcomers to wine find these wines and their labels easy to understand. As someone who works with wine I feel that I have a duty to promote and protect the geo/cultural individuality and diversity of wine.

“

Unless we do something about it now, a dull and boring future based on standard wines with varying degrees of concentration and alcohol will be upon us

”

Although the business of wine is an industry, good wine is not an industrial product. Good wine is essentially an agricultural product, which means it is by nature subject to all the natural conditions of a specific area where it is grown. That is why some wines are sometimes out of stock and that is why real wines vary in taste, structure, quality and style from region to region and from year to year.

On the other hand, it is very easy to understand why industrial drinks which are sold as wine have no problem with supply and offer similar tastes year after year.

The other notion often put forward by influential local journalists is that wine should be labelled, promoted and sold by grape variety, wrongly claiming that this is the easiest way to understand wine.

Even if this simplifies the selling of some new world wines, the concept is fundamentally flawed, especially with European wines, as besides overestimating the input that the variety gives, it degenerates the concept of diversity and 'typicity' of a particular region and fuels wine globalisation.

At a popular Valletta wine bar I recently overheard a client requesting a bottle of Syrah to

which the owner offered wine from Australia, South Africa and Chile but not Crozes Hermitage or Bel, both of which are made from Syrah. From experience I am convinced that if these are offered the client would be intrigued.

"I did not know that France has Syrah," I was recently told when I suggested it. More importantly everyone should be aware that wines do not taste of a grape variety but rather of geo/political/climatic/technical factors and that the grape is just one of many components, as those of you who have tasted Isis, Chablis and Rosemount's Diamond Chardonnay will testify.

I suppose we are back at that old French word 'terroir'. Terroir is the DNA of all great wines of the world. It gives wine its identity, its typicity. It is the one single factor that for over 5,000 years has fired and still fires the passion and enthusiasm of wine lovers everywhere. The message is simple.

We have a responsibility to uphold the spirit of true wine. Just like a chicken that does not taste of chicken is no chicken. A wine with no typicity has no soul and a wine without a soul is only a drink.