Issue 07

fine lees

Sustainability
What does it actually mean?

Gin
Victim of its own success?

Tuscany
Where tradition meets bling

Nature v Nurture
What's the role of the winemaker?


Issue 01
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The unfiltered
Wine Report

In a market where wine has to compete with craft beer, low-ABV cocktails and even the gym, it's more important than ever to capture consumer imagination.

And nothing taps into the zeitgeist quite like conscious consumerism. People are increasingly using their purchasing power for the greater good (or at the very least, to be seen to be), and a growing number of consumers from all age brackets are willing to spend more on products that have a positive impact on the environment or community. In the wine world we've been banging on about the benefits of sustainably-made wine for years. But do we need to get smarter about how we define it? **Mike Turner** explores some of the contradictions surrounding 'sustainability', and asks whether we should be making it easier for consumers to feel they're making the right choice.

When it comes to capturing the imagination, one category's been evolving faster than a pug on a fixie bike. And that's gin. But could a tidal wave of coloured, flavoured and novelty gins be damaging the integrity of the category as a whole? **Chris Losh** goes back to the start, to investigate how gin got quite so massive, and ponders where the fickle fans of new-wave gin might head once the novelty has worn off.

The second half of this issue tackles that delicate balance between tradition and innovation, raw material and the winemaker's touch, that makes wine so captivating.

During a recent trip to Tuscany, **Charlotte Levy** was struck by the contrasting sides to this region and how the traditional can rub alongside the new in apparent harmony. She travels from Maremma to Chianti to explore how the Super Tuscans and the stalwarts of Classico both play their unique, but complementary roles in Tuscany's enduring success.

Finally, in a time when any winemaker who wants to be taken seriously professes to 'let the wines make themselves', **Elona Hesseling** questions the role of nature versus nurture. Spanning the world, she asks a few of her favourite producers for their take on the issue, and gets some fascinating insight from some of today's finest winemakers (or should that be enablers...)

We've got some juicy topics to sink your teeth into, so get stuck in and let us know what you think on social ***@bibendumwine.***

Santé!

Sophia Godyn

Sophia is Bibendum's Brand Communications Manager. It was Sainsbury's Beaujolais that helped her bridge the gap from Snakebite & Black to the world of wine and she hasn't looked back since. After a stint doing 'a proper job' in the financial services sector, she decided to mix business with pleasure to start marketing wine. Today she runs Bibendum's website, social media channels and printed publications, and is now more likely to be seen with an elegant Spatburgunder or barrel-fermented South African Chenin than a Snakebite & Black...

Can we ever trust that a wine is truly SUSTAINABLE?

by Mike Turner

DESIGNED BY
Shannon Mayhew
& Youri Greffe

Consumers are becoming more picky. From fruit and veg, to clothes, cosmetics and indeed wine, good quality and value aren't enough any more. The conscious consumer wants evidence that what they're buying has been produced with 'sustainability' in mind. Mike Turner investigates the theme of sustainable wine and looks around the world to find out how the trade is attempting to define this most slippery of winemaking terms...

Sustainability means...

...answers on a postcard please.

When I hear about a wine being produced 'sustainably' I automatically think it should be something I need to get behind, but I'm not always 100% sure why.

For most of the wine-producing world, each individual producer still needs to explain why they consider themselves sustainable, rather than being able to point to an internationally recognised set of criteria. And, almost as importantly, an internationally recognised stamp on their wine labels that enables consumers to feel like they're making a consciously positive choice in the wine aisles.

Current definitions of sustainability

They do exist, I promise you! However, the important word in that sentence is the word 'they', i.e., there is more than one. Many more than one in fact.

Arguably the wine world's most famous and championed definition is that of the Sustainable Winegrowers of New Zealand (SWNZ). Developed throughout the 1990s, 96% of Kiwi wine is classified as sustainable under these nationwide regulations.

In France, the government has actually laid down the definition themselves, with their HVE (high environmental value) levels. Farming communities across France are being encouraged to sign up, and the Vignerons Independants de France is one of its biggest supporters.

But none of these definitions is the same, subject as they are to the pitfalls of internal politics and local lobbyists. As an industry we will continue to confuse the consumer and, let's be fair, ourselves, if we can't come up with a globally accepted definition.

From what I can work out, current guidelines set out by the bodies mentioned above leave us looking at four major categories: Viticulture, Energy, Community, and Economics. Which are all worthy of further explanation...

1.

VITICULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

The most obvious place to start is the one where we can easily piggy-back from existing organic, biodynamic, or lutte raisonée practices.

Isabel Galindo of Las Moradas De San Martin has one of the best definitions you'll hear. **Are your kids, grandkids or great grandkids going to be making wine on your land in the same way in 100 years time?** If yes, then you're sustainable. If no, maybe you need to have a think, and fast. The knowledge of how to do it properly, in her view, has a time frame:

"I need to ask my grandparents now how they did it before. My parents only knew one way of doing things, and that will lead us to dead soils within a few decades."

The advent of what we now call conventional techniques, that spread throughout the 1920s, was in response to a new post-World-War landscape of city dwellers and smaller country communities. So entrenched are some in how the status quo has worked for decades, that Italian winemaker friends of mine have regaled me with stories of college lectures from wizened old professors telling them that biodynamics is all hokum and organics is just a marketing fad.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that a positive increase in biodiversity can help with everything from pest management to soil preservation and even improvement.

And with that the improvement in the quality of the grapes making their way to the winery. If you add basic tick-list waste management procedures, then you can already make a huge difference to your farming and help ensure that the kids are inheriting something worth inheriting.

Las Moradas de San Martin Vineyard, Spain

2.

ENERGY SUSTAINABILITY

It's a two-lane question. Where do you get your energy from and how efficient are you at using it?

Modern wineries shouldn't be designed without some form of solar panelling or geothermal collection system. Gravity-fed wineries may reduce the abrasive nature of pumping over, but they also reduce the energy inputs.

David Trafford of De Trafford Vineyards in Stellenbosch originally trained as an architect, and energy efficiency runs throughout his winery:

"It's not as easy as you'd think, because you have no idea how often you'd like to rack, so you're guessing at the number of levels you need. But overall it's the right thing to do. I'd guess by now we're a carbon neutral operation."

One of the biggest arguments against organic winemaking is that the sprays allowed are far less targeted than modern chemical treatments. That means taking the tractor out to treat your vineyards four times as often as a conventional farmer.

OK, you're using more natural products, but also four times the diesel. It was just last year that Chateau Lafon Rochet turned their back on organic farming, citing this as a major factor in their decision.

Water, water everywhere?

Water management should, in theory, have its own section. A resource more precious than many care to admit.

It's not as simple any more to plant a vineyard where you want and install mass irrigation systems.

Mendoza in Argentina has just 3% of land under vine, but no-one is allowed further plantings without demonstrating that they have a natural and sustainable water source. Vineyard water management is as crucial to the future of winemaking as it gets.

Millton Vineyard, New Zealand

3.

COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

My wife works in management consulting, and in particular in consulting on the supply chain. That means when a consumer buys a product from a vendor, it becomes the vendor's responsibility, to an extent, to ensure the sound provenance of the product. In wine, the word provenance is generally used when we're talking about counterfeit bottles, selling for gazillions of dollars to unexpected collectors at auction houses.

But what if it meant other things too?

Let's look at the fashion trade. I'm not going to repeat certain claims about how large high street retailers can get clothes made so cheaply, and who they exploit to do so, but public opinion is very clear on it. The 2010 headline that pointed the finger at M&S, Gap, and Next for paying Indian workers 25p an hour in 'sweatshops' saw angry reactions from consumers, and a previously clueless set of management asking serious questions.

The old battle of big business versus the good of the community is as persistent as it is complex.

Look at the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, following supposedly economically sound decisions on everything from mining to the railways. Then look at what happened, and what is still happening to those communities. Canadian Derek Mossman Knapp, head honcho at Garage Wine Company in Chile, ensures that local farmers and their families are integral to everything he does, not just from an employment point of view, but also in terms of their education, renovation, and future prospects.

It's not just about being a good neighbour or a good citizen. It's about being a good human being.

Ensuring the satisfaction and health of the people and their families who work for you, or simply live near the winery, must be integral to the long-term viability of that winery.

Garage Wine Company, Chile

4.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

"What's the quickest way to make a small fortune? Start with a large one and buy a vineyard!"

We've all heard that one, right? But say that little joke in front of a few vineyard owners and you won't be surprised at how few will laugh.

Grape growers are farmers that are subject to the whims and wants of both Mother Nature and the markets. The move towards what we'd consider 'conventional' farming techniques in the first half of the twentieth century gave them the upper hand. Devastating harvests, whilst not necessarily a thing of the past, became at least few and far enough between that businesses needn't go under. To now ask those same farmers to make changes to their viticultural and vinicultural practices, changes that they believe will put that relative calm under jeopardy, is something that is not always going to be met with warm smiles and obliging consent.

The Three E's

It's hugely important, therefore, that any definition of sustainability includes that of economic sustainability. California's own CSWA has three steadfast mantras to sustainability, known as the '3 E's'. The obvious 'E' is environmentally sound. Another is socially equitable. I think they may have used a thesaurus to squeeze that one in, but we'll let them off. And the third, just as important to the mix, is economically feasible.

On a recent trip to New Zealand, I was blown away by the idea that no farms in New Zealand receive subsidies. They have to be economically viable on a standalone basis. Compare that to a cabbage farmer in Lincolnshire, or even a Moscato grape grower in Piemonte, both heavily reliant on subsidies to stay afloat, and think about the importance of economic sustainability as part of a move towards a 'sustainable' future.

As the great James Millton once prophetically said; "You can't be green if you're always in the red".

Managing the economics of the business is necessary inclusion into any definition.

James Millton, Millton Vineyard, New Zealand

Detractors of sustainability

There are detractors of the term sustainability, but in general they point to the lack of a solid definition, or the pressures it would put on stubborn conventional farmers to change their ways.

I had a chat on Twitter recently with a rather vociferous supporter of organic wine. That in itself is not a problem, but he was also rather unhappy at the term 'sustainability'. For all its issues behind the scenes, organic winemaking is easy for a consumer to understand and get behind.

As my Twitter... er... 'friend' pointed out, "They don't use Roundup, so it must be good."

On a more serious note, however, some organic organisations do worry about a formal definition of sustainability. Will it weaken the call to move to organic farming? Are we just hiding the health risks and foregoing the push towards something more stringent for the ease of most concerned?

From the producers' point of view, they don't want to be laden with an administrative straight-jacket, with no room for entrepreneurship, which has led many winemakers to shun the certification of organics or biodynamics.

In the most marvellously French comment I've heard, Pascal Ferey from the French Agricultural Union laid down his concerns regarding a potential "regulatory millefeuilles".

The future of sustainability

As I mentioned in the opening to this piece, 'sustainability' is a term I feel I could get behind, but it needs more headline-grabbing uses and firmer definitions.

> The future is looking bright.

In France the HVE has now been taken on by the winegrowers of St Emilion. If you're not HVE compliant by the end of 2020, your Saint Emilion reds will only be allowed to be called Bordeaux Rouge. On the left bank, to attain the levels of Superieur or Exceptionelle in the new Cru Bourgeois system, you need to be HVE Level 3 certified

Keep Moving

Established current definitions must use their first mover advantage to continue to set an example. With 96% of Kiwi producers hitting their targets, can the SWNZ raise the bar a little higher in the coming years? Can the CSWA begin to talk to their colleagues in Washington or Oregon for an all-inclusive West Coast Sustainability programme?

From a national or supra national point of view, a more far-reaching definition could have huge implications. If the UK or EU were to inherit a definition of sustainability in the same frame as New Zealand, and include it in their global tradae agreements, we could quickly drag the largest winemaking countries in the world to similar levels of responsibility, making them think more carefully about what they do with the land they're borrowing from future generations.

Moving forward from here

You don't have to be a card carrying eco-warrior to ask questions about how your wine is produced, or how your food is grown. The generations coming through are some of the most ecologically and socially aware the world has known. If the wine trade is going to stay relevant and retain the ability to produce wine as we know it today, we need to look at how sustainable the industry currently is.

That we don't really have a globally agreed definition right now isn't a problem. Arguably, it's an advantage. We have the ability to worry less about what it does mean, and instead to think about what it should mean.

And move forward from there.

> "The generations coming through are some of the most ecologically and socially aware the world has known."

Mike Turner *has been blogging, writing, and commentating on the wine industry for the last 5 years with a focus on industry sustainability drives and their interlinked roles within wider international industry development. He is a leading contributor for The Buyer magazine, runs a wine specialist web design and social media consultancy service, is the UK Director of wine retail site 20h33, and owns La Ferme restaurant in Primrose Hill.*

The gin boom is still well underway, but could the growth in flavoured, sweetened and coloured gins spell the end for the category's credibility?

Chris Losh *investigates how this once desperately unfashionable drink got quite so huge, and why it might end up a victim of its own success.*

COULD A TIDAL WAVE OF NOVELTY GINS SIGNAL THE IMPENDING DEMISE OF THE CATEGORY?

by Chris Losh

DESIGN BY *Silvia Ruga*

If you fell into a coma in 1994 – perhaps as the result of a fist fight with Liam Gallagher or being squashed by Mr Blobby – and woke up in the era of Boris Johnson, several things might strike you as odd. Brexit, for one; the internet, smart phones and social media, for another.

But also the UBIQUITY OF GIN.

Because make no mistake about it, 25 years ago, gin was emphatically not A Thing. It was the drink of middle-class sitcom dinner parties. Of 'ice and a slice'. Of feeble single measures and lukewarm tonic.

Ask for it at a mate's house and they'd probably smile politely, have a token rummage around their drinks cupboard, then offer you Smirnoff or Jack Daniels instead.

Request it in a bar or restaurant and 99% of the time, your choice was Gordons, Beefeater and, if you were lucky, Tanqueray.

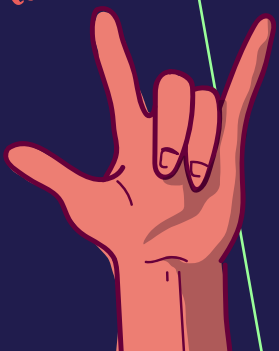
Nowadays, the tonic list alone can stretch to double figures, while the roll call of actual gins is measured in the dozens at any pub or bar with serious pretensions.

In the mid-90s, I was working on a drinks magazine, and the annual gin feature was a nightmare. There was nothing to say. We'd contact the main players to see if they'd done anything new, and the answer was usually 'no'.

'We just need to get people to appreciate what a great spirit it is', the brand managers would say, more in hope than expectation, and clearly desperate to get shifted onto a cooler category like vodka.

GIN WAS NOT COOL

It was where hopes and credibility went to die.



So what changed?

Well first of all, vodka started to innovate itself to death. Production methods became more unnecessary (quintuple distilled, triple-filtered through diamonds), flavourings became more outrageous, unpleasant and harder for bartenders to work with.

And as vodka disappeared up its own column still, that left a gap for something else. It needed to be mixable, accessible and affordable. Gin ticked all those boxes and slowly, slowly, from being the drink that sat ignored on the side lines, it began to edge onto the dance-floor.

The two key brands in the early stage of this renaissance were, for different reasons, Bombay Sapphire and Tanqueray No. Ten.

The former was launched in the late 1980s, but started to gather pace around the time our imaginary coma-patient was being sat on by Mr Blobby. It was delicate rather than strongly-flavoured (so handy for people migrating across from vodka) and it looked terrific. The blue bottle stood out for miles around, while the etchings of botanicals told you why gin was, well, gin.

Tanqueray No. Ten came out in the new millennium, after two years (and several hundred distillations-worth) of experimentation and trials. It wasn't widely available to the general public, but select bars could get it, and for any serious Y2K 'mixologist' it became a badge of honour.

Gin was becoming interesting – and Hendrick's ensured that it would get even more so.

Though it first appeared around the time of Tanqueray No 10, Hendrick's took a while to really establish itself. But its production methods (a London dry gin, with flavourings added), its flavour profile (decidedly non-traditional cucumber and rose) and its quirky cod Victorian packaging were like nothing the industry had seen before.

If Bombay had mass-market appeal, and Tanq 10 had prestige chic, Hendrick's was quirky, retro-modern and somewhat ironic.

It's probably not much of an exaggeration to say that most of the brands that we see now owe something in their production or packaging to one (or all) of these three. Between them, they marked a blueprint for the spirit's revival.

And when Sipsmith became the first new gin distillery to set up in London for almost 200 years in 2009, it seemed like a watershed moment. After being lost in the wilderness for so long, it was official: ***gin was coming home.***

And, well, we all know the story since 2010. It's been one of unallayed growth and excitement. Whereas we'd be lucky to see half a dozen gin launches a year pre-millennium, now there's probably one a week in the UK alone.

A few years ago, I drily wrote that the definition of a city ought to be whether a place had a gin distillery, rather than whether it had a cathedral. Except that the ginaissance/june-nami has been so ubiquitous that such a definition would now probably cover over half the country.

It may not be true, but it certainly seems that you're more likely to live near a gin distillery than a post office. Hogarth's Gin Alley has become a Ginopolis.

BEWARE THE GIN RUSH

Gin's on a roll, bars and pubs are stocking it by the palette-load and there's energy, investment and excitement to burn throughout the category.

So everything's good, right?

Well, yes. But rather like a sherry bodega, there's some pretty big but(t)s lurking in the darkness.

For starters, it's no great surprise that not all of the new launches are that good. Gin's cheap to make and, since it requires no ageing, quick to get to market. No surprise, then, that for every committed, passionate artisan, there's an opportunistic profiteer or clueless neophyte, their eyes awash with pound-signs.

And hey, who cares if the liquid's a bit 'MEH'?

A quirky back-story, local credentials and swanky packaging can go a fair way to getting you listings, it seems.

Geraldine Coates, long-established doyenne of the spirit and respected international judge, told me that she was on a tasting panel recently where 80% of the gins were 'awful'.

'People who don't have the skills are making a liquid and calling it gin,' she sighed. 'There's a lack of expertise in the distillation process.'

One distiller for a respected large brand told me that he was approached by a couple of young bucks at an event recently, who were struggling to get their new gin just how they wanted it.

'How long have you been trying it?' he asked. 'Three months' came the reply. 'You have to remember that Charles Tanqueray and Alexander Gordon took years to perfect their London Dry,' he reminded them.

The Gold Rush fever surrounding gin has led to a tendency to rush spirits out before they've been perfected, or simply produce poor examples due to a lack of expertise. But while this isn't doing gin too many favours, it shouldn't prove fatal.

After all, over time the spirits that don't have the quality to back up their marketing spiel will mostly fall by the wayside.

At what point does *Gin* stop being *'Gin'*...?

Of far more concern to all of those invested in the gin world is the growth of flavoured gins.

These are made by adding flavours (and often colouring and sweetness) to a gin.

There are dozens of fruit versions out there some are good, some are vile and many more novelty flavours such as bubble gum, chocolate, lemon drizzle cake and clotted cream.

The day I was filing this, someone flagged up the launch of a Tutti-Frutti gin liqueur.

And this is where gin is getting itself into trouble. After all, a traditional gin must taste largely of juniper – that's where the name comes from; it's an anglicisation of the Dutch juniper-flavoured spirit genever.

But there's no separate classification for these new heavily flavoured, usually brightly-coloured and often decidedly sweet variations. They're just 'gin'.

Emma Stokes, who Tweets under the name @ginmonkey and has been voluble about protecting gin's identity with the hashtag #stopfuckingwithgin believes that these new products shouldn't be labelled as gin.

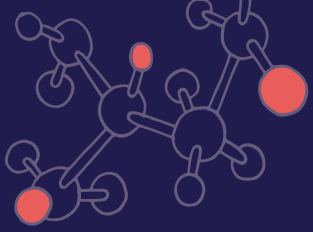
'There is a whole other category you can use to label your [flavoured] product,

she says with more dryness than you'll find in any of the newcomers.

'It's called vodka...'

Except, of course, that gin is currently fashionable. Put those magic three letters on a label and the bottle sells. And flavoured gins are a good way of hooking in punters who don't actually like the taste of London Dry styles. They get the kudos of drinking something called 'gin' without any of that troublesome juniper nonsense.

The Wine and Spirit Trade Association is looking at creating a new 'Flavoured Gin' classification, but unsurprisingly, given that serious money and livelihoods are at stake, it's taking a while.



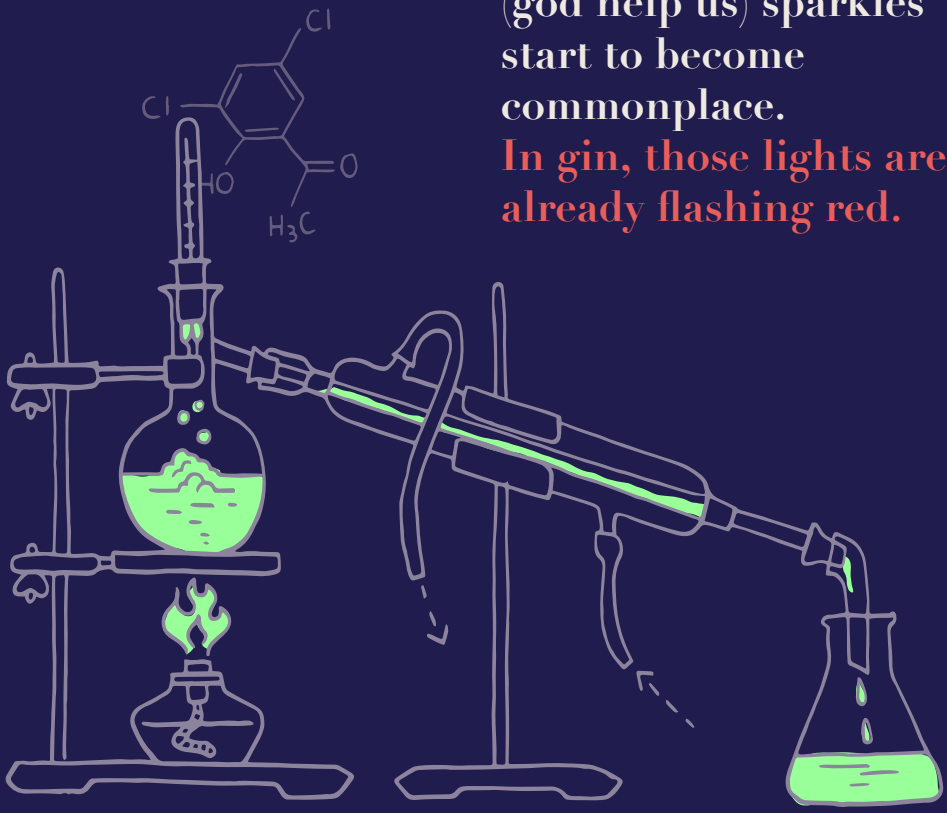
And in the meantime, 'classicists' within the gin field are concerned that, having finally made gin stylish, fashionable and interesting again, the growth of bright, syrupy, novelty flavours might undo all of that good work.

Certainly, there's a cyclical nature to drinks; that what is fashionable now will be deader than corduroy in 30 years time. And of course categories need an element of innovation to keep customers interested and stop them migrating elsewhere.

It's equally true that some of gin's appeal is its slight Wild West air; that the loose legislation attached allows new distilleries to try different things without fear of censure. Latitude like this isn't granted to, say, producers of Cognac or Scotch whisky.

But there comes a time when innovation oversteps the line and becomes simple gimmickry. Gimmickry, moreover, that can start to tug at the foundations of what the category is meant to be all about in the first place.

For me the warning signs for any drinks category are when colours, sugar and (god help us) sparkles start to become commonplace. In gin, those lights are already flashing red.



The question is not whether people will migrate away from gin over the next five years – I'd say that's inevitable in any boom category – but whether it will be a gentle correction or a wholesale abandonment. Whether the people who've discovered 'proper' gin will stick with it even as the lovers of Pug Unicorn Cakemix Sparkle gin head off somewhere else for their sugar fix.

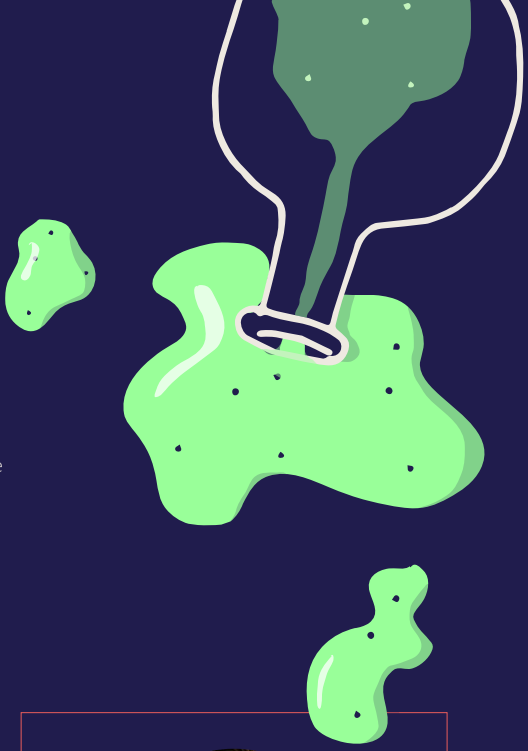
Like any journalist, I have no idea.
And equally, like any journalist, that's not going to stop me making a prediction, which is that the base of gin lovers and gin brands is now so broad that the category can never go back to the tumbleweed hinterlands it inhabited in the mid-1990s.

I'd guess that most of the smaller 'distilled in a local garage' brands will disappear along with the majority of the more outré flavoured variations. None of this would be bad.

Equally, some of the better new creations could go on to threaten established giants and be bought up by big producers. We've seen it in craft beer. No reason it won't happen in gin, too.

There'll be changes, in other words, but they won't amount to the seismic shifts of the last 20 years.

If I get sat on by Mr Blobby tomorrow and wake up in 2045, I'd like to think that gin will still be recognisable, and still going strong.



Chris Losh has been writing about drink for 25 years during which time he's eaten and drunk ridiculously well to make up for the lack of a viable salary. He's edited Wine and Spirit International and Wine Magazine (both long deceased) and, until recently, Imbibe, which he helped set up 12+ years ago. Last year, Quadrille published his fifth book: Where to Drink Wine. In his spare time he likes to drink gin and count his grudges. He's saving up to buy himself a spare liver.

TUSCANY: making diversity great again

ARTICLE BY Charlotte Levy | DESIGNED BY Sophia Martin

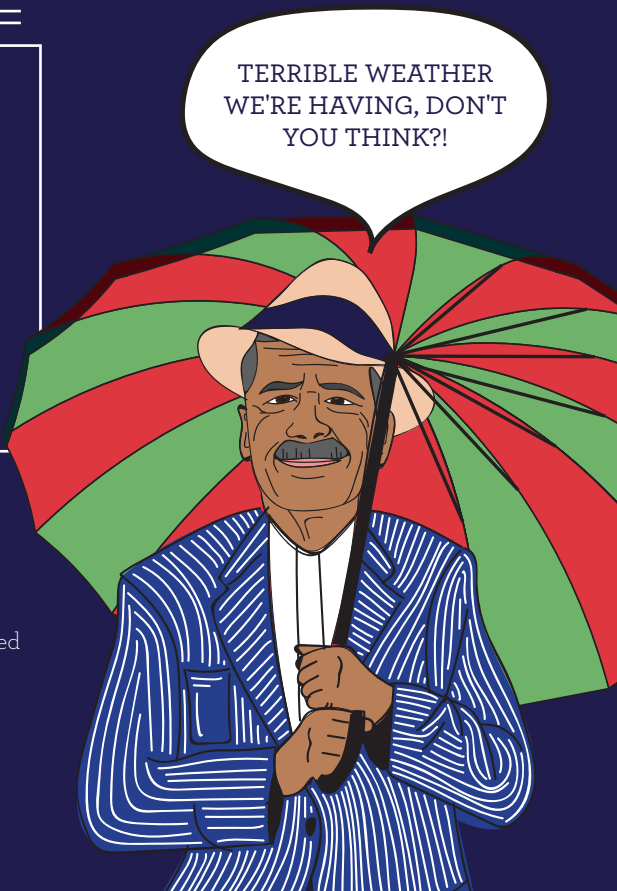
PHOTOS BY CHARLOTTE LEVY

THERE ARE TWO SIDES TO TUSCAN WINEMAKING

The classic Chianti-producing wineries steeped in tradition and heritage, and those who ripped up the rule book to make the so-called 'Super Tuscans' from international grape varieties. On a recent trip to the area, *Charlotte Levy* explores the contrasts and harmonies that exist in this diverse winemaking region.

> "You chose a terrible time to visit Italia. It's been the coldest, wettest May in 40 years," remarks our Airbnb host. It's pouring with rain, and we are sat in a tiny one-bed studio flat overlooking the stormy Chianti hills.

Despite the cold, wetter-than-usual weather, Tuscany is more than ever my favourite place, and not just for the to-die-for food and stunning views. The wine culture is fabulous to explore, something you cannot just experience on paper or through imported bottles. Drive from south to north and you'll walk away with an entirely different picture of this glorious region, and the wider world of wine.



WHERE CONTRAST AND HARMONY **CO-EXIST**

CASTELLARE TASTING BOTTLES


CASTELLARE CELLAR

It's a strong statement to declare one's viewpoint changed after a holiday, but hear me out.

If there's one thing lacking in the world today, it's a sense of acceptance and togetherness. But I felt both these things in abundance in Tuscany. Alongside an air of hope, passion and ambition, there was something refreshing in the harmonious contrast between traditional Chianti and the land of the Super Tuscans. Both different and special, each driving quality and interest in Italian wine forward.

> **That's not to suggest there is no underlying tension in their differences, or that some producers don't agree with planting international varieties on native Tuscan soil.**
>
> *But that wasn't how I saw it...*

...especially when visiting the wineries of the Domini Castellare di Castellina group. Established in the 1970s (during the Italian wine renaissance), the group now has four wineries, two of which are in Sicily. But my focus is on their Tuscan wineries, Castellare di Castellina (after which the group is named) and Rocca di Frassinello. If their story doesn't fill you with positivity for the future of traditional winemaking, and how it can thrive alongside new ideas and modernity, then I am at a loss as to what will.

GOING BACK IN TIME

Castellare di Castellina, first of the four established by group founder Paolo Panerai, is nestled just down the road from Castellina village. Quaint and pretty with a definite feeling that it's 30 years behind, the village restaurants are good for winding down and enjoying some hearty Tuscan food (we tried Antica Trattoria la Torre – if you go, the rabbit is delicious).

But the real jewels of the area are the vineyards, and Castellare is a true diamond.

The day we arrived (a cold, wet one you'll recall), I was especially excited to visit and taste the wines, because I'd just spent a week at their other winery, Rocca di Frassinello in Maremma – an ultra-modern, French-Italian venture that could not be more different.

CASTELLARE BARREL

ROCCA DI FRASINELLO – THE WINERY THAT HAS EVERYTHING

To really understand the Domini Castellare di Castellina group, and why I am so obsessed with their contrasts, I must first tell you about Rocca.

Rocca di Frassinello was born out of a collaboration between Castellare and the Bordeaux powerhouse Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite).

The idea was to take the passion for excellence that Castellare live and breathe in Castellina, and use it to make wines that express a completely different land. 100km further south and five to six degrees hotter than Castellina, Maremma is perfectly suited to Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Enter Lafite Rothschild.

TASTING ROOM AT ROCCA DI FRASSINELLO

Rocca di Frasinello is a winery that seems to have everything.

As you approach it, the winding country lane teases you, allowing glimpses of their iconic red tower that stands proudly against the lush backdrop. Margherita, who is in charge of hospitality, warmly greeted us upon arrival in an enormous room with glass walls that made the space feel endless. And don't even get me started on the views.

The whole winery is hyper-efficient and designed to maximise what nature gives it, with almost everything working via gravity. The grapes are sorted on the huge, flat roof and then dropped through holes into the tanks below. The fermented juices flow through to the barrels, where they are left to mature in the underground cellar: square, large and high-impact, with a beacon of light shining from the centre of it. The hundreds of barrels rest staggered as though watching a concert, which they often do; Rocca di Frassinello hosts some of the music world's greatest classical artists for intimate shows in this very cellar. Renowned architect Renzo Piano (know The Shard? He designed it) wanted it to be "a timeless structure that is a hymn to lightness", something much bigger than itself.

'Well Renzo, if my complete loss for words mean anything, I'd say you achieved it.'

ROCCA DI FRASINELLO VINEYARDS

AND THE WINES?

This modern, thoughtful winery is reflected in the wines. They make several different expressions here, the blends and making of which are influenced enormously by Rothschild. Their plantings are 50% Sangioveto (a specific Sangiovese clone), with the remaining land planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Vermentino.

And while all the wines are great, one really took me by surprise; the Baffonero. 100% Merlot, it's silky and sumptuous, but tamed by its close proximity to the sea.

The bright and well-rounded red and blue fruits are made sexier by dark balsamic touches and a gripping minerality, then with a bit of age, you get those late-night flavours: cocoa, coffee, tobacco... I could go on, but I'll spare you. Instead, now that you know a little about Rocca di Frassinello, I'm going to take you back to the tiny village of Castellina, where I entered the nearly 50-year-old winery of Castellare.

CASTELLARE DI CASTELLINA – CLASSICO AND PROUD

It seems funny to think of Castellare as a beacon of tradition when they also make a 100% Merlot (in the swankiest winery I've ever seen).

But their pride in Chianti Classico wines, and of the land's traditions and culture is palpable.

Even when other local wineries adapted their wines to suit international palettes, Castellare stayed religiously loyal to the land's signature style and only looked to improve its quality further. Yet as sticklers for tradition, it's not to say that they don't evolve. Their sustainability efforts, for example, have increased greatly. They love their wines, their homeland grape Sangioveto, and their region, while also looking to the future. They innovate where they wish, and have even started whole new projects like Rocca.

As forward thinking as they may be in philosophy, the wines sing of traditional Chianti.

With supple, definitely noticeable tannins that are balanced by good acidity, subtle spice and juicy fruits, their Classico is a true reflection of the region. The Riserva gives you something a bit more intense: berries and sweet spices, with a touch of maturation coming through. Perfect for enjoying with a Tuscan ragu or meaty pizza.

THE SPICE OF LIFE

In short, diversity and creativity make wine (and life) far more interesting.

And it certainly made my trip to Tuscany that bit more exciting. If the biggest contrasts between the wines we drank were simply the strength of tannins, or amount of oak influence, drinking them would be a hell of a lot more boring. Tuscan winemakers craft plenty of different wine styles, but they are united in working towards the same thing: making great wine. Celebrating diversity should be at the heart of wine, and the Castellare group embodies exactly that

So to the Super Tuscans and their classical neighbours, the traditionalists and the modernists, the naturalists and the conventionalists and everyone else doing something different, while harmoniously co-existing side-by-side, grazie mille from one rejuvenated wine lover.

Charlotte Levy's gastronomic love affair began young, when this caviar adoring child ended up chasing Michelin stars as an adolescent. Many meals later, a wine obsession grew. Now she's learning fast and delving into the wine world with ambition and a great passion; writing, taking pictures and tasting where she can.

NATURE

NURTURE

Design by **Lara Krenzinger**

by **Elona Hesseling**

It is said, ad infinitum, that 'wine is made in the vineyard'. It's a phrase so overused in the wine trade, yet we hardly ever stop to consider it. For if it's true, how important is a winemaker? Are they merely the 'face' of the brand? Or are they the real wizards crafting each bottle? **Elona Hesseling** considers the point where nature meets nurture.

Wine is at its core a natural product, extracted from fruits produced by Mother Nature.

But page through any oenology textbook or peek into a winery's storeroom, and you quickly realise there is a lot more to it than this overly simple, romantic notion. As a qualified winemaker myself, I always found the study materials to be very clinical, very specific, like following a recipe. Yet the reality can, and should, be so different.

Since I'm by no means an expert, having traded the vines and cellar for a desk job in London, I spoke to some of my favourite winemakers from around the world to consider the point where nature meets nurture.

An expression of nature

Paul Pujol is both winemaker and viticulturist at Prophet's Rock in New Zealand's Central Otago.

He believes that wines should express the beauty of the land where they are made, unencumbered by pronounced winemaking techniques that, in his view, take the wines away from the land.

"It is a privilege to make wines from beautiful sites. There is no room for a style-driven approach," he says.

"As a wine producer, your only unique asset is your land. You can copy winemaking techniques, packaging, marketing and so on, but if you successfully make a wine that expresses its place, you have something completely different to anyone else on the planet".

He describes his winemaking philosophy as 'transparent', with nowhere to hide.

"You can't tell people 'our wine is made in the vineyard' and then hand them an over-extracted, stemmy, over-oaked Pinot Noir," he says, concluding, "What you say has to match what's in the glass."

Internationally German

Over to Germany's Rheingau and the home of Riesling royalty Weingut Robert Weil. Winemaker Wilhelm Weil explains that their approach is a balancing act between what happens in the vineyard and in the cellar.

"We are wine-growers rather than winemakers," he says.

"We spend a lot of time in the vineyards and focus a lot on selection. Our team of 80 pickers will go into the vineyards up to 17 times during harvest to select only the top-quality Riesling".

But the cellar is "where the magic happens," he claims.

Adding that, "We don't interfere too heavily, rather we accompany the wine in the process, instead of pushing it into a certain direction. We do not push things too far and focus on a very gentle vinification in both stainless steel and traditional Doppelstückfass (2,400 litre oak barrels)."

Further south, on the Rhine's left bank, and with a slightly different approach, lies Peth-Wetz.

Christian Peth and wife Maja Luise make wines using traditional, local winemaking techniques, inspired by international styles from French grape varieties.

For them, this means reducing yields, sometimes dramatically, in order to achieve the ripeness and complexity that other regions achieve so easily. It's a great example of nurturing what Mother Nature provides. "We grow Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot and so on here in Rheinhessen," explains Christian, "Wines of those varieties will always be compared with wines from much warmer regions, such as California, Chile or Australia, so we have to, and want to, compete with those regions."

Viva Variation

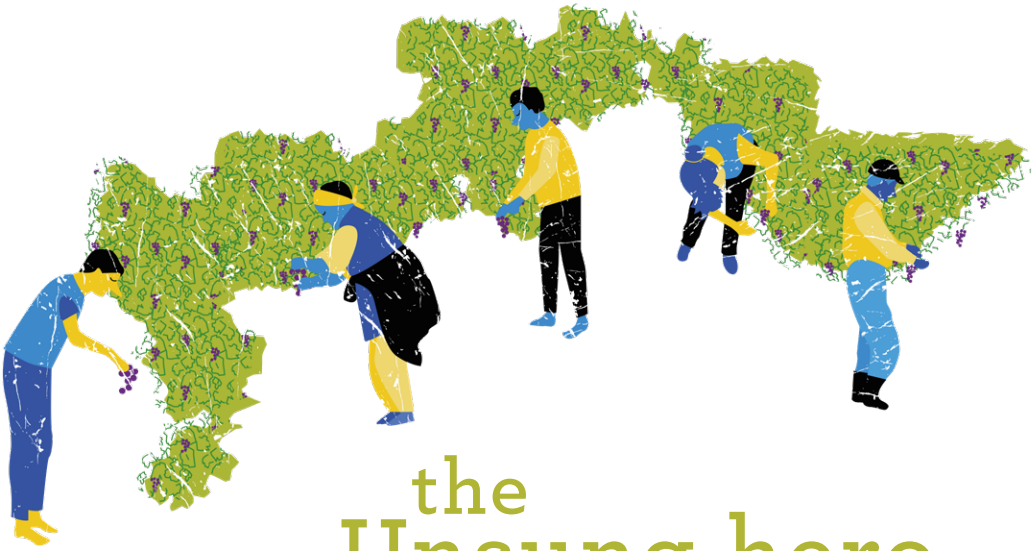
When it comes to wine style, it's a balancing act between nature and nurture; between allowing and even celebrating vintage variation, while offering consumers at least some sort of consistency.

David Trafford, architect, wine producer and owner of De Trafford in Stellenbosch, explains that one of the charms and challenges of wine is vintage variation.

He believes that, particularly in the fine wine end of the market, winemakers should be expressing each vintage as best they can, rather than trying to hammer the vintage into a house style. "I hope that when you taste a vertical line-up of De Trafford wines there is a fingerprint that unites them, while at the same time they should vary, even quite a lot, from one vintage to another.

As in any good design, style should only emerge as a result of a process, an approach to place, and not be imposed on a product," he says.

Paul agrees that a wine should not only reflect a sense of place, but also of time, saying, "My hope is that the overriding signature or character of each wine is the place it's from, not winery-derived. Allowing and celebrating vintage variation is important; the wines should reflect their place and their journey through the season."



the Unsung hero

a case for the viticulturist

While the winemaker and viticulturist are often the same person at smaller wineries, the role and importance of viticulturists in bigger establishments is largely overlooked; "the unseen hand working with the winemaker", according to Valdivieso's head winemaker Brett Jackson.

Site-specific Chile

Based in Chile's Lontue Valley, Valdivieso has a wealth of vineyards across the regions and crafts a range of wine styles, most notably the site-specific range of Caballo Loco Grand Cru wines. Brett explains, "If we are to squeeze out the best from the vineyard, a talented viticulturist is essential, and we have that in Jorge Rojas. The most fascinating wines are often obtained from vineyards in challenging or marginal conditions, and the line between obtaining incredible fruit and less than average fruit is very fine.

"A prime example for us is the Grand Cru Limari, a vineyard at the entrance to the Atacama Desert, with soils that are saline and an annual rainfall of 100mm. These are very challenging conditions that require a great amount of skill and dedication."

Soave Sisters

At Suavia, in Italy's Soave region, sisters Ale, Meri and Valentina Tessari run the operations. Winemaker and viticulturist Valentina believes that real quality is made in the vineyards. "Every decision and action taken by a viticulturist is going to affect the final product. Viticulturists need to be insightful and wise, to see the needs of every vine and act accordingly.

"Enologists are not wizards; we can be very good at our job, but it is impossible to make a great wine out of poor grapes. An excellent raw material is the key to making great wine."

Perhaps South African viticultural legend Prof. Eben Archer, who sadly passed away in June this year, said it best in an interview with Jeanri-Tine van Zyl in winemag.co.za: "'There is no such thing as a winemaker. Winemakers are really just grape processors.' He indicates towards the sky, 'There is but one great Winemaker.'"

The final piece of the puzzle

a case for the winemaker

So, if it's simply a case of growing great grapes, how important is the winemaker?

"It may not be fashionable to say so, but the winemaker is key," says David.

"We are the ones that need to bring out the best of a vintage, which can only be done if we're intimately involved and in tune with the vineyard. It's easier on a small scale, but not impossible on a grander one – the top growth Bordeaux Chateaux prove that. Winemaking technique, however, should not be an end in itself. Anyone can copy your technique, but no one can replicate your vineyard."

All in the Blend

Robert Weil's export manager Nicolas Pfaff agrees: "A winemaker is important, as he or she defines the style of the final blend. But in the end the winemaker is one piece of the puzzle. You need a great winemaker, a great story, and also a great team in the vineyards and cellar to allow you to blend together the style you are known for. Not to forget the origin of the grapes – the vineyards – where you are looking for the very best parcels for each individual wine."

Everyone wants to meet the winemaker

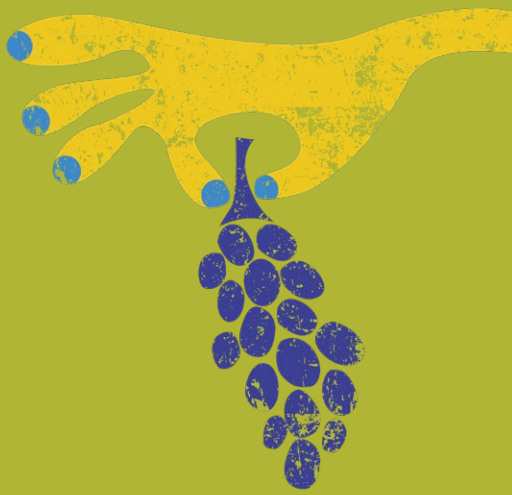
Looking beyond the 'making' of the wine, winemakers also play an important role in the sales and marketing of a brand... everyone wants to 'meet the winemaker', right?

Paul explains: "The winemaker is extremely important in marketing and selling, yet strangely they taught me nothing about that when I did Viticulture and Oenology at university!

People want to meet and talk to someone directly connected with the production of the wine. There's so much value to be gained in talking to a winemaker and it can help those working with the wine to gain further insight.

"It also completes the loop for me from vine to glass, as you get those impressions and that feedback from the market that are vitally important to the winemaking process."

NURTURING NATURE



So when it comes to nature versus nurture, it seems that, as with most things, it's about finding the perfect balance.

"Nature determines the inherent potential strengths and weaknesses of the vineyard, and therefore the wine," Brett says. "Nurture is the way the vineyards and winemaking are managed, to bring to fruition this potential. They are mutually inclusive, as each requires the other to achieve great wine."

For David it's a combination of both, and an ongoing, interactive process. "Nature is a given, a starting point, and one must perceive the potential beauty, while nurture is what one does to realise the potential. Coaxing the best out of nature is really what makes winemaking such a rewarding pursuit."

Born into the world of wine, **Elona Hesseling** grew up on a wine farm in South Africa. After graduating from the University of Stellenbosch with a degree in Viticulture and Oenology, she completed a couple of harvests before joining South Africa's producer-focused magazine WineLand as a journalist. A move to London meant a new adventure and Elona joined Bibendum's marketing team and now heads up brand communications.

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