



## The Wines of Change

What's new in the world of wine? More price breaks at restaurants, more packaging innovation (aluminum bottles, tote bags) more cause marketing, more celebrity labels, and a whole lot ... um, *more*. / By Bill Marsano / Photography by Mark Wagoner

**C**oca-Cola is so popular because it's so easy. Crack the cap, knock it back, that's that. Wine's the maddening opposite, ever in ferment. Some wine folk drone solemnly about "time-honored," "traditional," and "artisanal" values; others chant feverishly about progress and innovation. As one journalist giddily put it, "The wine world is always changing—it makes my heart pound. It can keep you awake at night!"

Really? If you owe the bank for vineyard acreage at Napa Valley prices, *yes*. If you're just a hyperbolic scribbler, *please*.

The truth lies between, Thirsty Reader. Most producers are wary of innovation, often because they're still paying for earlier breakthroughs. Yet change is coming: here and there, by fits and starts. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of our lives. One certainty: *More* will get a workout in 2008. Expect more of this and more of that.

More restaurants will bend a bit on wine policies. Manhattan's Cité was famous for unlimited pours of four wines with prix-fixe dinners. Cité's gone now, but its generosity lives on at Maloney & Porcelli. At Icon, chef Michael Wurster decrees weekly BYOB nights—with no corkage. "We're making Monday evenings a neighborhood experience," Wurster says. At Compass, the \$35 three-course dinner includes a 50-percent discount on any bottle in the restaurant's

award-winning cellar. "The neighborhood has supported us," says Compass partner Don Evans, "and we support our neighborhood."

This isn't just a New York thing. Every Sunday this Valentine month Morristown, New Jersey's Copeland Restaurant cuts champagne prices in half at brunch and dinner. So if nothing's cooking where you live, chat with management wherever you're a regular.

Expect more interest in Merlot, the wine reviled in *Sideways*. Doug Pendleton, owner of Grapevine Cottage in Zionsville, Indiana, says "The cherished '61 Cheval-Blanc in that movie is one-third Merlot, and Pétrus is 95 percent." Pétrus fetches \$1,000 a bottle, so he recommends values from Canyon Road, Grayson, and Sebastiani, and serious Merlots from Shafer, Twomey, or Whitehall Lane. There are more where

(California)

those came from: Blackstone, Brassfield, Burgess Cellars, Cartlidge & Browne, Clos du Bois, Clos Pegase, Duckhorn, Gainey, Gundlach □

**Can an Old World learn New tricks? You bet. Italy's GCWs (Good Cheap Wines) include Feudo Arancio, Bigi, and Dogajolo.**

Make Valentine's Day Into a Month

**For Him:** W.L. Weller Bourbon, Old Potrero Rye, The Glenrothes Malt, Cuervo Tequila, Cognac Delamain, Taylor Fladgate Port.

**For Her:** Penfolds Grange, BV Georges De Latour Private Reserve, Barolos by Fontanafredda and Gianni Gagliardi, Château d'Yquem Sauternes. **Bubbles for**

**Both:** Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label Brut, Domaine Carneros Cuvée de la Pompadour, J Cuvée Brut, Henriot Brut, Villa Sandi Prosecco, Domaine Chandon *étoile rosé*, Pommery Cuvée Louise.

Bundschu, Hayman Hill, Kendall-Jackson, Kenwood, Lockwood, Provenance, Silverado, Trefethen, Uvada, and Wild Horse. As St. Supéry winemaker Michael Beaulac says, "It's all right if you try Merlot and don't like it—just don't let some scriptwriter tell you *not* to."

Expect more GCW—Good Cheap Wine. GCW is the great innovation of New World winemakers, who believe in appealing to customers. It has replaced AVCW (Amazingly Vile ...), a product of

the Old World's class-conscious scorn. AVCW's highest expression was the *vin ordinaire* soaked up relentlessly by French factory hands. A top seller into the 1950s, it blended watery domestic red and acidic Algerian stuff with the texture of 60-grit sandpaper. (Nevertheless, it simply flew off the shelves. The nation's Premier, milk-crusader Pierre Mendes-France, said that proved the French were not connoisseurs but alcoholics.)

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Arancio, Bigi, and Carpineto's award-winning Dogajolo. France's include Hospitaliers, Fontaine, Red Bicycleette, Fat Bastard, French Rabbit, Les Jamelles, Lulu B., Maison Nicolas, Saint-Hilaire, and Tortoise Creek (surprise—they're from southern France, yesterday's font of *ordinaire*). Spain is the current darling of the price-conscious.

The bad news is that wine will cost more. Soon. Winebow president Leonardo LoCascio says he and other importers "had a painful 2007, when we did not raise prices despite the dollar's falling 20 percent on top of declines in 2006 and 2005. Nobody can withstand these changes without raising prices." Oil prices have increased costs for shipping, glass, and cardboard boxes. Consumers can "expect new vintages to go up upon release—the 2007 whites now arriving and the reds in March. By summer most Euro-zone prices will go up 10 to 25 percent, higher where there are grape shortages." The best offense is a good defense, so protect yourself. LoCascio suggests stocking up. Now? "Absolutely—you're down to the last few weeks."

Expect packaging surprises—and more bag-in-box wines (the euphemism "cask" fools no one), especially since DTour and now Revelry have buffed their image, using sleek stand-up cylinders instead of cartons. Black Box is adding Italian Pinot Grigio and California Merlot; Bota Box and Bandit cartons will become even more eco-friendly. Cordier of Bordeaux is testing 8-ounce juice boxes with aerating sipping straws, and Arniston Bay thinks outside the box: Its Australian and South African wines will come in 50-ounce plastic tote bags.

Spring will bring Yellow Jersey French varietals in PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottles, already available in

Canada, and Mommessin Beaujolais in a spiffy aluminum bottle whose Colordot sensor turns blue at the correct serving temperature. Midyear, expect Hardys' Shuttle, a PET with a built-in glass. PET bottles are reusable *and* recyclable, so let's debunk the Internet scare-mails calling PET a health hazard. Fact: No way, says the USDA. 'Nuff said!

"Cause marketing" will keep growing because every bottle sold helps a charity and wineries get good publicity—and (maybe) new customers. The latest entrant: Paul Newman's Cabernet and Chardonnay—\$16 each and due next month. (Coincidentally, Newman and writer buddy A.E. Hotchner started Newman's Own 25 years ago, selling salad dressing in recycled wine bottles.) Other examples: Toad Hollow supports New Orleans with Katrina Recovery Merlot; Cleavage Creek aids breast-cancer research; Rosenblum Cellars, owned by former vet Dr. Kent Rosenblum, helps provide service dogs to the disabled through sales of his newest puppy, Château La Paws (including, naturally, a Côte du Bone); and 57 Main Street imports South African wines, then returns the shipping containers—filled with books for young readers.

Expect to see more half-bottles, which appeal to solo diners and those who want just a taste. They're perfect when different entrées require different wines—but halves give couples just one glass each, so they must meter their sips to get through dinner. What kind of Valentine's feast is that? Producers, please: Give us half-*liters* instead! At 500ml or about 17 ounces, they foster moderation but still spell romance.

"Wine's too alcoholic these days," says Mrs. Thirsty Reader, joining her husband and your correspondent in protest. The problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world, but at least we now have allies. Among them: Darrell Corti, who won't stock wines above 14.5 percent at his Sacramento, California store; Napa winemaker Randy Dunn; and several writers, including Jancis Robinson and Eric Asimov of *The New York Times*. Twenty years ago 12 or 12.5 percent

alcohol was standard; now it's 14 or 14.5. Never mind why, say the Antis (Global warming? Robert Parker? Show-off winemakers?); the fact is excess alcohol makes wine hard to drink, overwhelms food, and is subtle as a blunt instrument. The Pros scoff, so resolution won't come quickly. No matter what the future brings, read the label: By law, alcohol content must be stated. (Pity it isn't required to be legible and accurate.)

Celebrities keep pouring in. You'll see Martha Stewart's \$15 Sonoma Cabernet,

Merlot, and Chardonnay (made by Gallo) and fashion's Roberto Cavalli. **Janet Hopkins exemplifies wine, women, and song. The Metropolitan Opera soprano star has released both her red *Aria Cuvée* and a CD of Italian favorites to go with it. It has been immensely popular.**

Burning question: Will Vanessa Paradis make wine at the French vineyard given her by boyfriend Johnny Depp?

We should be ashamed of *Schadenfreude*, but surely enjoying another man's woes is excusable once in a while. As, for example, when a



New York Metropolitan Opera star **Janet Hopkins** blended her own red wine and recorded a cd of Italian love songs to accompany it. This popular combination was called **ARIA**.

billionaire learns the historic "Thomas Jefferson" bottles auctioned to him for about \$100,000 each are surely fakes foisted off by an evasive German former pop-music entrepreneur with a false name and spurious academic credentials who got the wine from a source he won't identify and a place he won't specify.

Serves him right, but theft is theft, and the scams are increasing. With the new-rich bidding by the long ton, auctions are overheated. It's still the same old story: Too much money and too little savvy make pigeons for sharpies who gussy up bum-vintage 1974 Bordeaux as painted-for '82s. The risks are small because fraud is hard to prove. The faker claims he

bought the bottle in good faith, long ago; as for its provenance, "I was misinformed." And most victims are too embarrassed to admit they were taken.

Counterfeiting is now so easy it's infecting wines bought for drinking, not investments. With high-quality printers, label-making software, and some corks and capsules, it's a snap to dress plonk as a \$100 SuperTuscan.

Be wary of strangers. Think twice about auctions. In 2008, make your *more* more caution. **u**

Bill Marsano, Hemispheres' *James Beard* Award-winning contributing editor, always says more *when corks are pulled*.

### Fortified Against the Elements *By United Sommelier Doug Frost*

"Any port in a storm," goes the old saw, and it's not hard to understand the sentiment. Sailor or not, a stormy, frigid February evening seems far friendlier with your hands wrapped around a glass of rich port.

Port, along with its well-known brethren sherry and Madeira, is called "fortified" wine because it is bolstered with distilled spirit. In the old days, a dose of spirit was added to fortify the wines for a voyage to England or farther shores. But today, with most ports at around 18 percent alcohol, a tippie of one of these wines can bolster the drinker just as thoroughly.

The most famous style is vintage port, a powerful, dark, sweet wine intended for long aging; sometimes two or three decades is not enough. Late Bottled Vintage (or LBV) carries friendlier pricing and is almost always ready to drink upon release. Single Quinta (or single vineyard) ports are more or less the same as vintage ports, but they are usually cheaper and need only five to 10 years of aging to show their best.

Tawny ports are produced in greater quantity than any of the above styles, though Americans seem less interested in them than the Portuguese, who overwhelmingly prefer this more subtle, less overt style. Unlike vintage ports, tawnies are usually aged in barrels for 10 or more years and are most often sold in versions of 10 Year Old, 20 Year Old, 30 Year Old, and 40 Year Old.

But a caveat to the empor: None of those age statements actually means anything. A 10-year-old might be a blend of 8-year-old ports with a little bit of 15-year-old port. A 20-year tawny might not be 20 years old at all. Nonetheless, these can be deliciously nutty and complex from long barrel aging, and I care little what the precise term of aging might be.

Port from Portugal remains the standard of port-style fortified wines. But plenty of other countries and regions produce them as well. Australia, South Africa, and California, even the American Midwest, are all in the game.

Wines with the kind of bone structure (and alcohol) of port show up at dessert time simply because they're the biggest wines around. Port's inherent sweetness makes it an ideal match for chocolate, and since most people love chocolate, port and chocolate may be most people's idea of dessert heaven.

Chocolate's intensity can handle the hardest of spirits, so try rum or even cognac with chocolate. Or stick with fortified wines like port, Madeira, or dessert-style sherries; they each seem to be made for chocolate, and with the doldrums of a wintry sky devoid of sun, an indulgent treat just might brighten your day. **u**

