



Wine's Nastiest Feud

ROBUST VERSUS RESTRAINED. RICH VERSUS LIGHT. F&W'S **RAY ISLE** EXPLORES THE WINE WORLD'S MOST FRACTIOUS DEBATE AND EXPLAINS WHY IT ACTUALLY MATTERS.

THE LAND OF WINE used to be a peaceful place. At least, that was the image: all quiet cellars and bottles aging to perfection, and if there were disagreements, well, sir, they were gentlemanly. Frowsy old fellows in half-frame glasses debating whether the '73s were really quite so awful, or perhaps not.

Lately, though, wine seems to have entered a knives-out phase. The disputes, particularly online, have featured name-calling (“coward,” “charlatan” and “jihadist” are a few examples), as well as a strangely violent absolutism that seems more appropriate to political talk shows than anything to do with wine. It’s a weird and lamentable state of affairs, as others have noted. But I think it’s also telling.

Some of these fights are tediously parochial—both the pro- and anti-“natural”-wine sides could be put on mute forever, and I’d be fine with that—but there is one argument that covers all of wine. And once you strip out the vitriol and the grandstanding, it’s actually interesting.

It’s a fight about style, essentially: what wine should be and how it should taste. On one side are sommeliers, particularly those at cutting-edge places like Estela in New York City, Nopa in San Francisco and Covell in Los Angeles, along with a loose gang of California wine producers who gather together at events under the “In Pursuit of Balance” rubric, and several significant wine journalists, such as Jon Bonné at the *San Francisco Chronicle* and Eric Asimov at the *New York Times*. On the other side is, preeminently, Robert Parker, Jr., the most famous name in wine criticism (and a contributor to F&W for many years). Since founding the *Wine Advocate* newsletter in the late '70s, he has likely had more influence than anyone else alive on winemaking styles around the world, whether he’s wanted to or not.

What the sides disagree about is this: Should wine, broadly speaking, be ripe, luscious and powerful, or should it be lean, racy and restrained? Parker’s tastes lean toward the former. At the Napa Valley Writers’ Conference earlier this year, he stated: “You need some power, some richness, some

intensity. Otherwise, the wine will fall apart, because there is nothing there. Some of the thin, feminine, elegant wines being praised today will fall apart. You can't expect soft, shallow wine to get any better."

To pick one wine that epitomizes the rich, intense style—there are many to choose from—let's go with the immensely popular Caymus Special Selection Cabernet Sauvignon. From Rutherford, in the heart of Napa Valley, it's opulent, plush in texture, high in alcohol (15 percent), low in acid, impenetrably red-purple in hue and completely mouth-filling. It overflows with sweet, dark fruit flavor. It is unquestionably, unmistakably big. In his newsletter, Parker lauded the 2010 vintage, giving it 98 points out of 100. A lot of other people love it, too; the 9,500 cases or so that Caymus makes sell out, easily, every year.

But when this vintage of Caymus was poured at a recent tasting I attended, the sommeliers in the room thought it was appalling—sweetly fruity, massive and clunky. The tasting was blind, so their reactions weren't influenced by any preconceived opinions. And none of them thought it was technically flawed. They simply reacted negatively to the wine's flavors, the idea of balance it embodied, its style.

That didn't surprise me. Sommeliers and particularly, in my experience, younger-generation sommeliers at ambitious restaurants, favor a very different style of wine: taut and tight; low in alcohol, high in acid; and, they will argue, innately better with food. There are a wide range of wines that fit this description, from classic Burgundy to cool-climate Tasmanian Chardonnay, but—given the hipster somm love for oddball grape varieties—I'd argue that if you wanted to pick one wine as the ultimate cool-kid, anti-Parker offering, it'd be the Trousseau from California's Arnot-Roberts winery.

The Trousseau grape variety, mostly grown in France's Jura region, produces light-bodied, tart, strawberry-scented, herbal-musky reds. Pale red in hue, the Arnot-Roberts version is a fragrant, delicate whisper of a wine (produced by two young guys at a tiny California winery, which helps its street cred, too). It's the polar opposite of Caymus's Special Selection. Tasted together, they feel like wines from two different planets, though the vineyards they come from are only about 60 miles apart. And, regarding Trousseau in general, it's hard right now to walk into any of the edgier, wine-centric restaurants in New York (or San Francisco or Portland, Oregon, or seemingly anywhere) and not find several different bottles nestled among the more familiar varieties. Pearl & Ash in NYC's Nolita neighborhood offers five; even Napa Valley's famed The French Laundry has a couple.

But Parker isn't a Trousseau fan. In fact, he has lumped it into a catchall category of "godforsaken grapes that in hundreds and hundreds of years...have never gotten traction because they are rarely of interest." And there's no question that some sommeliers like it simply because it's obscure; there's definitely a cooler-than-thou attitude that's crept into the restaurant wine world over recent years that can make you feel like you've been abruptly transported into the indie music scene (but who knows—for a long time, it was hard to

find anything *uncooler* than liking wine, so maybe this is an improvement). But there are plenty of obscure varieties that produce big, in-your-face wines, too. Sommeliers don't care about these. Trousseau may be obscure, but more important, it produces wine that fits into a certain paradigm.

The dominant style of wine in the United States for the past couple of decades—from \$500 bottles of cult Cabernet to \$8 bottles of Aussie Shiraz—has been made in the "big and rich" mode. But there are signs that tastes are beginning to change, which may explain some of the recent jousting. In addition to the shift away from supercharged wines on restaurant wine lists, there's been a wave of unoaked, lighter-style Chardonnays from New World regions like California and Australia. Also, a growing number of California winemakers, from famous names such as Ted Lemon at Littorai and Cathy Corison at her eponymous winery to up-and-comers like Gavin Chanin at Chanin Wine Co. and Matthew Rorick at Forlorn Hope, are focusing on a more nuanced, restrained style. And several acclaimed winemakers have overtly disavowed the big, rich style, changing their winemaking approach fairly dramatically, including Adam Tolmach at Ojai and Wells Guthrie at Copain.

Is this a major change, or merely a splinter movement? That's hard to say. Parker, at the same writers' conference, seemed to have no doubt on the matter: "Truth is on my side, and history will prove I'm right," he stated, a comment which, if nothing else, seemed likely to incense his opponents. On the other hand, as Devon Brogie, who buys wine nationally for Whole Foods, told me not long ago, "I find customers are using words like 'smooth,' 'pleasing' and 'light' much more frequently than I ever remember. And words like 'bold,' 'rich,' 'intense' and 'full-bodied' aren't being used nearly as much."

We love the romantic idea that the earth dictates in subtle terms what a wine will taste and smell and be like; that wine is "made in the vineyard." But it's an inescapable fact that winemaking, at every stage, involves human judgment, primarily in service to one question: "Does this wine taste the way I think it should?" To make a wine that expresses *terroir*—the character of the place it was grown—is a fine idea, but every moment of the process, from how the grapes are farmed, to when they're picked, to how they are fermented, to how the wine is aged, to when the wine is bottled and hundreds of others, is a matter of choice. I'd guess that both Arnot-Roberts and Caymus feel their wines are legitimate expressions of *terroir*; however, I am dead certain that both wineries are making wines they feel to be good, the kind of wines they'd prefer to drink. That's one reason this Parker-versus-sommeliers debate matters: Winemakers have a choice.

If the pendulum continues to swing toward a lighter style, we'll be seeing more wines like that Arnot-Roberts Trousseau in the future. But it's also in the nature of pendulums to swing back. Thirty years from now, today's cool wine kids, starting to gray, may find themselves bemoaning an upstart trend away from lean, high-acid wines toward—God forbid!—some new, rich, ripe, intense style. Thoroughly undrinkable, they will cry! Every last drop of it.