

*»» Winemakers have become integral parts of even luxury brands, vying for public visibility. ««*

EDITORIAL

BY JOEL B. PAYNE

Europeans have traditionally venerated sites more than winemakers. Only a generation ago their job was merely to ensure that the wines they made were of marketable quality and typical of the region. Today, we often expect them to perform miracles, to the point that winemakers have become integral parts of even luxury brands, who, in spite of their personal authenticity, vie for public visibility. The consumer may not always know them, but the gatekeepers do.

As globalisation concentrates our interest on ever few brands, we might ask if wine can be reduced to Hermes scarves and Gucci shoes, endorsed by the latest idol. That is questionable. As Andreas Larsson, the reigning world's best sommelier, concedes in his column, highbrow monologues about organic wines' depth of flavour, for example, are often merely rant – and even experienced journalists do not always agree on what is a good wine, and certainly not on what is tradition, for reasons that Dr Jamie Goode elucidates in his piece on our perceptions of wine.

While many lament that the worldwide accent on brands has led to standardisation, the main downside of globalisation is that demand for a small number of handcrafted products is driving prices into the stratosphere, but then why shouldn't wine follow the fashion industry's lead, as Felicity Carter asks in her take on luxury. The fact is, we often place too much emphasis on what journalists like and not enough on what the consumer wants to drink.

Although there are many budding artistic winemakers in the wine world, all seem to regard success, and certainly financial success, as the true measure of merit. In particular, the lovers of New World wines have given winemakers a stamp of authenticity. In a world, where so much wine has become a fast moving consumer good, the idea is even gathering steam in Europe.

The reason that many estates in the New World flaunt their winemaker is, at least according to many Europeans, that they don't always have great vineyards or are not yet certain which ones are right for what varietals. Highlighting winemakers blurred the uncertainty. That said, very little of the wine made in Europe is truly marked by soil or tradition either, which has given winemakers a credibility not known in the past. Most wines are commodities hoping to become brands, and need figureheads to carry their message.

Our fascination with winemakers jibes with our worship of stars, be they in film, politics or on the football pitch. Signature winemakers have become ambassadors of their products, doing well and speaking about their wares to an eager audience. Brands need champions to give them credibility. Today they are winemakers. Who will they be tomorrow?

