



Robert Joseph, author of The Wines of France, is currently working on a study of the future of the global wine industry.

INDUSTRY NEEDS VERSUS CUSTOMERS

Talk to a wine producer almost anywhere in the world and it won't be long before the subject turns to the question of typicity versus homogenisation and regionalisation versus globalisation. Should wine always recognisably taste of the place where it was made? Or is it legitimate for producers to source, blend and make wines to please the consumer or critic, possibly at the expense of local traditions and styles?

The argument is usually, inevitably, centred on the Old World. Is it permissible for Muscadet producers to make their traditionally bone dry wine just a little sweeter? Should the owners of Chateau Pavie be praised or reviled for releasing more opulent wines?

But the controversy has now shifted to South Africa, where, following London Times critic Jane MacQuitty's comment that South Africa "has yet to tame its red wine's peculiar burnt rubber and dirt odour", the University of Stellenbosch and research body Winetech have begun to research the aroma's cause.

Within South Africa, news of the study has aroused a certain measure of controversy, with some, including Meininger's contributor Michael Fridjhon accusing MacQuitty of a 'personal vendetta', and others claiming that the rubbery character - at least in wines that are not made from Pinotage - to be a figment of her imagination. As the chairman for the last few years of the both the Swiss International Wine Awards competition in the Cape which last year brought together around 750 South African wines, and the Tri Nations Wine Competition in Sydney at which South Africa puts forward 105 of its wines against Australia and New Zealand, I have to throw my hat in the ring alongside my compatriots. Stated bluntly, when it comes to blind tasting, I am probably able to correctly identify the national origins of anonymous South African

reds with greater accuracy than those of any other country. And the key to that success lies in recognising what MacQuitty and Tim Atkin MW describe as "rubbery" and I call a "cold fireplace" smell.

I have my own - probably half-baked - theory about why so many South African red wines smell and taste the way they do; I attribute it to the blast of heat that most of the vineyards receive at the end of the growing season, at precisely the time when in other places, temperatures are dropping. If I'm right - and I support my notion by pointing at the non-rubbery or fireplace character of wines from cooler areas of the Cape - this means that the grapes don't ripen physiologically in the same way that they should. I wouldn't be surprised, however, to see the researchers come up with a different explanation altogether.

What I am sure of is that the recognisable character of most red Bordeaux is attributable to the combination of fundamental lack of full ripeness that comes from low vineyard density and an often less than ideal climate, coupled with the natural characteristics of the Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. A century ago, when Languedoc Rousillon, Southern Italy and La Mancha, not to mention California, Chile and Australia, were not producing competitive wines, red Bordeaux was the industry standard. Today, most consumers who have the option of drinking a softer, riper style of red tend to take it, even if some occasionally express nostalgia for the way things used to be.

Essentially, whatever the argument over whether South Africa's reds smell of rubber, fireplaces or of something else altogether, the brutal truth is that they have a character that has failed to win over a number of non-South African critics and failed to seduce non-South African wine drinkers. The South Africans, like the Bordelais, have a choice: they can either throw everything they've got at trying to persuade foreigners to realign their taste-buds, and also to pay a proper price for them. Or, alternatively, they can bend to the wind and admit that their customers might be the ones who now occupy the driving seat.

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WINE COMPETITIONS

As wine competitions proliferate around the globe, Charles Metcalfe takes a look at which ones are worthwhile.

THE WAR ON ALCOHOL

Governments are legitimately concerned about binge drinking, especially among the young - but the stern measures being taken in many countries suggest a new era of Prohibition is arriving.

DON ST PIERRE

The chairman of ASC, the largest wine importer in China, speaks about his Asian experience.

INSIGHT INTO RIOJA

Victor de la Serna and Jürgen Mathäß give you a guided tour of this important Spanish region.

ROUTES TO MARKET IN ASIA

Brokers, agents and export managers have a greater role to play in the Asian markets than they do elsewhere, as Joel B. Payne explains.

WHO IS WHO IN FRANCE

Sophie Kevany reveals the players behind one of the world's greatest wine producing nations.

COSTS OF PRODUCTION

New research compares costs of wine production from around the world.

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