



Old World

New Trends

“I think consumers are looking for value these days and are therefore more willing to experiment with wines from new places or with new names. It is an interesting time to study wine!” So says Mike Veseth, editor of on-line wine bible, *WineEconomist.com*. Speaking to *Hospitality Ireland*, Veseth spelled it out: “It is my impression that consumption patterns for Old World wines are shifting, at least in the market segments that I follow. Although Bordeaux and Burgundy retain their status among elite wine consumers, it seems to me that the broader market is shifting away from France, and within the market for French wine, towards wines that are easier for

Recent times have seen the return to glory of many of the Old World wine regions – such as Spain, Italy and France – which suffered during the meteoric ascent of the New World. Yes, they’re back, but with a difference. Consumers are increasingly looking for new grapes, new varieties and new areas to discover. **Emily Hourican** examines some new trends in Old World wines.

new wine consumers to understand – wines identified by varietal as opposed to DOC.” It’s a trend born out in our most recent sommelier report, published April 2009, in which some of the country’s top sommeliers delivered their analysis and predictions of the wine market. Bill Kelly of Kelly’s in Rosslare gave his opinion: “There’s a bit of return back to the more

traditional countries. People get fed up of Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc everywhere – we’ve certainly seen a move back towards the more traditional wines.” Kevin McMahon of the Wild Goose Grill in Ranelagh agreed: “There’s much better value in French whites than there is in New World whites. They have more flavour, more character, and they’re

Left: The vineyards of J Portugal Ramos in Portugal.

Right: Church steeple in Briones, Rioja, Spain

cheaper. In terms of red, Italy is due a little spell in the limelight, particularly Tuscan reds." While Martina Delaney of L'Ecrivain, added: "The big hitters, the Burgundies, the Rhônes and Bordeaux are always going to be popular in our restaurant, but I think everybody is very surprised at the quality of Portugal, Austria and parts of France that maybe don't get as much coverage, such as Languedoc Roussillon."

However, it is never as easy as simply upping sticks and following fashion. There is still an inherent reluctance among many Old World producers to face up to the great sea-change in consumer wine-buying trends. Monica Murphy, research and development manager for Febvre & Co Ltd, says: "The key seems to be in trying to produce brands that are big enough to compete, but it is really against the grain for European producers to do this. However, there are a lot of moves afoot to try and create even soft brands that should be able to combat the New World offering. Labelling is getting clearer and wherever the rules allow, they are tending to put the grape varietal on the label. In some ways it is a pity but the market demands it, so I suppose it makes sense. I think the biggest drawback is that European wineries do not have budgets like the New World for promotion and they find it hard to come round to that way of thinking, but it is essential that they catch up on this because so much wine now in retail particularly, is only sold through promotions."

So what regions does she think are making strides? "The South of France are trying hard, marketing the region as a whole under the banner of 'South of France wines.' They are having to lower prices across the board to compete with Chile and the New World, and fight the recession. But given the realities of European wages, it is never going to be quite as competitive. Spain is certainly able to compete on price and is producing better wines all the time. They also seem to be doing better labelling and general presentation. Italy has always been good at that, but prices have been too high for some years now. Portugal is coming on by leaps and bounds and Germany is trying to get back into the market."

The rise of Portugal as a quality wine-exporting region has been something of a struggle. "Portugal started from minus zero," explains Joao Portugal Ramos, founder of the prestigious J Portugal Ramos winery. "It was known for Port, for Madeira, and maybe Mateus Rosé, and that's all. The red wines that we exported were very poor quality, old wines, with harsh tannins, and our image was very bad. But we in the trade – the writers, producers – we believe in Portuguese wines, and we have made big advances. We believe in the concept of terroir – producing different wines from different regions, using the indigenous vines suitable for these regions. Now, we have lots of good producers, and this is very important. But it lacks the final stage – that the consumer picks up the bottle!" And what, does he think, will spur on this final stage? "Wide availability will help. The huge number of Irish people now travelling to Portugal and becoming





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Above: Consultant turned winemaker, Joao Portugal Ramos

familiar with the indigenous grapes here, that also helps." And official recognition of the increasing quality of Portuguese wines will help further. Ramos' Tagus Creek rosé recently won an IWC gold medal for the 2007 vintage, the first gold won by a rosé wine in 20 years. "Winning a gold medal helps in retail, and that helps in the on-trade. The challenge now is to get the message across, to show the quality and pedigree, and break the stigma of the old image."

It's a stigma that consumers seem increasingly willing to let go, helped hugely by the kind of quality coming from J Portugal Ramos, whose brands – including the fantastic Marques de Borba and Vila Santa – are distributed here by Classic Drinks. Ramos worked for many years as a wine consultant before deciding to start his own wine producing business. "In the difficult world of the wine business, companies need a full-time resident wine-maker, not a flying

consultant. The consultancy side is almost gone. So I had the idea to create something for me, for my pleasure, for my kids. I started from zero, buying land, planting vines. Now I have three wineries. Back then, I had one employee, now I have 120. It was a huge effort, I had to borrow a lot of money from the bank. But in only 15 years, what I have created is unique in Portugal. I am very proud of what I have done. But it is not for my generation – it is for me to build, for my children to enjoy. And maybe for the third generation to destroy(!)" But he says it like a man who believes the contrary; that the vines he has planted will be managed and worked by his family for many generations. These days, the biggest market for his wines is the home market, but on the export side, Sweden, followed by the UK and the US. Emerging markets

are China – "I have had someone there for the last six months helping to open doors." Angola and Central Europe.

So what does he make of the Irish market? "Ireland is a market with its own specifics, not exactly the same style as the UK. The big difference is that, in the UK, you can achieve volume sales only through the big supermarkets. Here, there are many premium shops, restaurants, select retail outlets, very suitable for Portuguese wines."

And how is he finding business in the current economic climate? "People haven't stopped drinking, but they are dropping a price segment. To feed this demand, we have a value brand, Loios already in development. It wasn't done specifically as a response to this, just very good timing. Last year, we had 15 per cent growth in the company, and this year



Above: Vina Real and Contino; both from CVNE, distributed by Febvre & Co. J Portugal Ramos' Marques de Borba, distributed by Classic Drinks Ltd.

we hope to have the same, but without sacrificing prices." Even within more obvious, high-profile regions, such as Spain's Rioja, there are impressive innovations to be found. For example, at CVNE, one of Spain's oldest and most prestigious bodegas, ancient traditions are now combined with cutting-edge technology. CVNE was founded in 1879 by two brothers Eusebio and Raimundo Real de Asúa, and Compañía Vinícola del Norte de España (CVNE) is now run by the fifth generation of the founding family. It is also one of the largest estates in the Rioja region, spanning 1200 acres of vines and producing around 9 million bottles of wine each year. Here, the traditions of five generations are combined with self-developed technology to make wines following the oldest and most traditional of winemaking techniques – the first all gravity-feed winery in Spain was completed in 1989 and another was added in 2004, the only facilities of their kind in Europe.

Cune became the best selling Rioja brand in Spain in 2008 and has been a well-established brand on the Irish market for many years. Legendary names in Spanish winemaking such as CVNE's Imperial continue to be a reference for wine connoisseurs worldwide. Meanwhile, CVNE's Rioja Alavesa estate, Viña Real,

has made wines at the Elciego bodega since the early 1920s. With its blend of more than 130 years of tradition and expertise, and the most innovative winemaking methods, Viña Real has established itself at the forefront of Rioja wines. This range combines the personality, character and elegance of the traditional Alavesa region with the roundness and balance of a modern Rioja.

Further innovations came in 1973, when CVNE founded the first single estate winery in Rioja – Contino – thus breaking with Rioja and Spain's tradition of blending grapes from different vineyards and opening a new path towards excellence in wines. In developing the Contino brand, the company pioneered the recovery of long-forgotten and almost extinct Rioja grape varieties like Graciano. CVNE, Viña Real and Contino are now distributed in Ireland by Febvre & Company Limited.

So, clearly the sun hasn't set on the Old World in terms of wine production. In fact, those producers ready and able to respond to the gauntlet thrown down by the New World are having a well-deserved resurgence. It's a cycle of competition that can only end by favouring the creation of great wines all around the world; something that is to everyone's benefit. ☺

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