

2018-5

## The Power of Wine Language - Critics, Labels and Sexism

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### Recommended Citation

Cawley, D. (2018). The Power of Wine Language - Critics, Labels and Sexism. *Dublin Gastronomy Symposium*, Dublin, Ireland, 29-31 May. doi.org/10.21427/g5a7-x024

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## **Abstract**

In 1940 Benjamin Lee Whorf set in motion the idea that 'language' had power over the human mind, suggesting that it accessed the human consciousness and was, in essence, a tool (Deutscher, 2010). Stearns (2006, p. 154) and Hommerberg (2011, p.3) contend that consumerism in the 21st century is a highly complex phenomenon, which can function to blur identity and "help people deal with confusions about social status" further noting that appreciating wine, is a "particularly complex domain of knowledge" (2011, p.15-16). Within the accepted daily language used to describe wine is a type of social exclusion, an absence of meaning for those lacking the cultural capital to engage with it and Watson (2013, p.16) underpins this by stating that "the language of wine has its own rhetoric". Today's wine writers and critics have become "powerful actors...involved in the public discourse about wine" (Rössel et al., 2016. p.16; Hommerberg, 2011) and often assume the role of quality assessor. Wine language too has evolved from a more technical and economic format to one which focuses on authenticity and cultural capital. To Rössel et al. (2016, p.2) the modern wine journalist is part of the "agenda-setting media" whose weekly columns inform the public with powerful cultural analysis which classifies and legitimatises. *Decanter* magazine, publishing since 1975, is one of the world's foremost specialist wine magazines. The first twenty years of its publications were tinged with sexist writing in its articles, on front covers and in the advertising, ranging from subtle to overt in nature. This paper will discuss the rise in power of the wine writer, including the embellishment of sexism within its culture and publishing while coming full circle to note the curious emergence and uneasy coalescence of gender roles in certain areas of wine and wine culture today.

## **The Power of Wine Language – Critics, Labels and Sexism**

“Wine is unique in the cultural history of food and drink”, (Varriano, 2010, p.7)

### **Introduction**

The image, taste and style of wine have evolved significantly over the last four decades as a direct result of increased demand, trends, politics, wine labels, and in particular wine critics (Colman, 2008). The unprecedented global growth in the popularity of wine occurred alongside the steep rise in the human population since 1950 (Rössell & Pape, 2016). The unification of Europe, the green revolution, the expansion of travel and tourism and the emergence of New World wines as a force have all contributed to this growth. Globalisation dragged wine from the dusty cellars of Europe and onto the shelves of supermarkets and convenience stores worldwide. For this growth to happen in the way that it did, wine needed to become accessible; in how it tasted, how it was interpreted and how it was situated socially. This paper focuses on the language and imagery of wine labels and wine writing (circa 1975-1995), which was bourgeois, stuffy and sexist. It aims to show how these two elements have been powerful tools dictating what wines were bought and who bought them, who wrote about wine and how said language was reproduced.

### **Modern Wine Divides**

At the time (1980s-2000s) when wines from California, Australia and later Chile began making strides into the global market, wine was predominantly viewed as a sophisticated drink by those who possessed the social and cultural capital to appreciate it. These new wines ‘spoke’ English and demystified much of the esoteric barriers which historically were part of the industry. Their fruit-driven flavours and uncomplicated histories appealed almost instantly and within a decade had hugely altered the balance of how customers interpreted and consumed wine (Johnson & Robinson, 2001). Wines from traditional European countries, initially goaded by this challenge to their dominant position, adjusted and regrouped relying on deep-rooted tradition and the prestige associated with provenance (e.g. Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne, Barolo, Chianti and Rioja). The manner in which the popularity of wine in general spread is complex, driven by a multiplicity of factors. What is certain is that wine writers, who promoted their wine choices through a variety of wine magazines, in the press and later online, became

the mediators between wine and the dinner table, between the producer and the consumer, and between the place of origin and its assumed social and cultural capital (Smith Maguire, 2016). An added factor was the overhaul and simplification of wine labels.

In 1940 Benjamin Lee Whorf set in motion the idea that language had power over the human mind. Whorf suggested that language accessed the human consciousness and was, in essence, a tool (Deutscher, 2010). Wine drinkers can inform their experience by knowing the origins of the wine and the name of the grapes used. The language and imagery used on the label, are perhaps the most immediate elements that forge the relationship between the winemaker and the consumer. Wine remains a high-risk purchase commodity (Hall & Mitchell, 2008), and the constant threat of selecting the wrong wine, one that does not fit with the identity of the individual, causes anxiety and feelings of insecurity (Rössel and Pape, 2016). Throughout history wine labels have engaged enlightened consumers by identifying and categorising wines, giving them meaning and place. Canaider (2018) notes that “semiotics – how meaning is created and communicated through signs and symbols – is increasingly of dark-art interest to many winemakers and marketers”. This interest is principally linked to the in-store interaction where the consumer standing in front of the bottle.

### **The Power of Champagne Labels**

Wine labels were not of major concern in the development of wine labels, with the notable exception of Champagne. The *Champenoise*, having historically associated their highly popular wines with French Kings and nobility, began decorating bottles with images and homages to important life-moments of post-revolutionary France. They sought unique and entrepreneurial ways to market their wines to the emerging middle classes of Europe, thus creating a myth about their wines through the powerful language of image and advertising (Guy, 2003). Champagne with its image of luxury, celebration and frivolity was in stark contrast to the rigid labels of Bordeaux and Burgundy, and this appealed to the upwardly mobile lifestyles of the middle class. By the 1880’s Champagne labels often (ironically) depicted royal symbols (lions, eagles, crowns, coats of arms) in gold lettering and wording such as “prince,” “marquis,” and “royal” (Guy, 2003, p.18). Guy, observing Loubère, notes that “this connection with social exclusivity and status...constituted a ‘form of snob appeal’” (2003, p.18). Some producers proudly declared their link with royal families on their label, something the house of Bollinger does to this day. The symbolic power of these labels was

immense and enabled the 'petite bourgeoisie' to symbolically distance themselves from the 'proletariat' by using gastronomy and fine wines, like Champagne, as their means. Champagne's ability to "create charisma" through concentrating the "leading idea" of its wine with "leading institutions" is symbolic of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "the active centres of the social order" (Guy, 2003, p.19; Geertz, 1983, p.122).

Champagne labels diversified and included a vast array of words and images through the decades before and during the *Belle Époque* period (1871-1914). Words like 'pure' 'love' and 'special' adorned labels, as did depictions of important moments - marriage, sporting events, the electrification of France, New Year's Eve and celebrations concerning the French republic. Champagne as both a wine and a commodity secured its status as the ultimate symbol of fashion, patriotism and distinction. Around the same period, women are depicted on their labels as wives, mothers and symbolic protectors of France (e.g. Joan of Arc). Guy points out that these women "acquired symbolic importance that could be exploited in the new commodity culture of the late nineteenth century" (Guy, 2003, p.35). No other wine region put anything near this level of ingenuity into marketing their wines through labels until the arrival of New World wines in the late 1970s and 1980s.

### **Today's Wine Labels**

The label on a wine bottle is what the customer comes into contact with first. It can be rigid, ornate, complex, ostentatious, tacky, rude and often difficult to understand. The language of the label can, in just a few words, communicate an amount of information by classifying the wine in terms of age, grape varietal, style, colour, geographical location, country, political and cultural status. The reverse label can add to this, with technical information about the alcohol content and best service temperature, and expound on what foods it could pair well with, how long to store or keep the wine, family histories and tasting notes of the wine itself; described by Johnson and Robinson (2001, p.17) as the winemaker being "in constant confessional, spewing out every detail of their doings on back-labels". These types of information can empower the customer and remove anxieties over their wine choice. Many people will admit to both buying and not buying wine based on its label (Becher, 2015; Canadier, 2018), which has been linked to a belief in the sincerity or authenticity of the particular wine or ethos of the winery. Beverland (2005) assessed that in the case of quality Australian wines, this took place by producers creating and communicating sincere stories about their wine. A backstory in

which 'genuine' 'passionate' and 'hand-crafted' narrative is to the fore, while at the same time removing all thoughts of financial gain, technical operations and modernity, is necessary for wineries to create authenticity (Peterson, 2005; Beverland, 2005) and a relationship with the public. This is a basic form of wine writing which has proven very effective in breaking down barriers between the product and those people who simply want to enjoy it without needing a diploma to understand it. The kind of label described above is usually but not exclusively found on New World wines. Many European appellation-based wines have remained quite conservative about the information on the label, offering no explanation in terms of grape, taste or even colour, while choosing to express the wines provenance and expected style simply by stating the name of the village, appellation and even vineyard.

New World wine producers were unrestricted by the decree of rigid appellations councils. They were free to put colourful, sometimes artistic, playful or quirky (Charters, 2006) labels on their wines. The language was usually English and the grape(s) varietal took centre stage. A reverse label was added, and additional information and simple yet descriptive language enticed new customers to enjoy the wine. Initially, the Old World dismissed this as a gimmick and faddish. In time, the omnipresence of some New World wines with their simpler labels and screwcap bottles had the effect of cheapening the wine's image and in some cases the producing country, in the eyes of more discerning consumers. Smith Maguire (2010, p. 272) states that:

goods such as single-vineyard wine...may offer a sense of connectedness, placing the consumer in touch with a system of production in which the sources, makers and context of the final goods are (felt to be) known and/or knowable. Such experiences of connectedness are understood as powerful generators of value in critical marketing discussions of value co-creation.

If a wine becomes too popular it loses its standing with knowledgeable wine drinkers but is not in danger of "sameness" on the global market as "base-level wine drinkers make up the majority, and what they want is continuity (Johnson & Robinson, 2001, p.17).

## **Wine in Social Culture**

Wine was, and still is to a large extent, both intellectualised and associated with a certain level of sophistication and this, in turn, makes it a beverage that can bestow cultural capital on people who are keen to identify with it in that way (Charters, 2006). Other alcoholic beverages, such as beer or spirits, are not imbued with the same symbolic status as wine (Standage, 2005; Charters, 2006). The association of wine with gastronomy and commensality, and that it has become what Goldberg (2017, p.10) refers to as “a staple of the dining table and a cultural object”, has elevated it to the same status enjoyed by art, academia and politics (Charters, 2006). Possibly over centuries but certainly over decades, powerful narratives of authenticity, heritage and even nationalism have signified wine as something grounded and real within the countries where it is produced, as well as within those who made and drank it. To the outsider, this type of provenance can appear exotic (West, 2013) and the reflexive nature of wine, that is its inclusiveness to those in the know and exclusiveness to those not, drew boundaries which were not easily traversed. There was no link between the public and the winemaker and his or her vineyard. It is in this liminal space where the wine writers or *promoters* (Smith Maguire, 2010) found a voice.

Wine has been democratised (Howland 2013; Smith Maguire, 2016; Rössel & Pape, 2016) from the bourgeoisie sentiments of the past and this has allowed for its connoisseurship and appreciation to occur, giving aspiring social groups opportunities to increase their cultural capital and distinction. Furthermore purchasing and consuming wine, in today's identity-driven world, can now be viewed as an ‘ordinary’ part of a shopping experience. However, differing occasions such as dining with company, in a restaurant or buying wine as a gift, changes the importance of wine, where it is “still considered a cultural marker different from ordinary consumer goods” (Rössel & Pape, 2016, p. 620). Appreciating wine, according to Hommerberg (2011, p.15-16), is a “particularly complex domain of knowledge” which is further complicated as it “involves composite perceptual experience”. Commentators have noted a contemporary trend among younger drinkers regarding their lack of confidence in drinking wine, preferring beer and spirits, not necessarily for the taste but for the ease and simplicity (Asimov, 2012; Xabier et al., 2016; Veseth, 2013). This has been directly linked to the rituals and perceived need for knowledge to correctly appreciate wine, although Broadbent (2003) is clear in his conviction that wine is somewhat like music, in that it both appeals to the senses and is subjective, and can be appreciated by those who do not necessarily have the technical knowledge or an interest in it. Despite wine now reaching a vast audience, through decades of

simplification (of its image and taste), it remains a beverage surrounded by considerable parameters of correctness, social layering and complexity surrounding it.

### **Men and the Historical Emergence of Wine Writing**

Pierre Bourdieu (1986, p.241) states that “the social world is accumulated history”, one that necessitates modes of capital in order to function. Capital operates as a form of power under three guises – economic, cultural and social. *Culture* is an often misinterpreted or ambiguous word but chiefly refers to certain traits and patterns in the behaviour and lives of a group or race of people, or other living organisms (Zimmermann, 2015). Used as a defining line in the human consciousness, the liberal, sensitive, artistic or intrinsic part of the cognitive frame, a buffer to all things autocratic or even non-human. Wine is an ancient beverage, believed to be first produced almost 9000 years ago, and is older than most of today’s spoken languages and is in reality as old as primitive farming and the emergence of food production. Interestingly, almost from the outset wine has been documented, demarcated and written about (Böhm, n.d.; Brewer and Teeter, 2001; Varriano, 2010; Johnson, 2005), though perhaps less surprisingly, the accumulated history of wine culture suggests it has always been the domain of men. From ancient Egypt where it is believed that it was only men who were involved in its production and distribution, to Greece and Rome where the sexual dominance of males was depicted on wine vases and drinking vessels at symposia and feasts, wine’s early associations made it a beverage of cultural importance and patriarchal eminence (Varriano, 2010).

Roman cultures depicted wine in their art and documented its development through the ancient texts of writers such as Pliny the Elder, Cato, Columella, Horace, Palladius, Varro and Virgil (Johnson, 2006). All of these Roman writers compiled detailed volumes on the topics of, but not exclusively, viticulture and wine. Cato wrote much on the preservation of wine, while Pliny the Elder is notable for his early critique and rating of wines and his belief that grapes grown in different places produced different wines, an early precursor of the concept of *terroir*. Columella wrote similar volumes focusing on taste and sweetness. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century Palladius, although borrowing from those before him, wrote his famous agricultural treatise *Opus agriculturae*, all fifteen volumes of it, and it remained an important basis of knowledge until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Through its rhetoric, his writings on wine informed its development, which by that time in Europe was largely under the auspices of the church and monastic orders.



The history of developments in viticulture are quite well documented in texts such as *Liber Commodorum Ruralium* (1309) and “Bacci’s treatise on wines, *De naturali vinorum historia, de vinis Italiae*...dating from 1596” (Unwin, 2001, p.170), however the actual voice of wine and the words used to describe its flavours and rules were clearly lacking (Robinson, 2006). To interpret the then social interactions with wine, we rely on imagery and realist art, in particular from the period 1400-1800 (Meagher, 2009) and it’s only within our modern social culture when the craft that could be described today as *wine writing*, begins to emerge. The increasing politicisation of wine would shape much of it.

### **Wine Language Becomes Politicised**

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, wine had moved beyond being simply wine, a bulk product commodity, becoming distinguished and classified by vintage, vineyard, and grape variety and for the quality of its producer and cellaring. Naturally, how these developments were communicated “laid the foundations for the emergence of wine connoisseurship and a conspicuous link with elite social distinction” (Howland, 2013, p.325). The anthropologist Mary Douglas connects drinking alcohol to culture by stating how “drinking is essentially a social act, performed in a recognised social context” (2003, p.4). Wine’s relevance, not only as an economic entity but also to cultural sociology, deals with “cultural values and cultural demarcations” (Rössel et al. 2016, p.2). In France, the creation of systems such as *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée* in 1935 dramatically altered the cultural capital of winemakers and wine drinkers across the world for decades to come.

Since 1850, French wine, in particular, had gone through numerous struggles and "social upheaval" (Colman, 2008, p. 7), and by the time the appellation systems began to regulate production, wine in France had “split into two segments, a high end and a low end” (2008, p.7). As empires gave way to nations, and world wars drew lines and identities, it is understandable how these systems of control, or what West (2013, p.209) describes as “regimes”, evolved and why they were so often necessary. Born out of the fear of fraud and the cultural dilution of goods deemed to be authentic, West (2013, p. 211) tells us that implicit in the notion that wines from different areas have different qualities lies the “socially constructed” concept of *terroir*. Through the use of technocratic language and regulation, wine took on specified production limitations, defined tastes and added value. West (2013, p.210-211) highlights the “fundamental ironies” associated with creating boundaries around wines

and food products, stating that it is only when they are sold outside of these regions that they take on a special or “exotic” meaning. These demarcated characteristics of wines from specified places were alien to the average person and existed with a degree of liminality. Regions that were already acclaimed, further benefited from official status and backing of the state.

As wine became more specific and individual producers were noted for their exceptional output, an element of scarcity and elitism jointly arose (Lukacs, 2012). The ability to secure wines from and even become acquainted with these winemakers separated consumers. Harriet (1982, p.248) notes that “scarcity is always an aspect of capitalist relations”, whereas Colman (2008) notes that generally customers who seek out cheaper or most globalised wines tend to be less choosy in their tastes and are not seeking specific wines, more so their purchases are guided by brand recognition, price and availability.

### **How Wine is Communicated –Wine Critics Then and Now**

Historically wines from certain regions (Bordeaux, Champagne, Rioja, Burgundy, and Jerez) had reputations based on their general quality, availability and association with people of status. For the most part, the producers were less commonly known. When the British wine magazine *Decanter* was first launched in 1975 most people had very limited knowledge of wine. Up to this point wine while had been written about it had not been “critically assessed” (Hommerberg, 2011, p.5). Weekly columns did exist in newspapers and also in food magazines such as *Gourmet*, the *New York Sun*, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde* and *The Manchester Guardian* (Prial, (1992) (1987) (1992) (2002), in Goldberg, 2017). The content was written by ‘newspapermen’ (Prial, 1992) who often covered politics, current affairs and war correspondence as well as food and wine. They tended to be grounded, direct, and avoided unnecessary “winespeak”, (Prial, 1987, p.10). Because their job was not necessarily to build bridges between the public and the winemaker, but more to report the state-of-the-art, and instruct the public on the finer points of dining and eating (Prial, 1992), the language they used to describe wine was pedestrian and inclusive.

Winemakers were essentially farmers, with little or no time to self-promote their end product. In any account during the post-war era, there was no available arena to promote, and most relied on local markets and co-ops. *Negociants*, or wine brokers, did most of this work

but this was solely for self-interest with regards to selling wines they now had in their possession. The direct link between the grower and the consumer was yet to emerge.

With the arrival of *Decanter* magazine in particular, whose tagline states ‘The World’s Best Wine Magazine’, wine writing took on a new form. The language became more obscure and elitist and was aimed at a specific and dedicated type of wine enthusiast. By and large, the magazine’s readers were (and remain) successful males of middle-upper class (Smith Maguire, 2016). Specialist magazines such as *Decanter* were influential and legitimised wine regions and practices around wine by being “categorization devices” (Smith Maguire, 2016, p.8). By self-proclaiming themselves as authorities and assuming positions as arbiters of taste (Smith Maguire, 2016), wine writers constructed a powerful social arena from whence their agency was influential and at the same time distinguished, through the use of obtuse wine language.

Initially, the writing tended to be suffused with heavy doses of middle-class sentiment, elitism and an air of sexism. As the market grew exponentially and became highly lucrative and given the somewhat complicated nature of the subject, the importance of the wine writer as an ‘interpreter’ was quickly established. Another important role that wine writers and critics assume is that of quality assessor. Their unique position and ability to thrust a winery into the public sphere by positively rating its wine (and thus greatly helping to sell wine) resulted in producers and writers getting to know each other. What emerged was the direct language of the vineyard being shared, translated and regurgitated onto the pages of books and magazines. Smith Maguire (2010, p. 278) notes that by:

Translating their personal experience into provenance stories wine promoters serve as liminal conduits for a strategically constructed, mediated form of connectedness, from which economic value (occupational success for the wine promoter; market value for the wine) can be extracted.

Although women were employed as recognised wine critics, such as Master of Wine (MW) Jancis Robinson, most of the content from the years 1975 – 1995 in *Decanter* and similar publications was male-centric and was written by men. Habitually the writing was tinged with sexism mentioning ‘pretty blondes’ and ‘women who made wine’. Jokes about bums, boobs and bonking were the norm, as was public school *double entendre*. The articles were possibly the more subtle of the output, whereas advertisements, images and cartoons were altogether more direct. Women were often depicted as adjuncts to men’s important enjoyment of wine. The editions were saturated with advertising and in a large number of cases, these advertisements ranged from subtle to overt sexism, sometimes portraying naked women next

to fine or important bottles of wine. A study of alcohol advertising in women's magazines in Scandinavia and Italy (1960s – 2000s) noted this almost universal use of expected gender positions; women in a nurturing and domestic role, men in a physical and working role. The study is broad ranging and diverse but notably, the magazines', which are intended for a female and not male audience, showed that the:

...identity of women as the responsible consumer continues to have a prominent presence up to the present day. By associating women's responsibilities and pleasures with their duties at home, intimate relationships, and the family, the alcohol-related advertisements call upon women to identify again and again with the private domain and to attend to the needs of others.

(Törrönen and Rolando, 2016, p. 24) The study further showed that in Italy alcohol and women were more often represented in connection to mealtimes and also were more hypersexualised generally, whereas Sweden and Finland remained more conservative until the 1990s. To the mainly female audience, far from being initially liberated, the images were conservative and dutiful rather than sexualised portrayals of themselves, whereas *Decanter*, purchased and produced predominantly by men, largely failed to empower women and regularly sexualised them from the get-go.

In the early years of *Decanter*, it was the front covers which drew the most attention and showed the divide between important 'wine men' and sexualised women. Men were consistently depicted either working or in portrait, fully dressed while appearing important. In contrast, women rarely made the front cover in any meaningful way (with a few notable exceptions), rather they were objectified as desirables alongside wine.

Using sex to sell alcohol has been a common idea for a long time (Charest, 2014), after all, alcohol is an adult realm and so it seems a more obvious space in which to do so. The symbolism (message) contained within this type of wine imagery seems fatigued today but in the mid-1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s was usual/habitualised within the language of wine and of wine enthusiasts. In recent decades the advertising and sexist commentary have ceased regarding wine, which is much in line with trends in advertising globally. The absence of women writing about and working within the area of wine from its infancy to the recent past is in stark contrast to modern wine writing where perhaps one of the most admired and successful wine writers Jancis Robinson, top *sommeliers* worldwide are female and many of the hippest and most sought-after wines are farmed and made by women.



Image 1 & 2. Contrasting covers from *Decanter* wine magazine from the same era (1989-1993). The magazine frequently contained contrasting imagery and language, similar (and more revealing/suggestive) to this.

By the early 1990s, the use of "obscure" flowery language in wine writing was having the effect of actually alienating new wine drinkers and irritating existing ones (MacDonagh, 1994, p.31). Mac Donagh points out that the first French-language text on wine, Orlando de Suave's "Devis sur le vin" from 1549 or the earlier Charles Estienne's 'Vinetum' from 1537 (written in Latin) actually only give scant descriptions of wines i.e. 'hard', 'soft', 'meagre', 'quality' and so on. The front cover of *Decanter* from February 1994 states "The language of wine: Has it gone too far?" MacDonagh, who penned the internal article entitled "Putting wine into words" sought the council of his peers who had alternating views of the then current state of wine writing. Some, like Micheal Broadbent and Hugh Johnson, thought it "ridiculous to be so over-expressive about quite ordinary wines" (p.34) while others thought it was "show business" and necessary to wax lyrical about wine.

While Colman (2008, p.118) says that "wine consumers love critics", arguably the most famous and influential wine critic, Robert Parker, while being one of the main forces in wine for three decades, has also come in for notable criticism and ire. Steinberger (2008, p.132) attests that "no critic will ever again wield the kind of influence that Parker has exercised." Hommerberg (2011, p.2) notes the "remarkably powerful contemporary rhetoric" of Parker's

wine writing. His “corpus of reviews” take place within “a strictly specialised field of discourse”. Within the accepted daily language used to describe wines is a type of social exclusion, a lack of meaning, for those without the cultural capital to engage with it, yet Stearns (2006, p. 154) and Hommerberg (2011, p.3) contend that [wine] consumerism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a highly complex phenomenon, which can function to blur identity and “help people deal with confusions about social status”. Watson (2013, p.16) underpins this by stating that “the language of wine has its own rhetoric”. Hommerberg clearly asserts that Parker had the power to change, was unapologetic, and highly persuasive in his representations, argumentation and appraisal. His influence, social and economic, was so strong that his word changed how producers made their wine, with the hope that he would notice it and grade it favourably using his extraordinarily powerful *Parker Points* system (Lukacs, 2012). The points rating systems, used by today’s prominent wine critics, enforce another complex layer within wine’s social and cultural contexts, something Bourdieu refers to in his fields theory (1996) which explains the “evaluation and consecration of cultural objects as the result of field-specific balances of power between different actors” (Rössel et al., 2016, p.2 ). The model is still in use today and has been replicated many times, even by budget supermarkets.

Today’s wine writers and journalists have become a “powerful actors...involved in the public discourse about wine” (Rössel et al., 2016. p.16; Hommerberg, 2011). Their contemporary offerings have a wide scope and vary from print media columns to in-depth volumes detailing which wines are fashionable, tips for what to serve on which occasion, wine courses and tasting notes, and expansive histories on the subject. To Rössel et al. (2016, p.2) the modern wine journalist is part of the "agenda-setting media" whose weekly columns inform the public with powerful cultural analysis which classifies and legitimatises “objects in a variety of fields, from art to wine or architecture for an upper-middle-class audience”.

Unsurprisingly the internet has further liberated the world of wine writing in the form of personal blogs and the male orientated arena of wine has retreated into the background somewhat. The canon of language surrounding wine continues to shift and adapt to the change in trends. Films, books, videos, tourism, art, food and wine matching and wine education have all suffused to become an economic phenomenon. Steinberger (2008, p. 134) declares that “in wine, as in everything else, we are witnessing the empowerment of the *vox populi*.” This has brought a new wave of language to wine with online wine websites noting large numbers of wine tasting notes from public wine aficionados and amateurs alike, much of it “static” and “noise” (p.134).

## **Modern Tropes - the un-natural language of natural wines**

A new uncertainty in wine has arrived. The much celebrated and often maligned natural wine movement has decided to re-liberate already-liberated wine from the grips of homogenised globalisation. Humans like generalisations; they make concepts easier to understand and categorise but natural or real wine, remains difficult to do so. Conventional wine has become too general, but this is why it's so successful. The problem, if it can be deemed problematic, is that these wines are now “out of step with a food culture that prizes all things local” (Buranyi, 2018). In line with the prevailing mono-farming of today, vast quantities of pesticides and herbicides are used to maintain vineyards while industrial production methods ensure that brand name wines taste the same year in year out, bottle after bottle. Conventional wine teaches us that wine should taste a certain way and from a consumer perspective that works but it is no exaggeration to say that modern-day wine, the kind that most people consume, is on a par with processed food. Even still the all-out natural concept does not sit well with many prominent wine writers, who negatively describe the wines as “flawed”, “wacky”, “weird” and “a fantasy of marginal producers” (Buranyi, 2018).

Given that most wine writers are yet to embrace natural wines and decode them for the general public, a new, almost tribal language has evolved for followers of this growing trend. Positive descriptors such as ‘glugable’, ‘smashable’, ‘downable’, ‘for chugging’, ‘easy juice’, and that wine can have had ‘skin contact’ or be an ‘acid hit’, ‘funky’, ‘wicked’, ‘mental’ and ‘insane’ are some of the raw emotive terms heard at trade wine tastings, casual gatherings and on social media. Words such as ‘organic’, ‘biodynamic’, ‘terroir’ ‘sulphites’ and the much debated ‘natural’ have not always appeared in wine writing. The typical wine article from even as late as the mid-late 1990’s has little mention of them as big names, brands and prestige were the tropes that drove the writing and in turn sold the wine. Elin McCoy (2018) writing in *Decanter* says that “Natural wine has arguably been the major movement of the 21st Century wine world, and for some, it has also become a “lifestyle choice”.

This new generation of winemakers express a desire to create and tell the truth through their wine, a truth that does not involve the technology or trickery employed by conventional winemaking, but rather is “the gritty, real stuff, made by real people from real grapes grown in real vineyards” (McCoy, 2018). The wine must be as pure and as far away from commercial “skittle” juice as possible (Vice, 2013). There is an element of freedom, or *vin libre* about this

approach, yet there must be control also, it is not anarchy winemaking, though some might disagree (See image 3).



Image 3 Source: 'Raisin' natural wine app online. Image 4. Charest (2014) Illustrator: James Carpenter

It is a lack of control in the winemaking process that has caused many traditionally established wine writers to dismiss it as a trend or another fad while others have rejected the wines claiming they are faulted and poorly made. A series of headlines from 2016/2017 read as follows: “Natural wine is a runaway train, and it might be time to hit the brakes” (Goode, 2017); “The cult of natural wine – ‘this is like punk or acid house’”(Naylor, 2017); “I have a problem with natural wines” (Smith, 2016); “Kawaii cute; the problem with natural wine today” (Feiring, 2016); “Natural wine: nice idea, shame about the problems” (Hesford, 2017); “Beware the cult of ‘natural wine’” (Palling, 2017). The notion of not wanting to work within the usual boundaries and satisfy the popular taste is not a revolution but is more about desiring less complication. The wines still need to sell, so are part of the system, with stories, language and capital all of their own. This capital has garnered a lot of interest from social groups seeking to be alternative, less commercial and more individual. Interestingly some of the natural winemakers receiving the most attention are women. This can be attributed to natural wine being a new movement, less wrapped up in traditional modes and by default less male orientated.

Even though this movement has managed to liberate itself from most of the trappings of conventional winemaking and open the door to a new generation of female wine professionals, a strange phenomenon of equating wine with sex remains. There are numerous examples of natural wine labels that depict women (and in a limited number of cases men) in various stages of undress, engaging in sexual acts and general innuendo. It could be argued that it is liberating, in good humour, harmless fun or simply an expression of freedom, but not



everyone agrees. Charest (2014) notes the many “examples of such “sexy” (or is that sexist?) labels within the community of natural winemakers”. These particular images are absorbed into a community where humorous, rebellious and anarchic labels are common. Liberating ideals of doing something against the system, are universal, but Charest (2014) suggests that in these particular instances “it appears instead to be a clinging to the bawdy, macho side of traditional wine culture”. When pressed on the reasons or meanings of these labels, the producers are surprised, seeing no issue whatsoever. Jo Python, whose wine, Grololo, has an illustration of topless women on it, pointed out that it was used at a charity event for breast cancer research in California, with Charest (2014) adding “in that context, celebrating breasts on a label does take on a whole other meaning”. When replying to questions for this paper, Nicolas Vauthier (2018), a French winemaker, rebuked the idea that his wine labels are sexist or offensive saying they are a mixture of “elegance, absurdity, nudity and humour...there’s nothing sexual in these labels...[and for me] are a kind of light provocation”.

Whatever way it is construed the importance of the label as a communicator to the customer and as an indicator of social status is possibly more prevalent now than at any time before. Capturing photographs of wine labels for later use on social media is the norm for the modern wine amateur or aficionado. Users set up profiles, upload images and rate and comment on the wines, with some giving the option of connecting the image to a place (of purchase or consumption) via google maps. The delicate balance of getting the perfect shot (angle, lighting, mood) of a wine with significant cachet and with the added bonus of drinking it in a popular location, is an important part of the discourse of wine and image today.

## **Conclusion**

Persuasive wine myths, for example, those of Champagne and Bordeaux, became a part of accepted social structures through the historical use of affirming symbols, code and language. Rössel et al., (2016) describe how the language used in wine writing has evolved from a more technical and economic format to one which focuses on authenticity and cultural capital and how in turn publicising certain wines as authentic garners higher prices. The trend of critiquing and grading cultural life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to uncover what has true meaning and authenticity remains intact. This phenomenon shackles those that engage with it, as the language discourse used to describe wine fuels an elitist motif on one hand and isolates the normative values of wine on the other. The power assumed by mostly male wine writers in the

late 1970s and 1980s, as dictators of taste, both shows how valuable wine is as a key cultural indicator and also how knowledge around it was and remains limited. The liminal space filled by writers, promoters and critics was a blank canvas for fecund language and notions to evolve unchallenged. Language does not create reality but it helps to shape it (Cassirer, 1953) and how we decode language, in turn, helps us to negotiate our experiences.

The era of male hegemony within wine has been mostly displaced and replaced with fresher perspectives and evolving alternative styles. The workings of wine still remain areas more frequented by males (winemakers, sommeliers, and critics) but the rising number of female professionals within the industry is addressing the balance. Prominent wine writing, journalism and social media have created new voices and mutable language, and wine writing continues to be a powerful influencer of wine trends and sales. The relevance placed on wine labels and story ensures an almost unending range of choice and difference in wine, even when wines are too similar to differentiate from each other. The cultural capital of wine language continues to decipher taste and value.

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