

## Is the Language of Wine Broken?

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**ABSTRACT:** At the 2021 Professional Wine Writers Symposium, speakers declared that the language of wine was broken and assertions of classism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, racism, sexism and being exclusionary were levelled against it. Having reviewed the difficulties of describing wine and movements between styles of describing wine from the early twentieth century through to the new vocabularies emerging from the natural wine movement today, this paper examines those assertions and considers whether the language of wine is, as claimed, broken.

Examining these assertions shows the language to be elitist, classist and exclusionary. A lived experience of Michelin-starred dining, classical French gastronomy and French language flavor terms is required to fully participate in the language. Privileged-based exclusions are encountered in terms such as forest floor and gooseberries. Eurocentricity is shown through the reliance on flavors unfamiliar to those outside Western cultures such as milk products (butter and cream) which are unfamiliar to Asian palates and lactose intolerant people. Gooseberries are virtually unknown in China. The WSET acknowledges difficulties and are updating their terminology. However, direct translations may be of little help. In America, the Court of Master Sommeliers was denounced for racist terminology, and the historic and ongoing racial inequalities associated with terms like heritage are mainly unrecognized. Use of overtly gendered terms and sexist commentaries continue.

Finally, despite the sensitivity and validity of the assertions against the language of wine, this paper presents the justification for concluding that the language is not, in fact, broken. The language is moving with society.

According to Esther Mobley, wine writer of the San Francisco Chronicle, and other speakers at the 2021 Professional Wine Writers Symposium, the language of wine is broken. Accusations of classism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, racism, sexism and being exclusionary are levelled against it. This paper will review the difficulties of describing wine in English, the movements between differing styles of describing wine since the early twentieth century and the above accusations. It will also consider whether the language of wine is, in fact, broken.

### The Difficult in Describing Wine

Describing the taste of wine to another person is difficult. Simply put: your choice of words to describe what you have

tasted, does not mean that the person you are speaking with, will share the same understanding of those words. The intended meaning of the description of a taste cannot be truly shared but rather only interpreted by the reader or listener.

Smells cannot be seen or held and, consequentially, are difficult to describe. Classical writers such as Aristotle, Darwin and Kant have questioned our sense of smell, its usefulness to humans and whether it can be described without reference to another sense (Johansen 1996, 1–19; Darwin 1871; Kant, Zöller and Loudon 2014, 270). Modern scholars have examined the weakness of language regarding sensory vocabularies (Paradis 2005, 541–573; Burenhult and Majid 2011, 19–29; Wnuk and Majid 2014, 125–138; Paradis and Eeg-Olofsson 2013, 22–40). Smell descriptors are overwhelmingly source-descriptors in English and other western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic cultures - such as the “smell of a lemon” or the “smell of roses” (Kaeppeler and Mueller 2013, 189–209). In contrast, the languages of hunter-gatherers such as the Maniq and Jahai peoples, have rich smell-specific lexicons (Wnuk and Majid 2014, 125–138). Consequently, the world-renowned wine consultant Émile Peynaud claimed that wine tasters “need to be able to describe the indescribable... [and] feel to some extent betrayed by language” (1996, 211), while wine journalist Malcolm Gluck described the English language as “inadequate for the job” (2003, 107). Wine is of significance concerning social capital, status, and semantic registers (Charters 2006; Silverstein 2016, 185–212). “A speaker successfully or not so successfully [in using the language of wine] places himself or herself within relevant orders of stratification” (Silverstein 2016, 196). Misuse can lead to ridicule, as illustrated by James Thurber’s famous 1934 New Yorker magazine cartoon (see Figure 1).

### Movements between Styles of Describing Wine

This section will consider style changes in wine descriptions, commencing with the relatively non-inclusive, non-accessible style of the first half of the twentieth century which was targeted at the wealthy and industry insiders, to the increasingly informal, accessible and entertaining style which emerged in the 1960s, the analytical and deductive approaches taught by global educational bodies, through to the trendy, experience-based and qualitative styles with growing, quasi-tribal followings of today.



***“It’s a naïve domestic Burgundy without any breeding, but I think you’ll be amused by its presumption.”***

Figure 1: James Thurber cartoon copyright ©1937 by Rosemary A. Thurber. Reprinted by arrangement with Rosemary A. Thurber and The Barbara Hogenson Agency. All rights reserved.

### Exclusive and Restricted, akin to an old English Gentlemen’s Club

While George Saintsbury is described as a “crusty old author” (Robinson and Harding 2015, 631), his *Notes on a Cellar-Book* (1920) is regarded as an early testimonial to wine literature. He was part of a group of predominately English writers for “whom drinking fine wines was part of everyday life”



Figure 2: George Saintsbury.

(Robinson and Harding 2015, 406). They described wine holistically, considering the wine as a whole, rather than its individual structure components (such as sweetness, acidity or tannin), aromas or flavors. They gave value to a wine’s typicity—how it compared to other wines of the same locality and style. This required their readership to be already knowledgeable about wine. As their intended audience were the wealthy with privileged access to fine wines and other wine industry insiders, this was not considered to be an issue. The style is reminiscent of the expectations of private, English gentlemen’s clubs of the era—distant and not open to outsiders.

It has not the feminine grace and charm of Claret; the transcendental qualities of Burgundy and Madeira; the immediate inspiration of Champagne; the rather unequal and sometimes paling attractions of Sauterne and Mosel and Hock... there is something about it which must have been created in pre-established harmony with the best English character. (Saintsbury 1924 [2008], 74)

Michael Broadbent is considered a writer of this style. In the hundreds of tasting notes in his *The Great Vintage Book* (1980), “there are only a handful of references to individual berries or flowers” (James 2018, 8). He declared that “style, quality, and condition [are] of more value than a precise description of the actual smell or taste - well-nigh an impossibility anyway. If you doubt this, try putting to words the taste of garlic or the smell of wild thyme. Pinot smells like Pinot” (1980, 13). His description requires the reader to have pre-existing knowledge of styles, aromas, and flavors as per his description of a Latour cabernet sauvignon:

Very much what one would expect from a youthful Latour of this class of vintage; opaque, dumb, that is to say closed up, with some pretty concentrated Cabernet underneath... peppery [...] quite unready to drink but all the signals set for a good future. (1980, 161)

While metaphors are a rich semantic tool for describing wine, their use may be interpreted as some sort of “lampoonable camouflage rather than serious technical discourse” (Gluck 2003). Michael Broadbent’s recollection of André Simon’s descriptions may be inaccessible to modern audiences.

A 1926 Chablis reminded him of the “grace of the silver willow;” the 1919 Montrachet “of the stateliness of the Italian poplar;” the 1920 Cheval Blanc “of the magnificence of the purple beech;” the 1870 Lafite “of the majesty of the Royal Oak.” (Broadbent 2007)

This style of describing wine is inaccessible to those without existing wine knowledge. However, a new style would appear in the second half of the century.

### Sixties Style Revolution

During the 1960s, there was a dramatic growth in global interest in wine and a “change in public perception of wine, from elitist to popularist, a movement encouraged by wider travel and higher disposable income” (Robinson and Harding 2015, 407) supported by mid-priced wines from the New World. The lesson learnt from the 1976 “Judgement of Paris”, which is regarded as revolutionizing the wine world (Taber 2005), “was to trust one’s own palate, not the label on the bottle, country of origin or reputation of the wine maker” (James 2018, 3).

In 1978, Robert Parker Jr. began publishing the *Wine Advocate* newsletter. His style of writing was folksy, informal, and entertaining as per his description of a cabernet sauvignon as having “the finesse of a horny hippopotamus” and another as being “hazardous to your health if drunk... a stinky rotten wine” (McCoy 2006, 53). His 100-point score system was “easily and delightedly grasped by Americans familiar with high school grades” (Robinson and Harding 2015, 506). Contrasting to Broadbent’s “peppery” descriptive, Parker’s description of a

Latour cabernet sauvignon, contains many aroma and flavor descriptors:

[...] sweet, smoky, roasted aromas in the nose combine with jammy levels of black current, cherry and prune-like fruit. It possesses extraordinary concentration and unctuousity, with a thick, fat texture oozing notes of cedar wood, tobacco, coffee, and overripe fruit [...] (Parker 2003a).

The public followed and understood Parker, trusting his judgement and buying wines he admired. James has even warned that “a single man’s preferences could become the international gold standard” (2018, 6) for judging wines. Arguably, many wine producers have created wines specifically to satisfy his preferences and alcoholic “fruit bombs” laden with vanilla and oaky flavors become increasingly prevalent under a phenomenon known as “Parkerization” as fearfully described by Feiring (2008).

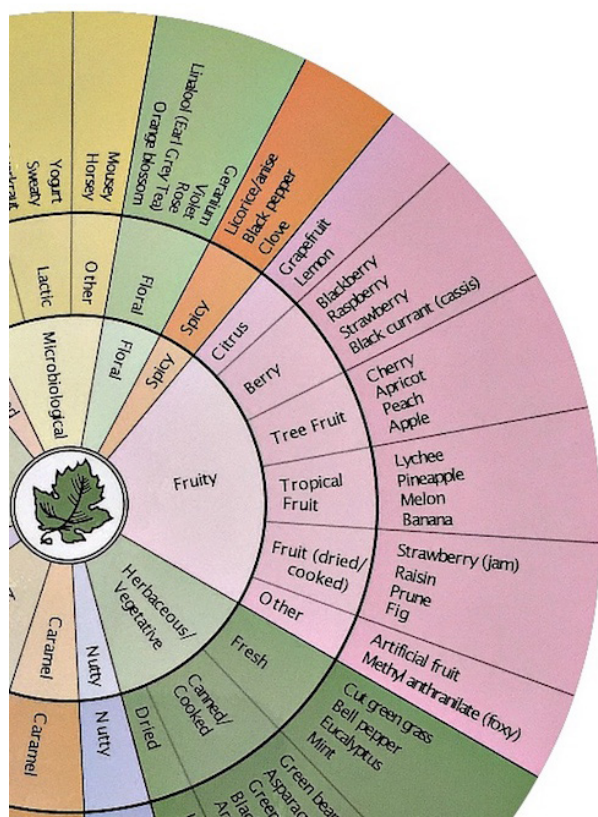


Figure 3: Wine aroma wheel. Copyright 1990, 2002 A. C. Noble, www.winearomawheel.com.

In 1984, Ann Noble created the Wine Aroma Wheel (see Figure 3) to facilitate “communication amongst wine-makers, marketing personnel, wine researchers, and wine writers, as well as consumers” (Noble *et al.* 1984, 107). Within the tool, terminology for aromas was presented diagrammatic in concentric circles of increasingly precision (see Figure 3). Similar tools have subsequently appeared for the structural components of wine (Gawel *et al.* 2000, 203–207; Pickering *et al.* 2008, 51–67). Following the

introduction of these tools, there has been a growth in the inclusion of precise aromas and flavors in wine descriptions. Concerns have arisen of exaggerated descriptions “sound[ing] almost farcical in [their] specificity” (Mobley 2020a) and of “autosuggestion and bluff” on behalf of writers (Peynaud 1996, 253). Kent Back highlighted Hugh Johnson’s concern of descriptions appearing similar to “the recipe of a fruit salad” (2014, 95).

Analytical descriptions of wine increased based on the teaching by the global educational bodies. In 1987, David Bird and Maggie McNie created a systematic (structured and repeatable) approach to tasting wine. Their approach addressed a wine’s structural elements (acidity, sweetness, tannin, body, intensity, and alcohol) and provided descriptive measurements for each - low, medium minus, medium, medium plus, high/pronounced (Bird, 2000). Subsequently, the Wine and Spirits Education Trust (WSET 2019) and the Court of Master Sommeliers (2017) adopted analytical approaches to describing wine which quantitatively described wine’s structural components (see Table 1). As global leaders in wine education, their approaches and vocabularies of aromas and flavors significantly influenced the language of wine writers (Robinson 2021a).

Palate	
Sweetness	dry » off-dry » med-dry » med-sweet » sweet
Acidity	low » med (-) » medium » med (+) » high
Tannin level	low » med (-) » medium » med (+) » high
Alcohol	low » medium » high
Body	light » med (-) » medium » med (+) » full
Flavor intensity	light » med (-) » medium » med (+) » pronounced
Finish	short » med (-) » medium » med (+) » long

Table 1. Quantitative measurements from the WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting.

The use of wine metaphors was examined by Caballero and Suárez-Toste (2008, 241–260), who identified three popular modern metaphors. The primary metaphor is “wine as a living organism”. The organism’s health is described through terms such as vigour, sickly, malnourished, weak, or tired. Familial relationships are described through terms such as clone, pedigree, sister, mate, peer, and sibling. Other anatomical, physiology and personality-related traits are described through words such as big-bodied, fleshy, sinewy, long-limbed, fat, boisterous, assertive, sensitive, demure, expressive, backward, and shy. The researchers noted that “the drinking of a wine at a premature stage of development is often condemned as *infanticide*” [original emphasis]. The description of “[t]his sexy wine is stacked in all the right places” (2008, 246) was highlighted. It is arguable that “wine as a stereotyped person” rather than a living organism may be more appropriate. The second metaphor is “wine as a textile” and utilizes words such as wrap, fabric, interwoven, seams,



tapestry, cloak, glove, frock, mantle, envelop and dress up. These wines can be described as “velvety smooth on the palate” or “a monster in a beautiful frock”. The third popular metaphor is “wine as a building” and is associated with terms relating to architecture such as edges, layers, contours, square, angular, pointed, round and spherical and these wines are constructed, assembled, structured and built into a magnificent edifices or fortresses.

As wine itself became increasingly popular from the 1960s, wine descriptions became increasingly informal, informative and entertaining. Detailed aromas, flavors and evaluative scores were provided alongside quantitative measurements of components such as acidity, sweetness and tannin. Metaphors were increasingly used to explain and compare wines. Further changes were to happen after the turn of the millennium.

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### Post-2000 Trends

Since 2000, despite the changes in approaches to describing wine, concerns have been raised about the apparent emotional disconnect in wine descriptions and there have been calls for alternative descriptive approaches. A new vocabulary and style of describing wine has emerged from the natural wine movement.

John Dilworth’s *Imaginative vs Analytical Experiences in Wine* declares that it would be a “disastrous mistake” (2008, 89) to ignore the role of imagination in our theories of perception and wine descriptions. Analytical wine descriptions do not convey the emotions experienced when tasting wine. Dilworth is not suggesting that wine “tastes of emotion” but conceives of wine as providing an “imaginative improvisatory theatre” (92) and of taste as akin to a “sensory theme, upon which the drinker carries out art-like improvisations” (91). A taster projects their own imaginative experience onto the theatre’s stage. Experiences of family celebrations, special occasions and vacations are imagined. However, these are individual imaginations and their inclusion in a wine description may not be relatable or relevant to the general reading public.

Andrew Jefford emphasized imagination and enjoyment when raising concerns about the exclusion of imagination in analytical wine tasting descriptions. He warned that “analytics will tend to exclude, rule out and close down... [and] leaves no role for the imagination” (2020). He advised “appreciative tasters [to] listen to the wine, the better to understand such pleasure as it might offer in the drink context... [and that tasters] should not be a policeman so much as a psychoanalyst or confessor.” Highlighting that wine attributes are to be enjoyed, not despised, he proposes “us[ing] the most vivid words you can, based on your own sensual experiences and not winespeak.” Similarly, Hannah Howard, writing for *Wine Enthusiast* declared that “it’s more about exploring attributes beyond flavor like how a wine makes you feel” (2021).

An imaginative and emotional-based approach to describing wine is emerging from the natural wine movement. Wine journalist, Emily Timberlake describes this style as “natty speak” (a reference to describing natural wines) and how users of this style “are more likely to talk about the “vibe” of a wine than its clarity, concentration, or color” (2020). Intuition and subjective experience, rather than objective and analytical deduction, are primary. The style is portrayed as “intentionally rudimentary, filled with fuzzy but friendly-seeming words [...] that are quite conceptual when applied to wine.” Emotion-based words are appearing. Glou-glou (a relatively light-bodied, low-alcohol and thirst-quenching wine), glugable, smashable, downable, for chugging and easy juice are associated with enjoyment of being able to drink relatively large quantities of that wine due to the lower alcohol and taste. Crunchy and fresh wines have high acidity and are associated with enlivening feelings of energy and electricity. The expansion of the language of wine is taking place and some terms remain to be clarified as positive or negative. While funky is associated with bacterial action or spoilage, in this style it can be used in a positive manner. Similarly, bretty is associated with flavors arising from the *Brettanomyces* yeast but may be seen as positive. The University of California have created a Brettanomyces Aroma Wheel and confirmed that “[s]ome of the characteristics would also be generally described as negative... whereas others are positive” (Joseph *et al.* 2017, 13). Negative aromas include urine, horse, rotten, putrid and vomit while positive aromas include leather, soy sauce, nutty, tobacco, coffee, and chocolate (aromas also associated with great, aged, traditional wines). Minerality, while not a new term and “easier to say what it is not than what it is” (Hemming 2016) may refer to a flavor, texture or feeling. However, leveraging the metaphor of wine as a textile, *The Sommelier’s Atlas of Taste* advises not becoming overly concerned with defining minerality when stating “upholsterers don’t get flummoxed when we describe wines as ‘velvety’ ” (Parr and Mackay 2018). The influence of fashions and trends in tasting terms such as *energetic*, *drive* and *racy* is emphasized by Jancis Robinson (2021a).

Silverstein (2016, 185–212) emphasized the link between the appropriate use of a semantic registry to describe wine and memberships of informal groups. Crawley, when describing how most wine writers are yet to embrace natural wines and decode them for the general public, highlights that “a new, almost tribal language has evolved for followers of this growing trend” (2018, 14). Membership of the group or tribe requires appropriate use of that language. Timberlake clarifies and asks:

The words we use to talk about wine often say more about us than the wine itself—how we want to be seen, which club we want to be part of ... a numbers gal or a feelings gal? Nerd or jock? Country or rock n’ roll? (2020)

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### Assertions Against Today's Language of Wine

Despite the changes described above, Esther Mobley claimed that “[t]here is widespread agreement that the language [professional wine writers] use to talk about wine is broken” (Robinson 2021a). This section will provide an overview of some of the assertions made against the language of wine.

Elitism and classism have been alleged with reference to the use of classical French gastronomy terms and the French language. Mobley (2020a) identified flavor descriptors which are derived from “the annals of classical French gastronomy: *pate de fruit* (a jellied fruit candy), *coulis* (a fruit sauce), *fleur de sel* (very fancy salt)” which she presents as evidence of the requirement for a “lived experience of Michelin-starred dining” to fully understand these terms. Without that lived experience, a person is excluded from fully participating in the language and, hence, the language is not fully accessible to them. These terms could therefore be considered as exclusionary. Mobley raises similar concerns regarding the use of French descriptive words, such as *brioche* (a French bread), *cassis* (a French alcoholic blackcurrant drink) and *garrigue* (French mountain-side herbs). Alternative terms in English for those or similar flavors are available. The use of French language terms is considered exclusionary to people without the privileges (education, finance and time) to become familiar with foreign foods or language terms. However, a counter argument should also be made that much of wine culture derives from France and that French terms should not be discarded just to appease English-speakers, but rather that English language alternatives should be added to the language.

English language terms are also accused of asserting a privilege-based exclusion. Privileges of wealth and class are visible in Ian Cauble's description of a Riesling wine as a “freshly opened can of tennis balls” in the film *Somm* (2012). Tennis is a sport of the privileged and few players regularly open cans of new balls. Timberlake informally proposes that *sophisticated*, *peasant wine*, *aristocratic* and *rustic* also be regarded as classist terms (2020). Mobley, while acknowledging that gooseberry is a concise descriptive for sauvignon blanc, emphasizes financial power when questioning whether people “shopping at California Safeway locations are not likely to have ever eaten” a gooseberry (2020). Alicia Towns Franken, vice president of Archer Roose, states “I grew up in Chicago, where there is no ‘forest floor’” (Howard 2021). Dwellers of mega-cities, particularly the less privileged, do not have access to forests. These terms are inaccessible to English speakers.

Eurocentricity, colonization, and potential racism have also been asserted. “The vocabulary used for fine wine is nearly exclusively rooted in flavors and aromas familiar to Western Europe” and excludes those “that are unfamiliar to the white, Western cultures” (Mobley 2020a). In Asia, gooseberries are again identified as “virtually unknown”

(Robinson 2021a) and imposing the requirement of familiarity with unknown fruits leads to frustration. Jeannie Cho Lee MW warns that “there is a certainly a case here for linguistic imperialism” (2011) while Miguel De Leon declared that “[i]t's time to decolonize wine” (2020). In addition to unknown fruits, De Leon notes that flavors of milk products (such as butter and cream) are unfamiliar to Asian palates (2020). Lactose tolerance is predominantly a European ethnicity trait. The WSET has acknowledged some of the difficulties identified and have commenced updating their tasting vocabulary (Robinson 2021a). A single approach to aroma and flavor terminology is insufficient. Differences between speakers of English also arises. As recently described by the WSET, “[f]rom biscuit to porridge, bramble to gooseberry, we know that some of the terms used in our Systematic Approach to Tasting wine and spirits doesn't always align with American English” (WSET Global 2022). Understandably, further issues arise regarding foreign languages such as Chinese. Direct translations from English into Chinese or other languages may be of little help as “many Western wine terms mean little in the Chinese vernacular or, worse, are beyond translation” (Port 2018). Cho Lee created an Asian-oriented wine lexicon (2011), which was utilized in the creation of the Australian Wine Flavors Card (Wine Australia 2017). The WSET, the Court of Master Sommeliers and Institute of Masters of Wines all originate from Vintner's Hall, London and the first Mexican American master of wine, Martin Reyes declares that “by the time you finish the[ir] framework, you basically sound like a British person without the accent” (Mobley 2020b). The Court of Master Sommeliers itself was recently denounced by requiring Tahira Habib to refer to the white examiner as “master” (McIntyre 2020) during her examination. Such language recalled “the power dynamics of slavery” for her. She “couldn't deal with people who couldn't see that that language was a problem” (Mobley 2020c). Words have different associations from different perspectives. American President Thomas Jefferson is known for attempting to produce quality wine (unsuccessfully) and quality cider (successfully) from his Monticello estate, as evidenced by his letter of November 15, 1817, to Edmond Bacon (Jefferson 1817, 192). However, the enslaved Jupiter Evans who made that cider is not widely known (Maki 2019). While the American Cider Association acknowledges the historic and ongoing inequality associated with the term *heritage cider* (Wells 2021), such recognition is not witnessed by the use of the term *heritage* by American wineries and wine names.

While the use of overtly gendered language has been reducing in wine descriptions, continued references to male and female can seem alienating and offensive in a non-binary environment (Ledsom 2020). When considering the use of gender in wine descriptions, Jancis Robinson acknowledged her own use of “192 masculines, 147 feminines and 37 sexys” in her tasting notes since 2000

and the implied stereotype of masculine as aggressive and muscular while feminine as delicate and floral (2021a). Mobley proclaims that “[it] astounds me that the word ‘slutty’—used to describe a wine whose appeal is obvious, rather than subtle—remains in circulation” (2020a). She references a description which reads: “[t]his wine is tropical like a girl in a bikini... it’s a total slutty fruit-bomb” (The Wine Snob 2015). Cawley describes how “[j]okes about bums, boobs and bonking were the norm, as was public school double entendre” (2018, 10) and while stating that “in recent decades [...] sexist commentary has ceased regarding wine” (11), he highlights “a strange phenomenon of equating wine with sex [which] remains” (15) in the context of natural wines.

The recent assertions against the language of wine are well-founded. The language has been shown to be elitist, classist and exclusionary. A lived experience of Michelin-starred dining, classical French gastronomy and French flavors is required to fully participate in the discussions using this language. Privileged-based exclusions are also encountered regarding with English-language terms, such as forest floor, cans of tennis balls and gooseberries. Eurocentricity is shown through the reliance on flavors unfamiliar to those outside white, Western cultures and diets. Assertions of colonisation, imperialism and racism are founded upon proven concerns and the continuing phenomenon of sexist commentaries.

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## Conclusion

Can it be concluded that the language of wine is, in fact, broken? Despite the sensitivity of a potential interpretation of my answer, and validity of the assertions against the language of wine, I suggest that the language is not broken. This is based on the language’s demonstrable capacity to grow, change and consistently become more inclusive and accessible. It is living and moving. The style changes highlighted in this paper reflected changes in wider society, from the era of the British Empire and restrictive norms of English Gentlemen’s clubs, to the increasingly informal and open society of the 1960s through to the current era when social movements are highlighting and raising awareness of the injustices, discriminations and prejudices perpetrating society. With today’s perspective, certain traits and terms of the language of wine are, indeed, inappropriate and very wrong. However, it should be noted that the focus of unacceptability changes with society. For example, a recent *The Financial Times* article queried “Why is it still considered OK to be ageist” (Kellaway 2022). Adrienne Lehrer highlighted negative age-related words such as withered, dead, dying, decrepit and senile which are part of the language of wine. “We can interpret the phrase a decrepit or senile wine as one that is too old and has lost its desirable qualities. The association between senility and old age is based on stereotypes” (2009, 76). Why is the language of wine not described as broken with regard to

ageism? People of all races, ethnicities, cultures, and sexes grow old. Both today’s society and the language of wine are ageist. The language of wine is not broken as it changes with society. Surely, the declaration at the Professional Wine Writers Symposium 2021 that the language of wine was broken, was meant to be applied to certain facets and terms within the language. Based on the examination of certain assertions, these facets and terms are exclusionary and discriminatory. Therefore, they are broken from today’s perspective of inclusivity and accessibility. The actions of identification and acknowledgement initiate their removal. Wine writers, aware of and highlighting these breakages, will change how they use the language of wine and others will be influenced by them. Together, they will change the future language of wine.

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