

Total Transformation

Wines today are almost unrecognizable from those of the 1970s. Is this for the better?

By [Matt Kramer](#), Wine Spectator Magazine
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Because I have a new book out (*Matt Kramer on Wine*), in the course of promoting it I've had an unusually large number of chats and interviews with colleagues in the past few weeks. Consequently, I've discovered, like a patient in therapy, a recurring theme that I hadn't realized was preying upon my mind: how wine has utterly transformed.

My book notes that I've been a full-time wine writer for more than three decades. So, inevitably, I've been asked about how wine has changed. Of course I've been aware for a long time that wine has changed, as I'm sure you have too.

But until recently, I never fully scanned, like a radar sweep, the landscape of wine, taking in a broader picture of just how thoroughly wine has changed since, say, 1970.

You'd think that change has been a constant in wine over the centuries. To a degree that's true. In France, red wines became darker and richer-tasting in the 1700s due to the advent of what's called *cuvaison*, the prolonged mingling of pigment- and flavor-rich skins with the fermenting grape juice. (Previously, the red wines were what we'd today call rosés. They barely lasted from one vintage to the next.)

In the mid-1800s, yet more changes occurred. Red wines became increasingly powerful and tannic, requiring (and rewarding) longer aging in bottle. This is one reason why, by the way, the Baron Ricasoli, who owned the Brolio estate in Chianti Classico, advocated adding white grapes (Malvasia and, later, Trebbiano) to Chianti's traditional Sangiovese, the better to soften what he felt was a hard red wine that required long aging.

So, yes, there have always been gradual changes. But that gradualism accelerated to a whiplash intensity starting in the 1970s. The reason was the powerful thrust of technology (stainless steel tanks that allowed temperature-controlled fermentations; new presses; advanced filtration techniques) and scientific know-how. Winemakers were no longer just knowing craftsmen. They were enologists, with university degrees in wine science.

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Thanks to this, what occurred starting in the 1970s was a swiftness and completeness of change never previously seen.

The key point, the startling fact, is this: Nearly all of the world's wines are significantly different—in some cases, unrecognizable—from what they were 30 years ago. When you think about it, you'll find that you can name but a mere handful of wines that have not so changed.

This first came home to me several years ago, in a thunderbolt fashion, during an extensive vertical tasting of Trimbach Rieslings (Clos Ste.-Hune and Cuvée Frédéric Émile) from 1971 to 2000. Apart from the sheer goodness of the wines, what really struck me was that, stylistically, the wines hadn't changed at all. It was a wine version of the famous Sherlock Holmes observation about the dog that didn't bark.

("Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?")

Holmes: "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

Holmes: "That was the curious incident.")

It was then that it dawned on me that such a stylistic continuity is almost unknown today. You don't believe me? Think about it for a minute:

Red Bordeaux? Ask any Bordeaux lover with some history on his or her palate. You'd have to search hard to find any acclaimed red Bordeaux that today is *stylistically* similar to what that same château issued back in the 1970s.

Please note the emphasis on "stylistically." Substantively, one or another great red Bordeaux is arguably as profound today as ever. But the delivery of the message, if you will, has incontrovertibly changed. Today's acclaimed red Bordeaux are higher in alcohol, deeper in color, oakier, richer and fuller than what was being made back in the 1970s. Ditto for lesser red and white Bordeaux as well. You can like it or not. That's a separate issue.

Arguably, only Sauternes has not changed. But perhaps those who know these wines intimately will tell me differently.

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Burgundy? Big changes. Exceedingly few red Burgundies today are stylistically anything like what they were in the 1970s or '80s. Back then, red Burgundies were overly light (the producers said "delicate") because of excessive yields. Things changed in the mid-1980s (richer, darker, oakier). By the 1990s, a new equilibrium appeared, with red Burgundies that were less intrusively oaky.

White Burgundies for their part became dramatically oakier in the past three decades, again especially starting in the mid-'80s and then, thankfully, diminishing in oakiness by the mid-'90s. But Chardonnay yields remain stubbornly high, with ever fewer white Burgundies offering the midpalate density that existed before many of us were even born.

Italy? Here, you can throw an arm around the entire country when it comes to the topic of transformation. Virtually every wine anywhere in Italy, from Sicily to the Alps, is today different from what it was in 1970. The transformation of Italian wines, red and white, is absolute. Everything you can imagine has contributed to this: stainless steel tanks, small new oak barrels, export market demands, the incorporation of "alien" grape varieties in once-traditional blends, the exclusion of white grapes in red wine blends, new clones, a celebration of old varieties, a change in the taste of the locals themselves, the rise of local and non-Italian press criticism, and yet more.

Spain? I'm tempted to say "See Italy." Here again, wine transformation has been sweeping and near-total. (There's the equivalent of a mop-up campaign going on to very nearly eradicate any old-fashioned winemaking still occurring in more "backward" Spanish wine zones.)

Germany? Yes, the classic great, "rich" German Rieslings are still being made, vintages permitting. But make no mistake: the supply is dwindling. Lighter, drier styles of wine are rapidly transforming German wines (and German wine drinkers). And red wine production is increasingly fashionable.

California? You can taste almost any wine you'd like from 1970 or even 1980 and, excepting a few traditionalist holdouts such as Mayacamas Vineyards or Stony Hill Vineyard, you won't be able to find practically any wines made in California today that resemble those once offered. The reasons are numerous: winery technology, fashion, new vineyard areas and, not least, the near-wholesale revision of vineyards (clones, spacing, rootstocks, trellising), from replanting in the mid-1990s after the phylloxera invasion.

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You get the picture. Pick a place—Australia, New Zealand, Austria, Chile, Greece, Argentina, Hungary, South Africa, Portugal (except for Vintage Port), Canada—and if you were a wine-tasting time-traveler from 1970 fast-forwarded to today you literally wouldn't recognize the wines you thought you knew.

What does this mean for us today? The implications are numerous. One is that today's wine discussion is flavored by this transformative divide. Here's a question: If wines have changed so radically, can those of us who remember the older "wine life-forms" confidently predict the future of today's new "wine life-forms"? (Short answer: No.)

Is everything that we're tasting today truly superior than what previously existed? Here, we come to personal taste and, yes, the power of fashion. The past was far from intrinsically superior or preferable.

In one man's opinion, I'll say this much: I'll take a clean, well-made wine every time over a dirty, technically flawed wine. And I'll take today's much greater reverence for vineyard site expression over the past's less exigent, let's-blend-it-all-together-and-call-it-Pommard approach. And I'll shout huzzahs for today's widespread effort to elevate and showcase a district's indigenous grape varieties.

As for the downside, take your pick. Overly high yields, anyone? High-tech gizmos that serve only to create increasingly artificial-tasting wines? Commercial blends that pretend to be fine wine but are little more than focus-group wine concoctions?

You tell me: What is the good and the bad of the past and the present? Are our wines as irrevocably changed as I submit that they are? And are we better off for it?