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Are European Wines Superior?

This unspoken question always lurks. Is it true? Should we care? - Matt Kramer

SALZBURG, Austria—While sitting in a café in this famously atmospheric city, sluicing down a pleasant Austrian red wine (a Zweigelt, if you must know), I couldn't help but ponder a question that has plagued American wine lovers for decades: Are European wines superior?

Now, before you get all huffy and chest-puffy with national pride, allow me to point out that 30 years ago this question was no question at all. Even most California wine producers back in the 1970s agreed that European wines were superior compared with their own fledgling efforts.

I recall the late Myron Nightingale, who was winemaker at Beringer Vineyards as well as a former president of the American Society of Enology and Viticulture—and a real sweetheart of a guy, too—growling about ever-higher California wine prices. "If I'm going to spend 50 bucks on a wine, it's going to be European!" he said to me.

Today, of course, all such bets are off. That's no news. But I don't think that I'm alone among Americans—or among Australians, New Zealanders, Chileans or Argentinians for that matter—who have traveled to Europe and found themselves enthralled yet again by Europe's profound wine culture. After all, it's Europe that gave the rest of us not just vines, but also a vocabulary ("terroir," anyone?) and an array of benchmark wines that still stand today. Credit where it's due and all that.

Nevertheless, the question of whether European wines remain superior still lurks among wine lovers, even those whose fidelity is firmly attached to their local production, be it Californian, Australian, Chilean, whatever. Everywhere, there's always the nagging question, "Do we measure up?"

So while I sat in that Salzburg café, I started to tot up possible categories, the better to measure—like a baseball fan weighing the individual merits of one champion team compared with another—whether European wines remain superior. And if so, where do they excel? And if not, where do they lag? For example:

Variety. This was the first category that came to mind, if only because the answer is so easily at hand: European wines are vastly superior when it comes to sheer variety. How could they not be? After all, Europe has been at the wine game for thousands of years. They developed innumerable strains of *Vitis vinifera*. They've had equally innumerable highly localized cultures, which, in turn, created individualized wines. Why, Italy alone dwarfs the rest of the world combined when it comes to grape varieties. If it's sheer wine variety that you seek, you can't beat Europe.

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Originality. Now, here you'd think that Europe, again, would be the hands-down winner. Not so fast. True, on a crude by-the-numbers accounting, European wines would win on originality if only because of variety (see above). But if you allow a handicap—hey, they do it in golf, so why not wine?—you'll see that non-European contenders are definitely in the game when it comes to originality.

In Australia, for example, you've got utterly original Shirazes, dry Rieslings and Sémillons, to name but three. New Zealand came up with a Sauvignon Blanc that took the world by storm with its—you guessed it—originality. Argentina's Malbecs are like no others anywhere. Compared with those of Argentina, French Malbecs take a distant second place.

California for its part has a slew of originals, starting with Zinfandel and then broadening to an array of Cabernet Sauvignons that have consistently, even boringly, been deemed indistinguishable—even superior—to the best of Bordeaux. And today, most improbably of all, California now delivers profound, world-beating originality with Pinot Noir. Twenty years ago nobody—and certainly not California winegrowers—would have thought such an assertion possible or even plausible against the glory of Burgundy. Yet today it's a fact. Full stop. Ditto, I might note, for California Syrah compared to the benchmark Rhône originals.

The list can be extended to many other locales (Washington, Oregon, Ontario, British Columbia, Chile), but you get the picture.

Yes, European wines win on originality, thanks to their edge in sheer variety. But the gap is not as great as Eurocentrics might imagine.

Technical prowess. This is where the likes of California and Australia simply crush the European competition. While today's European winegrowers are hardly slouches when it comes to technical competence, Europe's centuries-old traditions have been a drag on technical prowess until very recently.

Many of the technical innovations now considered essential or desirable to fine winemaking everywhere, such as temperature-controlled stainless steel tanks and drip irrigation, were either pioneered in California and Australia or demonstrated on a larger scale in those two places. Higher-tech devices such as reverse osmosis machines, spinning cones and vacuum concentrators were similarly non-European either in origin or initial use.

Even the widespread employment of small new oak barrels, which are indisputably European, saw a dramatic shot in the arm because of California. Prior to the 1980s, French wine producers only rarely, and grudgingly, bought new oak barrels. Italian wine producers never used them at all. Angelo Gaja blazed the trail in Barbaresco and has repeatedly said that it was California, not France, that inspired his embrace of new French oak barrels.

Until the 1990s, only Germany among European winegrowing countries could be said to be in the vanguard of technical prowess, thanks to German proficiency with technologies such as filtration systems, bottling lines, centrifuges and the like.

Even today, technical prowess lags in certain parts of Europe. Southern Italy, for example, has only recently improved its game compared with the more progressive northern Italian producers. Greece and Spain are relatively new arrivals to widespread technical prowess. And I recently participated in a judging panel where a dismaying number of red wines from Hungary proved technically inadequate.

Finesse. This is a rather personal category, both in the sense that it's hard, perhaps impossible, to prove finesse, as well as in the sense that it's an attribute that I value disproportionately.

Do European wines have more finesse? Yup, they do. Not universally, of course. And not everywhere, including places that once were praised for that very quality, such as Bordeaux. Too many modern-day red Bordeaux are now as lumpy and flabby as Saturday shoppers at the mall.

In the Ouija board business of choosing a wine (which way will your hand go?), I find that when I reach for a European wine, it's because I'm looking for finesse. For example, I love California Pinot Noirs and have praised them repeatedly. But red Burgundies collectively still win on finesse (Oregon Pinot Noir admirably comes in second, by the way).

Finesse is a tricky business, I grant you. Sometimes it's a function of sheer lightness (I love Austrian reds because of this element); sometimes it's a matter of apparent acidity. Big wines no matter where they come from usually lack finesse. I can't recall the last time I celebrated an Italian Recioto della Valpolicella Amarone because of its finesse.

Above all, many of the changes in wine today—both for better and worse—are either generated in places such as the United States or Australia or are amplified by the marketing power of these cultures. Today, the vocabulary of fine wine is no longer dominated by Europe.

So are European wines superior? Do you think they win on all the counts cited above? Are there yet other elements that you would consider? What do you reach for—and above all, why?

Featured Spirit

Passoa

The rich flavors of Central and South America gave birth to Passoa with its sweet and fruity taste. For nearly 20 years now, the famous black bottle has kept the secret to fuel any Latin Fiesta. Besides the essential passion fruit Passoa, there are three additional flavors for you to experiment new tastes and cocktails.

Passion fruit Passoa - Originating from Brazil, passion fruit is one of the country's symbols. Passoa managed to capture its exotic and unique taste. Mix it with fruit juices, especially with apple and orange and imagine yourself with other cocktail lovers, partying with friends on a Brazilian beach.



Mango Passoa - Originating from exotic countries like Brazil, the mango has a very powerful aroma. Passoa takes the best out of the fruit's taste to offer a unique and refreshing exotic drink. Mix Passoa Mango with fruit juices or cola and release an explosion of tropical flavors.

Pineapple Passoa - Underneath its thick skin is a hidden fruit with a sweet smell and a succulent taste: THE PINEAPPLE. This fruit of a thousand flavors gives Passoa Ananas a fabulous taste. Passoa Ananas is best mixed with exotic fruit juices.

Coconut Passoa - The exotic flavor of the coconut evokes irresistible images of Brazil where it is consumed everyday. Passoa Coco combines the freshness and the intense aroma of this fruit. When served with lime, Passoa Coco reveals its full taste.

Cocktail idea - In a shaker containing ice pour 3/10 Passoa Ananas + 3/10 Vodka + 2/10 Cranberry Juice + 2/10 Orange Juice. Shake, pour and enjoy!



Now Drinking

Pascale Jolivet Sancerre Chateau du Nozay 2009

The house of Pascal Jolivet is one of the youngest and most dynamic in the Loire Valley. Having started their Grand Vins du Val de Loire in 1982, however, they later founded the house of Pascal Jolivet in 1987. They specialize in the wines of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume which have very quickly gained a leading position with the Michelin-starred restaurants in France. Today, with 70 acres of vineyards in the two premier appellations of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume, bolstered by 50 percent purchased fruits, Pascal Jolivet produces classically styled Loire whites.

Location: Selected from a 9.88 acres parcel of old vines on the estate of Château du Nozay in the district of Sainte Gemme.

Grape Variety: 100% Sauvignon

Vinification: The grapes are picked and hand sorted. The juice is then fermented with wild yeasts in stainless steel tanks with thermo regulation. The wine is bottled by September.

Tasting notes: The chalky-clay soil and its micro climate give the grapes a distinct characteristic of smoothness and elegance. This single estate wine combines softness, roundness, generosity and mellow exotic fruit. Due to its great aptitude for ageing, the wines of Nozay will only improve with time.

Pairs well with rustic salads, shellfish and roasted fish.

\$72.80/ECD per bottle



Food & Wine Pairing

Shrimp and Crab stuffed Avocados

Ingredients:

- 2 avocados
- sprinkle of lemon juice
- 2 to 4 tablespoons chili sauce
- 6 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons capers, optional
- 2 tablespoons chopped bell pepper
- 2 tablespoons chopped celery leaves
- 1 tablespoon chopped red onion
- 1 teaspoon finely minced parsley
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1/2 cup crab meat
- 1 cup small boiled shrimp, peeled & de veined



Cut avocados lengthwise leaving skin on. Remove seed. Sprinkle the cut surface with the lemon juice.

Mix the next 8 listings together and toss in the crab and shrimp.

Divide mixture and fill the avocado halves. Place on a bed of lettuce and serve with crackers.

4 Servings

Pair with - Pascale Jolivet Sancerre "Chateau du Nozay"

Wine Trivia

Did you know that ?

Most wines do not improve with age.

The word Alcohol is derived from the Arabic language (al kohl or alkuhl). Consider the fact that a large proportion of the Arabic population is forbidden from consuming alcohol for religious reasons.

Poor soil quality tends to produce better wines. The trick is to "challenge" the vines by making them "work" harder.

Although red wine can only be produced from red grapes, white wine can be produced from both red and white grapes.

Need to set your food or drink on fire ? The way to do it is to preheat the vessel holding the alcohol, as well as a portion of the alcohol itself. Certain alcoholic beverages are exempt of this rule however and are readily combustible (i.e Sambouka).

What is proof ? It is alcohol content in half the proportion of the proof degree specified. A 200% proof vodka would taste as alcohol, as its alcoholic content would be 100% (doh). However no such content has been yet recorded on commercial products. In the early days of alcohol trading, whiskey was mixed with gunpowder in order to determine if the alcohol content was high enough to set the gunpowder aflame. (It is inadvisable to attempt to test this fact, consequences could be dire).

Try to pronounce this correctly : brandewijn. It is the original word for Brandy (Dutch in Origin).

