



Vicenzo Trulli (1860-1942), *In the Wine Cellar* (watercolor on paper) Private Collection / Photo © Bonhams / Bridgeman Images

# ROMANCING THE GRAPE

## THE ORIGINS OF THE NATURAL-WINE MOVEMENT

The Romantic movement of the 19th century has profoundly influenced many aspects of Western culture. And while we may think of natural wine as a very recent trend, **Elin McCoy** suggests that, in terms of vineyards, winemaking, and the wines themselves, the movement takes Romantic ideals to their logical conclusion

**I** admit it: I'm a wine romantic. I respond to those special landscapes in wine country, the rows of gnarled vines tended by passionate families attached to their land for generations, the ever-repeated miracle of clusters of grapes being transformed into a drink that reflects their patch of ground, the dark cellars of cobwebbed barrels that hold history in liquid form. The wines that most capture my imagination seem imbued with a kind of meaning that no other beverage can match, their tastes conjuring cultural values that often tap into deep emotions.

My first visit to a California winery, several decades ago, was just the type of wine experience that fosters that kind of romantic view. To get to Mayacamas, I followed a winding road up the forested slopes of Napa Valley's Mount Veeder to a hand-lettered sign at a bumpy dirt track. It had the wine label's letter M with two rampant lions, for the name Mayacamas, an adaptation of a Spanish word that means "the howl of the mountain lion."

I arrived at a small 19th-century winery built of old stone, perched on the cone of a collapsed volcano with a view of fog, forest, and mountains. Twisted old vines covered the cone's steep slope. Owner and winemaker Bob Travers, in jeans and cowboy boots, explained he was a refugee from the world of finance who dreamed of living outdoors, under the sun, making something real. As he described it, being a vintner sounded like an artistic calling. I found in his deep, rich Cabernets and Chardonnays a taste of the volcanic soil, the story behind the winery seeming to give the liquid in my glass a kind of soulfulness.

Travers's Mayacamas seemed like a New World version of the picturesque Old World domaines that had captured the palates and minds of wine lovers over the past two centuries. And that was it: I'd fallen in love with wine.

Dig down—and you won't have to go very far—into the memories of American importers like Kermit Lynch, Neil Rosenthal, and Terry Theise, and you'll find that this same sense of the romantic was the very impetus for their careers, what sparked their passion. Something similar lurks in the background of just about every winemaker, sommelier, wine critic, collector, and wine lover.

Over the past decade, this romantic view of wine has expanded, notably with the rise of the natural-wine movement, which has gone from quasi-spiritual to downright ideological, complete with manifestos.

How did it get to this point?

### **Blame it on Bacchus**

Wine has been around for at least 6,000 years, according to the latest archaeological excavations; yet for millennia, people

may have drunk it largely because it was safer than water. Those beverages certainly weren't anything like the wine we drink today. To make it palatable in the absence of bottles, corks, and basic sanitation, it was liberally mixed with herbs and spices and was probably sweet. Maybe the first "romantic" view of wine originated in the intoxication it allowed, which swept away inhibitions with abandon and returned imbibers to their "natural" wild state. In the cult of Dionysus, tipsy drinkers were regarded as possessed by the god's spirit.

The source of today's romantic view of wine is surely Romanticism, the European movement that was at its peak from 1800 to 1850 and influenced almost every aspect of Western culture—art, music, literature, philosophy, politics, education—and that gave us a concept of the artist as a solitary genius that now echoes in images of the gifted rebel winemaker.

The Romantic era paralleled the beginning of modern wine that started in the 18th century and continued in the 19th, during which its consumption changed dramatically. There was a move away from adulterating wines, in favor of fresh wines, helped by the invention of the glass wine bottle stoppered with a cork. As Paul Lukacs points out in his fascinating book *The Invention of Wine*, record numbers of people in the burgeoning middle class began to appreciate and acquire high-quality wines during the 19th century. The rise of the restaurant played a role in making available to them wines they would never have tasted otherwise. Wine rapidly became a symbol of sophistication, which led to the cultivation of taste. Bordeaux wines in particular began to embody fine wine's new aesthetic status.

The Romantic movement was a reaction to the Industrial Revolution and a revolt against the aristocracy and the formal classicism of the 18th century; it prized emotion, intuition, spontaneity, and originality over scientific rationalism and technology. At its core was the importance of untamed nature, which became a central theme in the critique of all that was mannered artifice and the glorification of the individual, the personal, and the sincere over symmetry and order.

To Isaiah Berlin, in his lecture series *The Roots of Romanticism*, the movement was "a new and restless spirit, seeking violently to burst through old and cramping forms [...] an effort to return to the forgotten sources of life, a passionate effort at self-assertion [...]"

Fast forward to the 1970s, when modern winemaking allowed the creation of a global wine boom, and we can see that behind our attitudes toward wine—and its commercialization—

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are many of the same high-flown assumptions about the natural world and our relationship to it that Romanticism championed.

Over the past half-century, there's been a transformation of the wine world and winemaking styles. Advances in winemaking technology and transportation have allowed producers in dozens of countries to make sound wine in huge quantities and transport it to consumers everywhere. These changes have made reasonable wine possible in areas known only for bulk production and others that had never even grown grapes.

Rising affluence, tourism, and a new fascination with cuisine and taste fueled demand for them and continue to do so. Yet even box-wine consumers who think of wine as little more than a pleasant tippie that gives you a decent buzz at the end of the day have a romantic view of the grape and expectations of how it's made. Why else would mass-marketed brands work so hard to associate a product produced in factories that look like oil refineries with images of a farm family clinking glasses at a long table under a pergola, rows of vines stretching out behind them?

One result of all this improvement has been to make more and more distinction between ordinary and fine wine, between mass-market brands and wines with "soul."

Passionate wine lovers now define fine wine according to fundamental Romantic tenets: a rejection of technology and standardization, an embrace of natural sites that have special, mysterious attributes (such as terroir), a trust in nature to illuminate the winemaking path you should take, and a disdain for the mass-market and the commercial.

### Spinning the romance of wine

The majority of wine consumers don't care to dwell on the fact that wine is actually a commercial product. A few hopelessly infatuated wine lovers believe it's an edible art form and that philosophical meaning lurks at the bottom of the glass. All of us are happily drawn to its pleasant associations. Wine-industry marketers have long known that the romance that can be spun around it is as much a part of a wine's attraction as its taste.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, television ads for wines from the giant California winery Italian Swiss Colony featured a twinkly-eyed old man dressed in an alpine hat and lederhosen who pitched the product. At the end of every ad, he referred to himself as "that little old winemaker, me." It worked.

"The Real Thing: Branding Authenticity in the Luxury Wine Trade," an article by Michael Beverland in a 2006 issue of *The Journal of Business Research*, identified six attributes of authenticity that resonated with wine drinkers: heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, and down-playing commercial motives.

Ambitious vintners have often invented a nostalgic past to seduce customers. If you're a California winery, a cave easily beats an above-ground air-conditioned storage facility in the all-important image stakes. On the other hand, historic wine estates looking to the future are careful not to appear eager to ditch tradition. That's why, when Château Latour first used stainless-steel vats, they were hidden from visitors.

As Mike Steinberger wrote in a blog post on his website *Winediarist.com*, "When you [...] listen to Jean-Louis Chave talking about his family's 500-year winemaking tradition, how can you not be in love with wine and all it represents?"

Since wine became a vast global industry, there's been a marked accompanying effort to distinguish small, family-owned wineries from those run by big corporations. This plays to the widely held assumption that only small producers make "real" wines that have authenticity and meaning, as an outgrowth of their nurturing passion. I once walked the vineyard of the tiny estate Château Lafleur in Pomerol with Jean-Baptiste Guinaudeau, who talked about how he had to treat each drooping vine differently during the vintage's drought and heat. Part of the current appeal for the wines of Burgundy is that it's a place dominated by artisans who think of tiny plots of vineyard land as having individual personalities.

Big, corporate producers, according to the flip side of the story, are primarily about making money, which runs counter to the prevalent romantic notion that real wine is about more than crass commercialism, which is thought to endanger it.

In 2011, Richard Elia announced that his journal, the *Quarterly Review of Wines*, was ceasing print publication after 35 years. His grumpy announcement blamed the demise on the decline of wine as he saw it; it was a new world of wine kitsch, the Internet, hype and marketing, and more. "What initially attracted us to wine was the romance of it. Now this passion is spent," he wrote. "Wine became so commercially successful that romance was lost along the way."

### Farmer fizz and the authenticity stakes

One of the key themes of a romantic vinous outlook is that a wine should be "authentic," a word that drags behind it an entire train of values and assumptions.

Nowhere is the notion of the contemporary quest for wine authenticity more apparent than in the changing paradigm of Champagne. Traditionally, the world's most famous bubbly has been made by big brands, now often owned by multinational corporations, which purchase grapes from hundreds of small growers to create consistent house blends. They produce tens of millions of bottles. Some growers now make and sell tiny quantities of their own estate-bottled wines, which usually come from single villages or single vineyards.

Importer Terry Theise, who coined the phrase "farmer fizz," has promoted the appealing artisanal narrative of grower Champagne in the USA. In his latest catalog, he proclaims, "You should drink it because it's honest real wine grown and made by a vintner—by a FAMILY just like yours—by a 'him,' not by an 'it.' You should drink it because it's better to buy wine from a person than from a company. You should drink it because its price is honestly based on what it costs to produce, not manipulated to account for massive PR and ad budgets, or to hold on to market share."

When Theise first began bringing grower Champagnes to the USA 17 years ago, only 31 were available. In 2015, there are more than 230. As Zachary Sussman points out in his recent article in *Punch*, "The grower movement's success has benefited from a certain 'David and Goliath' dichotomy, pitting the agrarian values of the family farmers—with their claim to authenticity—against those of the large commercial firms."

Among the most interesting grower producers is Anselme Selosse, a visionary rebel and godfather of the grower movement. When he took over his family's tiny domaine, he began to rethink just what Champagne was, what terroir was, and how it expressed itself in wine. His goal is to "reveal the

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truth of the vineyard." He abandoned his adherence to biodynamic viticulture when, he says, "it became just a recipe." His rumpled hair and casual dress, his willingness to get his hands dirty in the vineyards—in contrast to Savile Row-suited owners of big brands more comfortable in the boardroom—mark him as philosophical farmer rather than businessman.

An "honest" wine, in romantic terms, comes from and reflects a special place, a cherished site, like the single-vineyard wines in Selosse's Lieu-Dit series. He's inspired many rising Champagne stars, like Cédric Bouchard, who farms his tiny plots organically and only makes single-vineyard, single-variety, single-vintage cuvées. He ferments with only indigenous yeasts and uses no *dosage*, so no sugar is added to the wine after the secondary fermentation. The implication is, of course, that this is purer, even more honest wine, with no "makeup" to distort the transmission of flavors from the ground to the grape to the glass.

The little guys win all the public-relations points with hip sommeliers and wine drinkers, but the Goliaths, the big Champagne houses, work on their own version of romanticism, selling their luxury products by association with pleasure, fashion, celebration, Valentine's Day, candlelit dinners, and successful seductions. This comes perilously close to the way big brands of perfume are sold: by sheer fantasy.

As Sussman points out, last year's release of a new no-*dosage* Champagne from *grande marque* house Roederer, with its simple, hand-lettered label, plays directly into the romantic grower narrative. The press kit and website, filled with photos of vines and horses in the vineyard, trumpet Roederer's "respect for nature" and "quest for authenticity." Yet given that famous designer Philippe Starck created the label, it's more of a bridge between the two worlds.

Today's fascination and nostalgia for old, historic vineyards and forgotten, almost extinct local grape varieties is rooted in the belief that they embody genuine authenticity. "Old-vine field blends are the only California wines that aren't ersatz," Morgan Twain-Peterson of Bedrock Wine Company in Sonoma told me not long ago. "They're unique."

The same belief holds for winemaking methods that favor traditional, old-fashioned methods, such as hand-harvesting and fermenting with "wild" yeasts, over the latest technology, like adding Mega Purple for intense color or cultured yeasts to add special aromas and flavors.

And that traditional route, laden with romance, is the one that many—perhaps most—of the world's great wines follow.

### Winemaker as Mr Natural

Just about all the threads of Romanticism come together in the natural-wine movement, whether we're talking about vineyards, winemaking, vintners, or the wines themselves. In many ways, it takes the romantic ideal to its logical conclusion.

Though it has a several-decade history in France, the idea of natural wine has only become important in the USA over the past seven or eight years. Alice Feiring, whose book *Naked Wine: Letting Wines Do What Comes Naturally* is the best and most entertaining guide to the movement and its personalities so far, has the missionary zeal of a convert. "One sip of the natural stuff often changes your attitude toward wine forever and fills your life with (forgive me for saying it) meaning," she writes, later adding that this kind of wine has "emotional truth."

The wines of Paolo Bea—a small family winery in Montefalco, in Umbria, that I visited last fall—are exemplars of this approach. Gianpiero Bea, Paolo's son, is one of the founders of Italy's natural-wine consortium ViniVeri, whose website includes a history of how the group of "anarchical naturalists" came together and what their "manifesto" is.

"It's important to have faith in nature," Bea told me as we toured his family's vineyards. "It should be observed, listened to, and integrated, but not dominated." Like most natural-wine makers, he is as passionate about the land as any Romantic, which today means using no chemicals and following at least some biodynamic processes, like timing vineyard practices to the phases of the moon.

His winemaking method, he says, "is to trust to nature the transformation of grapes into wine"—which almost sounds as if the grapes had a desire to express themselves and only needed an understanding enabler.

The turning-away from the manipulation of the grape and the use of technology in the cellar also serves to keep wine mysterious, which doesn't hurt its marketing, either. Few people, except for other winemakers, are interested in looking at banks of fermenters and other pieces of equipment on a winery visit. Few want to hear about the science or the chemistry of wine production. We'd rather think about it as a moving narrative of events in which the winemaker is mainly an observer, not an agent.

This leads to the idea of wine without artifice as a goal: no wood perhaps, or even, in the case of some natural wines, without added sulfur—a risky move. But the most ardent advocates of natural wines seem ready to accept more irregularity and aromas and flavors that many would find peculiar. The best natural wines, like Paolo Bea's, surprise and delight us.

Earlier, I described myself a wine romantic, but there are limits. I don't believe in giving a wine a pass because of the stance behind it. It either tastes good, or it doesn't. But Theise, in his impassioned text *Reading Between the Vines*, suggests the point behind the embrace of the natural: "You want predictable, stay clear of wine," adding, "If you find yourself curious about wine, you have to accept that uncertainty is inextricable from the experience."

### Taste and language: love notes v ratings

Just as the Romantics rebelled against the idea of the aristocracy, so, too, in the 1970s there was a shift from using the language

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of class—extolling "noble" wines with "breed," for example—to comparing wine to elements in nature.

In a fascinating article, "Wet Dogs and Gushing Oranges: Winespeak for a New Millennium," first published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 7, 2003), Professor Sean Shesgreen calls contemporary wine guides "modern forms of the pastoral, a literary genre inventing idealized, imaginary, and nonsensical images of country life for the amusement of city dwellers."

One example he quotes to illustrate this is a tasting note for a 1998 Argiolas Costera that appeared in *Wine & Spirits* magazine: "A garden of southern Italian flavors, from sun-baked black plums and fresh, fuzzy figs, to almonds, fennel, and cherries. Crisp, lemon-like acidity provides the freshness of a sea breeze." Descriptions like these, he says, focus only on "picturesque" fruits and vegetables that have a "romantic, idyllic and halcyon aura."

Though Robert Parker has used a veritable produce stand of fruits and vegetables in his tasting notes, his 100-point rating system has been controversial since it first gained notoriety in the early 1980s. The idea of using numbers to describe a wine's quality has been denounced over and over again, as critics repeatedly asked, how many points would a Picasso painting get? At worst, a quantitative rating is deeply antithetical to a romantic view of wine—and useless if what you are looking for in your glass is "emotional truth."

Today there's a push-back against the very idea of "objective" taste. This is, oddly enough, supported by science. It turns out that we all have very different senses of taste and, especially, smell. The non-wine media loves to report on experiments that show even experienced tasters have a hard time replicating their judgments when blind-tasting the same wine twice. But the overly simple conclusion that everyone's opinions are equal, if taken literally, would mean there could be no connoisseurship in the arts, music, or literature, no judgments of quality. The same is true in wine; experience, thought, and judgment all count, which is why we pay attention to discerning opinions.

The natural-wine movement, at its most radical, aims to upend our beliefs in taste, quality, winemaking, rankings, the works. But at the heart of its ideology is the assumption that wine has an even deeper, underappreciated cultural and spiritual significance.

How romantic. ■