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# AS THE PENDULUM SWINGS

by **Mike Steinberger**

**M**ore and

more winemakers around the world seem to be shifting their style away from the so-called modern phenomenon of recent years and toward something more “traditional”—whatever that means. But the most important thing, now as ever, must always be the quality of the wine made available to the consumer (and not just to the critics)

Early pendulum clock. Johannes van Ceulen (d. 1695).  
Science Museum, London / Bridgeman Art Library



Johannes Van Ceulen Leijt Haghe

On a pleasant early-autumn evening in Manhattan, a small group of journalists gathered at an up-scale Italian restaurant for a vertical tasting of Sassicaia, including the now-legendary 1985. Sassicaia is the original and most acclaimed of the so-called Super-Tuscans, and in the not-so-distant past, a chance to taste seven vintages of it would have been considered a rare privilege. But while Sassicaia continues to fetch high prices, it no longer generates anything like the excitement that it did in the late 1990s and into the first few years of the 2000s. The same is true of Tignanello, Ornellaia, and the rest of the Super-Tuscans. As Kerin O’Keefe rightly noted in issue 23 of *The World of Fine Wine*, the Super-Tuscans, once among the most coveted wines on the market, have lost much of their luster in recent years—a diminished stature that undoubtedly accounted for the distinct lack of buzz in the private dining room of that Manhattan restaurant. Certainly there was none of the giddy anticipation that one might have expected for such an illustrious wine.

More than a few wine enthusiasts now regard the Super-Tuscan experiment, with its emphasis on non-indigenous grape varieties, as an epic blunder. By this account, the Tuscans led themselves up the garden path (encouraged by the impressive ratings and all the hype that the Super-Tuscans attracted), only to find that the thirst for “international” wines was not so great, after all, and they are now paying dearly for straying from wines that offer a true *goût de Toscane*. But is this really a fair reading of what has transpired in Tuscany? As O’Keefe pointed out, the Super-Tuscans gave Tuscan winemaking a dynamism that it had conspicuously lacked till that point and helped raise standards throughout the region. If vintners and consumers alike are today reconnecting with Sangiovese—with the authentic taste of Tuscany, if you will—it is in a viticultural environment that has been greatly improved by the Super-Tuscans.

classified as “modern” wines. Changing sensibilities; the global economic crisis and revulsion at the excesses that caused it, as well as at the perceived symbols of those excesses; a renewed passion for the authentic, the local, the native; the waning influence of critics who have championed these wines... Whatever the reason—or reasons—the pendulum is swinging back toward wines that have generally been categorized as “traditional.” Setting aside for a moment the question of just how accurate and useful the “modern-versus-traditional” dichotomy is, a shift is plainly taking place. This is obviously welcome news for those who have decried the advent of wines such as the Super-Tuscans and the *vins de garage*. But even as they hail this development, they ought to acknowledge that much good has come from the modernist movement.

I say this as someone whose own palate falls squarely in the so-called traditional camp. Burgundy is my personal touchstone, my taste in Bordeaux runs to the likes of Léoville Barton and the wines in the Moueix stable, and names such as Chave, Mascarello, and López de Heredia occupy considerable space in my cellar. For my taste, the garage wines rate somewhere between barely tolerable and completely undrinkable, much of Spain is a black hole these days, and even the modern-style Piedmontese offerings tend to leave me cold. I favor wines that are light and earthy and exude both a sense of freshness and an unmistakable sense of place, and I find that too many of the modernist wines show the opposite qualities: They are overwrought and plodding and seem to lack recognizable coordinates.

What constitutes a “modern” or “traditional” wine is not always clear, however. Broadly speaking, the term “modern” has been taken to connote wines made with very ripe fruit, aggressive extraction, and lots of new oak. The term “traditional” refers to wines that are not as ripe and extracted, that are not as overtly oaky, and that are

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#### A move away from “modern” wines

The Super-Tuscan is not the only newish category of wines to be suffering these days. Bordeaux’s so-called garage wines appear to have lost much of their luster, as have a number of new-wave Spanish and Australian wines. Across the wine world, there is starting to be a discernible movement away from what has been broadly

said to have a “natural,” unmanipulated quality about them. But between the most extreme representations of these competing styles lies a vast gray area, filled with wines that are not so easily classified. Frequently, the categorizing is done on the basis of personal preference and syllogistic reasoning: I consider myself a “traditionalist,” this wine pleases my “traditional”

palate, therefore it is a “traditional” wine. The late US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said of pornography, “I know it when I see it.” When it comes to distinguishing modern from traditional wines and vice versa, a similar logic often obtains: I know it when I taste it. All that said, the modern-versus-traditional story line is not an invalid one. Some wines are being

were tired of being captive to what they saw as a hidebound, unbearably rigid style of cooking and wanted the freedom to invent—to break free of the canonical methods and recipes and to be truly creative in the kitchen. By the time the nouvelle cuisine era ended, in the early 1980s, it had yielded many things of lasting value: important new ingredients and dishes,

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made in a more experimental or contemporary style, while others are being crafted more with a view to the past than to the future.

### **Modern versus traditional**

To suggest, however, as we journalists frequently do, that the two camps are presently engaged in a fight to the death, with nothing less at stake than the fate of wine, is an exaggeration. For one thing, arguments about innovation have been with us for a long time. The late enologist Emile Peynaud is now a deified figure in Bordeaux, but when he came on the scene in the 1950s and began urging châteaux to pick riper grapes, use cleaner barrels, and improve the hygiene in their cellars, many people in the trade dismissed him as a charlatan. He was accused of trying to destroy Bordeaux, which seems laughable today but was an oft-heard charge at the time. It is true that man can now influence the production of wine in ways that were unimaginable back in Peynaud's day, and there is a very important debate to be had over how much human intervention is too much. But the desire for change is nothing new, nor is the resistance to change. It is also the case that traditions often begin their lives as avant-garde creations, even acts of subversion; what seems modern today could well be looked at as the height of orthodoxy a generation from now. (This certainly proved to be true of Peynaud's insights and prescriptions.)

More importantly, it is wrong to depict this modern-versus-traditional split as a kind of Manichean, zero-sum battle. In truth, it is something far more mild: a push here, some push-back there. Not only that; it has largely redounded to the benefit of both wine and wine consumers. A useful analogy is the nouvelle cuisine movement in France. In the late 1960s, some of France's most gifted young chefs, inspired by the *soixante huitards*, began rebelling against traditional, Escoffian fare. They

and useful new techniques and technologies. Nouvelle cuisine wasn't a rupture with the past (even if its insurrectionary rhetoric promised one). Instead, it took France's remarkable gastronomic heritage, gave it renewed vitality, and propelled it forward.

Like every revolution, nouvelle cuisine had its excesses: A lot of bad cooking was done in its name, and there was often a sense that the chefs were catering to the media as much as they were to the dining public. In these ways, too, the nouvelle cuisine epoch is analogous to what has lately transpired in the wine world. Certainly, plenty of regrettable wines have been fashioned in the name of progress, and many international-style wines have been created with an eye to pleasing critics (one in particular). The misfires and mixed motives hardly negated nouvelle cuisine's achievements, however, and the same can be said of the modernist movement in wine. Moreover, nouvelle cuisine would never have caught on had it not been in step with what French-restaurant goers wanted. The dining public, too, had grown tired of the classics and wanted something new and different on the plate, and there was also a keen desire for lighter, healthier preparations. Likewise, we surely would not have seen the proliferation of international-style wines had there not been considerable demand in the marketplace for more fruit-forward, accessible wines.

### **Dragging Piedmont into the present**

The most celebrated “battleground” between modern and traditional wines has been Piedmont. While glorious wines were produced there during the 1960s and '70s, traditional vinification methods (endless maceration periods, years of aging in cask), combined with fickle weather, lax farming, and often dirty cellars, tended to yield many more misses than hits. In the 1980s, some ambitious young vintners, convinced that Piedmont was stuck in a time warp and needed to be dragged into the

present, came up with a radical new recipe for their Nebbiolo-based wines. They shortened the maceration and fermentation periods, began maturing the wines in French barriques rather than the traditional oak or chestnut *botti*, and kept them in wood for less time than had been the custom or, previously, the requirement. The

as Valandraud and Rol Valentin, as well as others from superior terroir but produced on a similar scale and in a similar style, such as La Gomerie and La Mondotte, were among the hottest around, eclipsing even some of the most established names in Bordeaux. By the mid-2000s, however, the novelty had worn off, and the *garagistes*

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wines were darker, fruitier, and far more approachable than standard-issue Barolos and Barbarescos. Nor did the new-wave producers confine their changes to the cellar. In the vineyards they instituted better clonal selection, denser plantings, far more rigorous pruning, and green-harvesting to yield riper fruit with more supple tannins. These, too, were seismic changes.

The changes scandalized some old-timers, but the wines thrilled Robert Parker and a number of other critics. A spirit of experimentation and self-improvement swept through the Langhe. Traditionalists didn't stop making traditional wines, but they cleaned up their cellars, became more fastidious in their vineyards, and began turning out better Barolos and Barbarescos (a task aided, it must be acknowledged, by the more reliable weather that northwest Italy has experienced over the past 15 years or so). To say that they have profited from Piedmont's quality revolution would be putting it mildly. It is a golden age for the entire region, but especially for the traditional producers like Giacosa, Giacomo Conterno, and Giuseppe Mascarello, whose wines have probably never been held in higher regard or been more sought after. If Piedmont has been the site of a war, it is surely one the more beneficial wars ever fought.

### **Parker and the *vins de garage***

Bordeaux has been another staging ground for the supposed clash of the modern and the traditional. The 1980s and '90s saw the emergence of the so-called *garagistes*. Centered in and around St-Emilion, the *garagistes* were a group of producers—some new to the region, some new to viticulture—who began fashioning wines that were radical departures from traditional claret—micro-cuvées that were opulently ripe and oaky, normally sourced from rather undistinguished terroir. To their detractors, however, many of these wines were vulgar concoctions that tasted more Californian than Bordelais (ironically, Peynaud was said to be no fan of them). But Parker adored the *vins de garage* and became one of their most vocal champions. For a time, wines such

suffered an almost Icarus-like plunge, punctuated by a headline in *Decanter* that flatly declared, "Bordeaux *vins de garage* dead: official."

That was a bit of an exaggeration. The *garage* wines may not command the same level of interest that they did a few years ago (how many high-end wines do?), but they are hardly obsolescent, partly because they have become less extreme in style and have changed with the times. It would be wrong, too, merely to dismiss the *garagiste* phenomenon as a misbegotten experiment. No, the *vins de garage* did not usurp the likes of Ausone or Cheval Blanc, but they helped make St-Emilion the most dynamic commune in the Gironde and generated unprecedented attention for it. More important, they brought a democratic spirit to Bordeaux and set a powerful example for aspiring winemakers elsewhere. They demonstrated that even in a region as hierarchical and steeped in history as Bordeaux, pedigree was not necessarily destiny—with ambition and diligence, one could create compelling wines and win an international following. Summing up the fundamental lesson of the *garagiste* experiment on his website, Andrew Jefford put it well: "Effort matters more than reputation" ([www.andrewjefford.com/node/179](http://www.andrewjefford.com/node/179)). In wine, as in life, that is a universal truth.

### **The new Rioja**

For self-styled traditionalists inclined to see an endless horizon of dark clouds, Spain's Rioja region is the inevitable Exhibit A. Over the past 25 years, there have been two competing styles in Rioja: one labeled modern, the other traditional. There is some debate as to whether these labels have been applied correctly; defenders of the dark, lush Riojas that have been collectively branded as modern contend that this style was actually the norm early in the 20th century and that the real imposters are the wines that now claim to be traditional (light in color and texture—more Burgundian than Bordelais). Whether or not the wines have been categorized correctly, one side has been the decisive winner—the so-called

modernists have triumphed, and the number of wineries now producing old-school Riojas can literally be counted on one hand, with digits to spare. In the minds of traditionalists, Rioja has become a post-apocalyptic landscape and perhaps also a harbinger of what awaits other wine regions.

Yet, the changes in Rioja have occurred in the context of Spain's remarkable viticultural renaissance—a newfound dynamism that has had a distinctly modernist edge but has also given Spanish wines a global following that they have never before enjoyed. It seems churlish to begrudge the Spaniards their recent success simply because one objects to the kinds of wines that are being produced. Moreover, the triumph of the modernist style in Rioja has perhaps also laid the foundation for a traditionalist revival. Recent years have seen the emergence of what might be dubbed the Cult of López de Heredia. In the United States, at least, the wines of LdH have become very fashionable and have probably attracted more press coverage of late than any other Riojas. While the interest in LdH stems mostly from the exceptional quality of the wines, it also reflects a preservationist instinct among many amateurs. In the same way that people rally to the defense of endangered species, many enophiles know that LdH represents a genre that is now threatened with extinction, and they wish to help ensure that this style survives. And this passionate outpouring in defense of LdH and what it embodies has not only boosted the likelihood that both will indeed survive; it may well succeed in pushing the pendulum in the other direction. Sales of higher-end Spanish wines are flagging, and surely the passion for LdH has not gone unnoticed among other producers in

marked, in the West, by the triumph of a consumerist culture that placed a premium on instant gratification. These developments clearly influenced the production of wine in both the Old World and the New. The wine market became increasingly international, winemakers embraced technology with unprecedented zeal, and in keeping with the spirit of the times, many Old World regions felt under pressure to craft wines that offered more up-front pleasure than had been the case traditionally. It was also a second gilded age, in which owning a vineyard and turning out trophy wines was one of the premier status symbols, millions of wine drinkers were spawned, and a few arbiters of taste were assigned influence the likes of which no critics have ever enjoyed.

In the wake of the global recession, we have perhaps entered a new era. People are not just looking for value; there also seems to be greater demand for authenticity—for wines that are made by people who actually get their hands dirty in the vineyard, for wines that have compelling stories to tell. This is surely one reason why Napa Valley, home to numerous start-up wineries, has experienced such a sharp reversal of fortune, and it undoubtedly explains why Burgundy, with its strong farming culture and its *vins de terroir*, excites enophiles these days like no other region in the world. The emphasis on authenticity seems to extend to grape varieties, too; certainly, the dimming of the Super-Tuscan phenomenon and the renewed appeal of Sangiovese, as well as the growing interest in indigenous grapes in other parts of the world, bespeak a desire for rootedness and diversity.

If you consider yourself a traditionalist, these are heartening developments. But even the most ardent

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Rioja. Old-school bodegas rushed to embrace the *alta expresión* trend when it became fashionable; perhaps now the reverse will happen.

### Greater demand for authenticity

There is reason to think that maybe the pendulum will indeed swing. A few years ago, I interviewed the great Rhône winemaker Jean-Louis Chave, and he offered one of the most astute observations about wine that I have ever heard. He said simply, "Wine is a reflection of the times in which you live." Starting in the early 1980s, the world experienced a period of rapid globalization and unprecedented technological change. It was also a period

traditionalists must acknowledge that a lot of good has come from the modernist eruptions in various corners of the wine world. Some admirable wines have been produced, some valuable insights gleaned. Moreover, regardless of one's personal preferences, a spirit of experimentation—a desire for progress in the vineyard and in the winery—is something that should be welcomed. To a person, the greatest winemakers share certain traits: an inquisitiveness, an openness to new ideas, and a conviction that, however impressive a wine may be, there is always room for improvement. These are not modernist or traditionalist traits; they are laudable traits that ought to be commended and encouraged. ■