

New World Winery Continuum

The act of drinking a glass of wine is nearly always, in some small way, coupled with the act of envisioning the source of that wine, which is usually some variation on the theme of rolling vineyards adjacent to an historic stone (old world) or wooden (new world) winery. This image exists in part because it can actually be true, and partly because the hard-working souls who put the wine in the bottle want you to believe it is true, but it is very often pure illusion. This is in no way a bad thing. The fact is that the very definition of a winery falls on a rather broad continuum, from ancient bricks and mortar to the genuinely virtual. What really matters is what is in the glass. In the old world, or Europe for simplicity, if the wine is even moderately expensive one can rest fairly comfortably on the notion that, indeed, hand-tended vineyards adjoin the vine-covered cellars. Complexity sets in, however, when a château releases a second label, or produces a domaine-appellation wine alongside its estate product. Throw in the grower cooperatives and, of course, the négociants, and it becomes considerably more difficult to answer the question, "which winery made this wine?" The savvy consumer of old world wine, therefore, is guided more by name, reputation, and appellation of origin than by an image of a grand château. The new world has managed to re-imagine the winery even more thoroughly. By casting out the vision of bricks, mortar and estate vineyards as essential, the new world wine industry has re-defined a winery to be, quite simply, a vision. Examples of this wine vision fall at many points along the new world winery continuum. One of the most commonly understood is the winery which does its own winemaking but purchases all of its grapes. Or, a winery may be simply a vineyard, growing and harvesting grapes which are then brought to a contracted wine production facility, where the wine is "custom crushed" and eventually bottled under the vineyard's own label. Custom crush can also be a way for a winemaker to fulfill a vision, by overseeing his own production at a facility hosting more than one, and often several, wine "visionaries". In some cases the visionary may be neither winemaker nor grape grower, but someone passionate enough to make an investment in wine production and willing to both purchase grapes and contract the winemaking for the project. Of course, vision aside, every wine must have begun in a vineyard and finished up in a wine cellar. Yet the multitude of means to the end creates a range of opportunities for the would-be wine producer, and consequently allows for the availability of a broad range of wine styles to the consumer. When a winery no longer has to overcome the significant economic barriers to establishing the traditional vineyard and production facility, the industry is no longer the exclusive domain of wealthy individuals or large corporations. The resulting infusion of small to medium scale wineries, some entirely working with purchased grapes and shared facilities, results in many wines which share the same essential attributes of their more traditionally-produced brethren: a distinctly regional stamp of style and an individual stamp of character. Consumers and wineries alike should absolutely embrace this continuum, as much as it may undermine the romantic definition of a winery, as a natural adaptation of the wine industry to the challenge of bringing interesting, enjoyable wines spanning a broad range of styles to the public. A winery, defined, is really no more than a way to bring an experience to one's glass. The business model it applies to reach that goal is of little consequence to the wine itself.

About the Author

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