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drinking out loud

What Makes a Wine “Classic”?

Questioning whether a region with only 25 years of fine-wine history can establish the equivalent of *grands crus* and *premiers crus*

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Something in us, it seems, wants not only to catalog, but also to rank. The most recent example of this irresistible urge comes from New Zealand.

The Kiwis have already adopted a fence-building system, called Geographical Indications, which draws wine district borders. Now some vintners want to add quality rankings to the regions, similar to Burgundy's hierarchy of *grands crus* and *premiers crus*.

In order to appreciate what can only be called the *chutzpah* of this, allow me to remind you of the brevity of New Zealand's fine-wine history. Wine grape cultivation on any scale in New Zealand dates only to the 1960s. Moreover, those early plantings emphasized second-rate grapes such as Müller-Thurgau and other hybrids. It was a dead-end.

By the early 1980s, New Zealand had about 14,000 acres of vines, 85 percent of which were on the North Island. However, the wines were so unattractive that prices plunged. These plantings were so ill-advised that the government actually subsidized their removal.

Consequently, it was only in the mid-1980s that the Kiwis revamped their wine industry. By then, they knew what *not* to plant. The outside world's first glimmer of a revitalized New Zealand came from the zingy Sauvignon Blancs of the Marlborough district at the northern tip of the South Island, most famously from Cloudy Bay Vineyards. (Ever competitive with their neighbor, the Kiwis always wince when it's pointed out that an Australian, David Hohnen, started Cloudy Bay.)



Kent Hanson

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Serious red wines have an even briefer history. It was only in the 1990s that the Pinot Noir vineyards of the South Island's Central Otago area began to emerge. Ditto for the various red grape plantings (Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah) in the North Island's Hawkes Bay district.

And now some people think that New Zealand is ready to establish *premiers crus* and *grands crus*? With all of 25 vintages, at most, of fine-wine history?

Which brings me to “classic.” Although it’s not immediately obvious, the concept of “classic” is part of the foundation upon which a hierarchy is built. Whatever is considered “classic” represents an agreement about a particular and enduring goodness that’s proved over a period of time, usually generations. That, in turn, allows a hierarchy to be built. Remove “classic” from its structure and it topples.

Mere popularity can’t make something a classic. Although Charles Dickens’ serialized novels were hugely popular in his mid-Victorian day, books like *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* didn’t become classics until long after Dickens had died. Only over time did we realize that his characters remained alive. Even today, we have to remind ourselves that Pip and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* weren’t actually real.

The tough-guy noir writer Raymond Chandler captured it best. “A classic,” he said, is something “which exhausts the possibilities of its form and can hardly be surpassed.”

When it comes to wine, classic is conventionally seen as a benchmark, a measure against which other wines are judged. It does serve that purpose, to be sure. But “benchmarks” can shift. Tastes—styles, really—do change over time.

In Burgundy, for example, the red wines made in the 1970s were collectively quite light, because of excessive vineyard yields and short fermentations. By today’s benchmark measures, those wines are seen as dilute and thin. Yet even though a certain amplification and full dimensionality was lacking, the great sites of Burgundy—Ruchottes-Chambertin, Richebourg, Corton, among many others—continued to convey their greatness during this period.

To earn recognition as a classic, a wine must accumulate a critical mass both of vintages and of tasters. At first, the accolade might be proposed by insiders—winegrowers and professional critics. But it can only be validated over time, through confirmation by a critical mass of tasters, usually several generations’ worth.

For example, it’s not enough to taste one vintage of La Tâche and proclaim it classic, which is to say, a wine and vineyard that “exhausts the possibilities of its form and can hardly be surpassed.” Recognizing its relative stature compared with other renditions of Pinot Noir requires an intimacy spanning multiple vintages. This goes way beyond congratulating its current owners and winemaker for a job well done *this year*.

Does the [Gimblett Gravels district](#) in New Zealand’s Hawkes Bay zone on the North Island deserve the essential element of classic implicit in the concept of *premier cru* or *grand cru*? Who knows? The wines certainly are very fine. (Try [Craggy Range’s Sophia](#) bottling for proof.) But Gimblett Gravels is so blink-of-an-eye new that asserting an enduring originality worthy of enshrinement to an official *cru* status is presumptuous in the extreme.

Classic, like the concept of *cru*, or site, comes from composition, rather than from rendition. A song like “I Loves You Porgy” is classic because a) generation after generation, it moves us deeply and b) its compositional profoundness shines through so many presentations. We can hear it performed operatically, in pop form, instrumentally, in various jazz variations, and yet its elemental beauty and structure shines through all versions.

This is why—whether its doubters or detractors like it or not—the concept of *terroir* is inescapable when it comes to classic. *Terroir* is wine’s composition. Winemakers play its notes, some better, some worse. Like musicians, they can “cover” it in one style or another.

For our part, we tasters must first discover—not just across a span of vintages but through the lens of our own evolutions as wine lovers—the underlying beauty of a wine or even an entire (small) district.

However, our own private judgments are insufficient: Classic requires consensus. Much to the discomfort of the “if I like it, it is good” contingent, it’s not enough that you or I think a certain wine is great and therefore classic. There are no genius tasters, no Albert Einsteins who can see something in a wine that no one else has yet grasped.

Classic must be confirmed by others. Without it, an assertion of enduring greatness is just idiosyncrasy. No one person—no single generation even—can bestow classic upon a wine.

What, then, makes a wine classic? Time, of course. Time confirms that a wine’s—or even a zone’s—particular beauty is not just the fashion of a moment, but something deeper and more enduring. (*Porgy and Bess* got mixed reviews when it first appeared on Broadway in 1935 and ran for only 124 performances.)

Above all, a classic wine offers enduring, repeatable, confirmable insight—“news that stays news” as Ezra Pound memorably put it.

A wine proves itself as classic when, in the end, a transgenerational tribe of tasters knows the composition, sees it no matter what the “performance” and is moved and enlightened by it—and applauds wildly.

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