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drinking out loud

The Great Divide

Time's up. Which side do you land on?

Matt Kramer

Posted: August 2, 2011



Something in the human condition, I believe, prefers a certain clarity. Whose side are you on? Where do you stand? What are your beliefs?

Now, we all know that life never is quite black and white, the binary system of computers and our own left-brain/right-brain setup notwithstanding. And surely in matters of wine, an embrace of a broad spectrum of pleasures is the wisest course.

That acknowledged, I would be less than honest were I not to say that I personally find the "I love all kinds of wines and I drink everything" school to be, well, wishy-washy.

In the spirit of making a stand, I've started to identify markers of what I like to call The Great Divide.

Obviously, no one—including, I have to admit, myself—is quite so definitive in their palate and aesthetic preferences. Still, there's at least a kernel of reality to what follows in this column. Most of the wine lovers I know *do* seem to land on one side or the other of The Great Divide in their preferences.

So here's the question: Where do *you* stand? For that matter, do you agree that it's either enjoyable or perhaps even essential to take a stand? Consider these possibilities:

Power or Finesse? For this observer, the divide between power and finesse is one of the major wine markers of our time. Now, it's possible



Kent Hanson

Matt Kramer identifies a handful of issues that most wine lovers feel strongly about—one way or the other.

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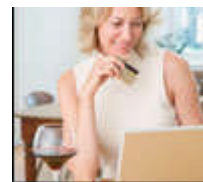
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Most wines however, the great majority, tend to fall into one camp or the other. And it seems to me that most wine tasters do too. When you choose your wines, do you gravitate toward the emphatically flavorful? Or do you seek the more insinuating? How you answer says, I think, a lot about aesthetic preferences and very often informs which regions and grape varieties that you will seek out.

Old School or New Wave? The idea of "old school" and "new wave" is admittedly ambiguous. Most of us, somehow, do have a sense of what's being referred to, even if it's not terribly exact. Besides, the two categories tend to evolve. What's "new wave" today becomes "old school" tomorrow.

Nevertheless, I do sense that some tasters have what might be called an "appetite for modernity." They *like* the new and different; they prefer the eye-opening. We saw this, for example, in the 1980s and 1990s in Barolo with the dramatic divide between tannic, long-maturing Nebbiolos and the "new wave" of Barolo producers using short fermentation times, small new oak barrels and other techniques to create soft, supple and earlier-maturing wines.

We are seeing even more radical wine interpretations with the so-called "orange wines," which are white wines that acquire a hue from the long skin-contact time during fermentation, resulting in a dramatically different flavor and color than we're used to with modern white wines. Actually, it's an ancient winemaking technique. But skin contact for white wines has been so long out of use that it is now, ironically, "new wave."

Are you sympathetic to "new wave"? Or does it consistently strike you as gimmicky?

Apparent Oak or Stealth Oak? The issue of oak is utterly modern. Prior to the 1970s, you would have been hard-pressed to find a wine anywhere in the world that could be described as "oaky." That changed with modern California winemaking, which embraced the use of small new oak barrels on a scale never before seen.

Because so many of the California wineries were new, so too were their barrels. These new barrels imparted a pronounced oakiness, the signature scent of which is vanilla. Vanilla is catnip for humans. America's new wine drinkers loved it. So too did many other new-to-fine-wine drinkers in Italy, Spain, France and Australia, as producers in those countries followed the California lead.

Of course, the trend evolved. Winemakers found their own palates evolving. And they also found themselves in possession of multiple years' worth of small oak barrels, allowing them to more precisely calibrate the ratio of flavor-free older barrels to more flavorful (and very expensive) new barrels.

Today, the greater population of wine lovers seems to be divided between those who seek and enjoy a certain level of frank and apparent oakiness and those for whom apparent oakiness is, by definition, too much.

The dividing line is clear: If you can smell and taste the oak, is it too much?

Corks or Screw Caps? Here again, we have a truly modern wine divide. Increasingly, wine drinkers identify themselves as those for whom screw caps (or some other non-cork closure) are the ideal and those for whom cork remains irreplaceable.

What's interesting about this particular divide is how vehement the supporters of each side have become. Advocates of screw caps grow more vocally impatient with every cork-tainted wine they open. Cork lovers, for their part, find screw cap advocates soulless, lacking in what they believe is an essential traditionalism as well as a belief that the preservation of ancient cork forests is vital.

This divide is somewhat geographical: Australians and New Zealanders are now overwhelmingly in favor of screw caps. Americans, for their part, appear to be accepting, if not necessarily embracing, screw caps steadily, if slowly. Europeans still seem to prefer traditional cork.

Some of that European preference is codified into law. In Italy, for example, higher-level wine classifications, such as DOCG, expressly forbid the use of a non-cork closure. When the great Soave producer Pieropan

downgrade the designation of their wine from Soave Classico to mere "Soave," which is less prestigious. The law requires a cork closure for the former, but allows a non-cork closure for the latter.

What we think about screw caps reveals, I submit, something about each of us as a wine drinker.

Soil Is Major or Minor? This division may not seem, on the surface, all that controversial. After all, few wine drinkers would deny that soil plays some kind of a role in the flavor and quality of wine. The question is, to what degree? There lies the divide, one that is widening noticeably.

Today, many wine drinkers and wine producers are openly skeptical about the informing influence of soil on the flavor and character of wine, preferring instead to emphasize the effects of microclimates and winemaking techniques.

Perhaps in response to this, a growing cohort of "soil seekers" is becoming increasingly vocal in insisting that soil plays a far greater role in wine quality and, especially, character, than many advocates of "wine rationalism" are willing to accept. Not surprisingly, some of the greatest advocates of the "soil school" are admirers or practitioners of biodynamics.

Some New World winegrowers, as they acquire more information over a longer span of vintages—and continually subdivide their wine districts into ever smaller ones—are beginning to reconsider the effects of soil. Where once the more measurable qualities and effects of climate were considered supreme, now the more ambiguous element of the effects of soil is ascendant—at least for some producers. Others are openly skeptical, uncomfortable with the lack of scientific veracity in predictive results.

For their part, wine drinkers are dividing into two camps: those for whom soil is a major consideration in their appreciation of certain wines and those for whom soil is, at best, a minor matter.

Where do you stand? Does knowledge of a certain soil type influence your appreciation? Are you now more convinced than ever that, assuming an appropriate climate for the grape variety in question, the soil is what really makes the difference?

The Great Divide exists. Where do you stand?

Member comments 27 comment(s)

David Rossi — Napa, CA, USA — August 2, 2011 2:10pm ET

1. Finesse
2. Old School
3. Apparent Oak
4. Cork
5. Soil- Minor, as long as it is well drained.

Don Fuller — US — August 2, 2011 2:57pm ET

1. Power (prefer ripe fruit - ripe not sweet and jammy)
2. Old School (stealth way to get some finesse)
3. Stealth Oak (none for whites)
4. Screw cap
5. Soil - Major

Peter Vangness — Springfield, MA — August 2, 2011 3:10pm ET

2. Old School
3. Stealth Oak
4. Haven't noticed any appreciable difference
5. Soil - Major!!

David Strada — San Francisco, CA — August 2, 2011 3:17pm ET

1. Finesse for sure, with purity of fruit
2. New Wave with an old school sensibility
3. To quote from Gerald Asher, "Oak is like garlic, if you know it's there you have used too much."
4. Screw caps all the way, including reds
5. If you get the dirt, you get the wine

Don Ciaramella — New York — August 2, 2011 4:21pm ET

Like both Power & Finesse, Old World & New Wave, Stealth Oak, Cork. Soil? More concerned if its Mountain or valley fruit! - @94cup

Chris A Elerick — Orlando, FL — August 2, 2011 4:50pm ET

1. power w/ finesse! but if i have to choose, power.
2. probably new wave, but i want new wave that drinks well today and tomorrow and doesn't sacrifice drinkability for ageability.
3. apparent oak. i want to smell it but i don't want to taste it.
4. screw caps every time. wake up and smell the tca!
5. don't really care, but i guess micro climate is more important to me than soil type. and modern technology seems to be such that a winemaker can coax out just about any flavor s/he wants regardless of characteristics imparted by nature.

David Peters — Mission Viejo, CA — August 2, 2011 4:54pm ET

1. Power & finesse(outstanding wines should have both)
 2. Old school(with an eye on new techniques)
 3. Stealth Oak(a combo of new & older barrels is the real art)
 4. Any closure w/o TCA works for me.
 5. Hydroponic vineyards(no soil issues)Just kidding!!
- Soil does matter. Just compare Syrahs from France, Australia, & central coast California.

Douglas Levin — Tempe, AZ — August 2, 2011 5:33pm ET

1. Finesse
2. Old School
3. Apparent Oak
4. Cork - How can a bottle age properly with a screw cap?
5. Soil & Terroir. The whole micro-climate approach with vineyard designate cabernets being a strategic mix of small lots differentiated by differing vineyard sections and their different soil/weather characteristics... seems right on the money to me. The result seems to be more complex wines

Brett R Turner — Hawthorn Woods, IL — August 2, 2011 5:55pm ET

1. Power
2. New wave with occasional old world
3. Stealth oak and no oak for whites
4. Would love it if all were screw caps
5. Soil - Minor.

Giancarlo Ortega — Washington DC — August 2, 2011 6:20pm ET

1. Finesse
2. Old School
3. Apparent Oak
4. Cork
5. Soil- Minor.

No wonder i love St. Emilion.

David Rapoport — CA — August 2, 2011 6:25pm ET

I'm on side of not having forced, contentious dichotimies

Andrew J Walter — Sacramento, CA — August 2, 2011 7:17pm ET

I like this one....

1. Power with a dollop of finese
2. New School in the sense that we should never have our hands tied by tradition (maybe with newer techniques of winemaking and viniculture -- stellar syrah could be grown in Bordeaux?)
3. I prefer stealth oak. I was told that Darryl Corti once said we should put salt shakers with oak dust on the tables at tastings so people could oak their wines to their palate
4. SCREWCAP!!! (in response to Mr Levin from Tempe -- wines under screwcap age just fine, look at Harvey Steimans blogs on this subject)
5. If by soil you mean the whole package of weather, geography etc then I think soil is major

John Wilen — Texas — August 2, 2011 7:57pm ET

Missing questions:

With food or without?

Critics matter or not?

Extensive cellar-aging critical or not?

Adam Wallstein — Spokane, WA — August 2, 2011 8:45pm ET

2. Old School
3. Stealth
4. Screwcap. How is a failure rate of close to 10% remotely acceptable?
5. Soil-Major

Staffan Bjorlin — Los Angeles, CA — August 2, 2011 9:22pm ET

- 1) Finesse
- 2) I appreciate both
- 3) Stealth
- 4) Either. I am not opposed to screw caps or other modern closures, but I am sure that the failure rate with cork could (and will) be reduced if cork producers get more competition.
- 5) Probably maybe?? If you have a great plot of land, it seems pretty hard to take the soil out of the equation.

Jeremy Matouk — Port of Spain, Trinidad — August 2, 2011 10:22pm ET

1. Power is useless without finesse.
2. My palate has evolved toward old school but there are really good "modern" barolos.
3. Stealth oak, definitely.
4. As a wine merchant I have found the failure rate of cork very low, nothing like 5%, far less 10%. Once screwcaps have a track record over 10 years then it will not matter.
5. There can be no denying the influence of soil and terroir. If winemakers haven't enough history they need to be patient, not dismissive.

Don Rauba — Schaumburg, IL — August 2, 2011 10:55pm ET

1. Power, but love the combination of power & finesse more.
2. No opinion here whatsoever.
3. Stealth oak for whites, stealth/neutral oak for lighter reds (grenache, pinot), apparent oak for heavier reds (syrah, zin, cab)
4. Screw Caps RULE for ALL wines (as do other alternate closures)
5. No opinion here whatsoever.

David Tietz — Columbus, OH — August 2, 2011 11:48pm ET

Interesting, provocative post!

- 1/2: I prefer wines that have a balance of both.
3. Whites: No oak. None. Red: the amount doesn't matter, personally.
4. Screw caps.
5. The more soil/climate/terroir influence, the better.

Harvey Steiman — San Francisco, CA — August 3, 2011 2:17am ET

From my jazz collection sometimes I like to listen to Bill Evans, other times I put on Count Basie or Duke Ellington. Coltrane or Sonny Rollins? I would hate to leave behind any of the above. Call me a wuss, but why do I have to choose?

Kenneth A Galloway — Paris, France — August 3, 2011 9:24am ET

i definitely don't stand on either side ... it's why i love wine so much ... which side i stand on depends on my mood, the time of day, my appetite, the company, the occasion, and many other variables that aren't coming to mind at the moment that boil down to "what I'm feeling like at the moment" ... this gauges every single aspect of my life ... i'm simply a VERY spontaneous, complex, dynamic, diverse, international, and compulsive person ... so these "attributes" (you be the judge!) affect my wine consumption just as they do my personal and professional life ...

so my real answer is that I disagree with the premise of the article ... but if I were forced to submit my answers, then i'd say :

1. Finesse (i guess when people are claiming that you can have both power and finesse, maybe they're more referring to beauty and pretty aromas and flavors vs. finesse, cuz I agree, you can't really have both, but I guess like everything it depends on one's interpretation)
2. Old School (although I prefer the producers respecting both schools and genuinely trying to impart innovation with history and tradition, which applies to a HOARD of quality "Old" world producers nowadays)
3. Stealth Oak (but depends on the wine and the food)
4. Screw Caps (this was the easiest one to answer... I was pleasantly surprised after spending 6 months on contract in Savennieres (a very historic, traditionalist, biodynamically-run little village), working for Domaine du Closel, to find a number of producers fully subscribed to the benefits and superiority of screw caps, granted I'd still like to wait 10-20 years to better test the ageability of screw caps)
5. Soil major (i was a believer after 6 months on the job at Domaine du Closel... their Clos du Papillon, Caillardieres, and Jalousie are all vinified identically ... the only difference is the harvest dates and the soils ... each of these wines are worlds apart ... granted the harvest date played a big role ... but this was also tied into soil variation)

Clinton W Mitchell — Naperville, IL — August 3, 2011 10:42am ET

It depends.

JOHN J KANE — Dallas, TX — August 3, 2011 11:51am ET

Matt,

I think the only question you posed that is black and white is the question of screw caps. After seeing the results of decade long studies with numerous enclosures and white wines, the answer is clear -- Stelvin Enclosures win. I cannot fathom a true scientifically sound counter argument. Anyone who enjoys the tradition of cork hasn't seen corks disintegrate, fall into bottles, get saturated and rot, shrink in a non-humidified warehouse cellar resulting in mass oxidation, etc. etc. Why not use a screw cap and immediately eliminate ullage, humidity concerns, sideways storage concerns, random oxidation issues, TCA issues, and all of the other variables that cork enclosures introduce. Wine is one of the only businesses where a guaranteed 4% failure rate is actually preferred over a .001% failure rate.

Steve Cole — Portland, Oregon — August 3, 2011 12:33pm ET

There are many wonderful shades of gray in life. I think the comments above bare that out. Thanks Matt.

Craig Peer — Cameron Park, CA — August 3, 2011 12:37pm ET

1. Finesse usually - power can be good with food like roast beef or lamb !!
2. Old School
3. Stealth Oak - I like fruit, not wood in my glass. But I tend to age all my wines too - tends to take care of any oak.
4. Cork - I've only had 2 bad corks.
5. Soil - Major

Ivan Campos — Ottawa, Canada — August 3, 2011 1:47pm ET

Only definitive answer is "screwcap." Everything else depends on the varietal and situation. Some varietals work well for me in a broad spectrum of styles: syrah, pinot noir, chardonnay, tempranillo, mencia, nebbiolo.

Richard Lee — Napa — August 3, 2011 7:12pm ET

Andrew Joesph Roberts Walters,
I always appreciate your odd retorts! They bring much fun and laughter to the game. So tell me, how long will your Carlos Rossi Hearty Burgandy w/the screwcap age for? Stay thirsty my friend! CHEERS!

Flavio Henrique Silva — São Carlos, SP, Brasil — August 3, 2011 9:01pm ET

Great article!

1. Finesse (but I don't hate power...)
2. I prefer the old school, but I also like the new wave
3. Stealth oak
4. Cork, but I have nothing against screw caps
5. Soil is major

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