

Catching up with the sense of a place

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What's true (and not) in the world of wine.

South African wines to watch: Tygerberg "The Ollo" and Bush Camp's "Our Daily Red."

With so much wine out there, it's easy, and makes some sense, for consumers to formulate general views about the points of origin. This kind of conventional wisdom can be quite useful in navigating store aisles and restaurant lists.

It also can come to live up more to the "conventional" part rather than the "wisdom." In the past decade or two, the wine world has morphed mightily, with new grapes emerging (and old ones re-emerging), fluctuating prices (up and, yes, down) and more knowledge about grape-growing and winemaking techniques (and a greater appreciation for some old-school ways).

So while everything we know about these regions is not wrong, many assumptions now have corollaries or even contradictions. Greece, for example, still is best known for its bright, sunny whites, but the reds, mostly from native grapes such as agiorgitiko, are catching up quickly.

Some other truisms about certain parts of the wine world:

Chianti is either too harsh or too bland. That's less true than when most of them came in straw-covered bottles, and one good route to a juicy but true-to-its terroir Chianti is the sub-region of Rufina (not to be confused with the brand Ruffino). Marchesi de' Frescobaldi, Fattoria di Basciano and Selvapiana produce stellar and affordable reds from that nook of the world.

South African wine, especially steen and pinotage (whatever they are), is plonk. That might have been true for most of what reached this market a decade ago, but no more. (OK, I'll grant you pinotage.) The erstwhile steen, now going by its proper name of chenin blanc, is often stellar (Robertson, Maankloof, Bush Camp "The Sundowner"), and juicy, tasty white blends abound (Zidela Bouquet Blanc, Tygerberg "The Ollo"). Blends are a great way to go on the red side, too (Glen Carlou Grand Classique, Springfield "Ripe Red" and Bush Camp "Our Daily Red"). Cabernet (Landskroon) and shiraz (Rust en Vrede) are on the rise.

Burgundy is a way-too-expensive crapshoot. Sigh. I wish I could counter both parts of that, but a lot of the high-end stuff costs almost as much as a plane ticket to Paris. The quality, however, is much more consistent. "Enology means there are no more bad vintages these days," said Laurent Drouhin, whose Maison Joseph Drouhin, Macon Villages Blanc is an absolute steal at \$14. A good winemonger can steer you to plenty of swell options, red or white, for under \$25.

Argentina is all about malbec from Mendoza. The nearby region of Cafayate is offering some dandy renditions of the floral white grape torrontés (look for Michel Torino, Dona Paula or Piattelli). The big surprise is the reds starting to emerge from the chillier cattle country down south, Patagonia (Ruta-22 and Black River malbecs, more coming soon, plus some pinot noir).

New Zealand is all about sauvignon blanc from Marlborough. They're still popular, although I wish more of them would step away from the copycat grapefruit/grassy style that cynics call "cat pee on a gooseberry bush." I tend to prefer the Martinborough sauv blancs (Wairau River, Martinborough Vineyards and Craggy Range), and some dandy pinot noirs are coming from there and the Central Otago, the world's southernmost wine region (Craggy Range again, Mohua).



Spain is a font of nicely priced reds and overpriced whites. Actually, the blancos have just about caught up with the rojos in quality-price ratio. Three Rioja whites -- Cune, El Coto and Lorinon -- offer clean, vibrant flavors at happy price points. For more depth of flavor, look for an albarino (Paco & Lola, Don Olegario, Terras Gauda) or a verdejo (El Perro Verde, Irun, Naia, Paso a Paso, Tapena).

Minnesota wine ... fuggedaboutit. We're decades behind our countrymates and centuries behind the Europeans, but we're fast learners. Local wines showed well at this month's Riverside International Wine Competition (my fellow judges liked them at least as well as I did). The product at most Minnesota wineries has improved enough to not dread Aunt Lena asking you to accompany her on an excursion to one of them