

Old World vs. New World Approaches to Wine

Hello! Welcome back to Wine in Easy English - on what's for english dot com. This is the podcast for english language learners with an interest in wine. Thanks for coming back.

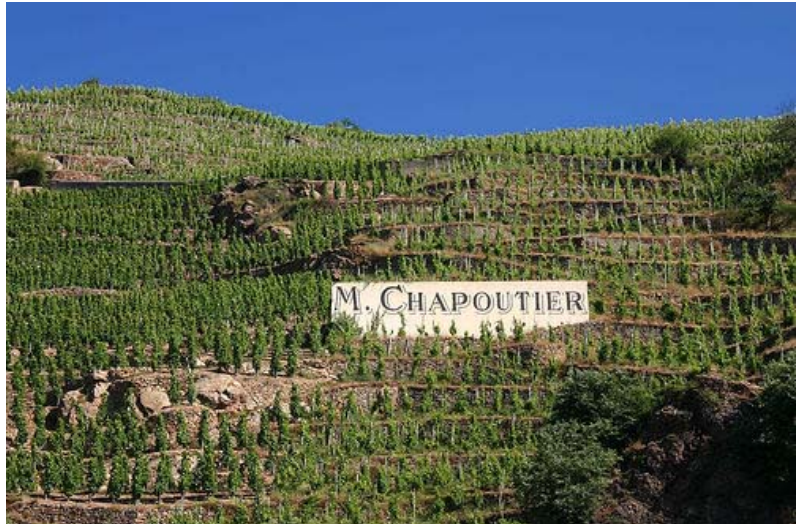
Today we'll be exploring the way that people in Europe - the Old World - and the people in the United States or Australia or New Zealand - the New World - approach wine. Is there a different approach to making wine or appreciating wine? Let's find out.

I'd like to remind you to use the transcript and study guide. You can download it from the website. Reading along while I speak might help your comprehension. And it includes a glossary and a lot more images that can help, too.

When friends of mine find out that I like wine, they often ask me what I prefer: French or California wine. If they know I'm from California, they usually expect that I'll say California Wine. But really, I see myself more as an explorer or traveller when it comes to wine. I like trying the wine of almost any place - especially if the wine has some personality to it - that could be the personality of the wine maker or, maybe more importantly, the personality of the place where the wine was produced.

So what I've just said is that there are wines that express the character and culture of a place, and there are wines that express the personality of a winemaker. What we have are two different approaches to wine. One is the Old World or European approach. The other is the New World approach, which you find in America and Australia. In the Old World, in Europe, the goal is to make wine that expresses the character of the place that produced it. The idea is to make the wine with very little interference, so that it naturally expresses the physical characteristics of the vineyard or of the traditions and culture the wine belongs to. In this approach the wine really belongs to a place - or to the people who live there.

But in the New World, much more prominence is given to the winemaker. The winemaker is a master craftsman - or even an artist - who uses a vineyard and the grapes as raw materials to make a wine that expresses something. What could wine express?



Wine can express the character of a place



Wine can express the personality of a winemaker

It might express the winemaker's personality. There are some "fun" winemakers who like to make "fun" wines, for example. Or the wine may express the winemakers beliefs about what a good wine should be. Or maybe the winemaker will experiment - with the fermentation or with the barrels to try to come up with something new and unique. Let's take a closer look at what's behind these approaches and what the implications are.

Let's talk about Business Models.

If we compare the Old World and the New World, we might say that each one has a different business model when it comes to wine. Wine in Europe is still, generally, a local agricultural product that is consumed by the local people in a particular area. If you live in the area around Burgundy, you probably drink wine produced in Burgundy. The Bordelais - the people of Bordeaux - drink Bordeaux. Of course many or most wine areas in Europe do supply export markets. But wine is almost always tied up with local economies and cultures at the same time.

This situation doesn't exist in the United States. It doesn't exist at all. The fact is there is no local wine-and-food culture anywhere in the US - even in the wine producing areas like the Napa Valley. And even though wine very much supports the local economy, it's not really integrated with the local culture. I'd say the majority of people who live in the Napa Valley don't even drink wine regularly. Most wine produced in Napa is shipped out of Napa. And when they have wine festivals or other activities, they draw tourists as much as they draw the local people.

So this is my point: Wine in Europe is part of local agriculture and local food culture and traditions. The wine that people drink is a part of their identity. Or wine is a sort of food for them. But in the US, many wine drinkers got into it as a hobby or as a change from drinking other forms of alcohol. Many winemakers started out as hobbyists, too. And the wine producers serve a market that's spread out throughout the United States. The US is not a nation of wine drinkers.

But in the Old World, the link between place and culture and wine and food brings us to the next big difference between the old and New Worlds, and that is the concept of terroir.



Old World Culture and Tradition



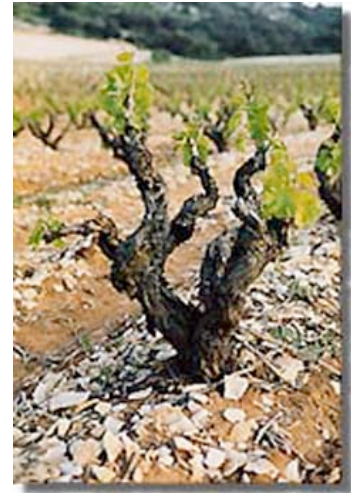
Wine Supermarket

William Couch/flickr

Terroir

Terroir is a French word - but it's a concept that guides attitudes toward wine, philosophy of wine making and even how wines are labeled in Europe.

The concept of terroir basically means that the conditions grapes are grown in will influence the wine. We could spend a lot more time on this. But the idea is that soil, climate, amount of rainfall - even the shape of the vineyard (for example, is the vineyard on a hill or on the flat land) all these factors will influence the wine. Generally when vines struggle to get water from the soil, the quality of the grapes will be better. And the way these factors play out in combination is what separates great vineyards from good ones.



Some serious Terroir

In the Old World, many people believe that terroir is more important than winemaking methods in determining the taste and character of wine. In other words, you should be able to recognize the wines that come from a particular region, district or village - even if they were made by different winemakers. That's how strong the influence of terroir is.



The Montrachet Vineyard

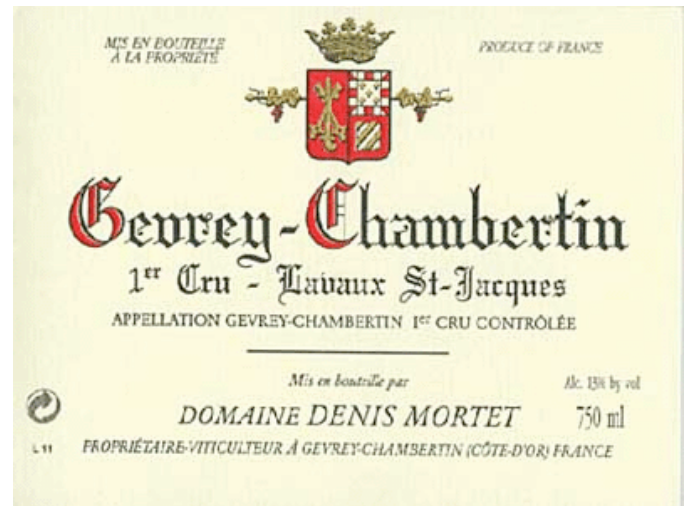
Well - it's not quite that simple. We also have the laws that regulate what people can put on their wine labels. But these laws are also related to the terroir of the places as well. In most parts of Europe, wines are labeled with the appellation rather than the grape variety. Or sometimes you might see the appellation and the grape variety. The appellation you see on a wine label can be the name of a large area such as Bordeaux, Bourgogne, or Beaujolais. It can be a smaller sub-district such as Medoc or Haut-Medoc (which are within Bordeaux). There are famous towns with their own appellation. This happens in St. Emillion or Beaune. Many quite small villages have their own appellation, too: Margaux in Bordeaux or Puligny-Montrachet in Burgundy. A single vineyard (if it is great enough) may also have its own appellation - think of the great Montrachet or Clos Vougeot. The point is though that it's not enough to just grow grapes in a particular vineyard or village and then you get to label your wine with that appellation. No, that's not enough. In fact, wines labeled with a particular appellation name must conform to the style and traditions of that appellation.



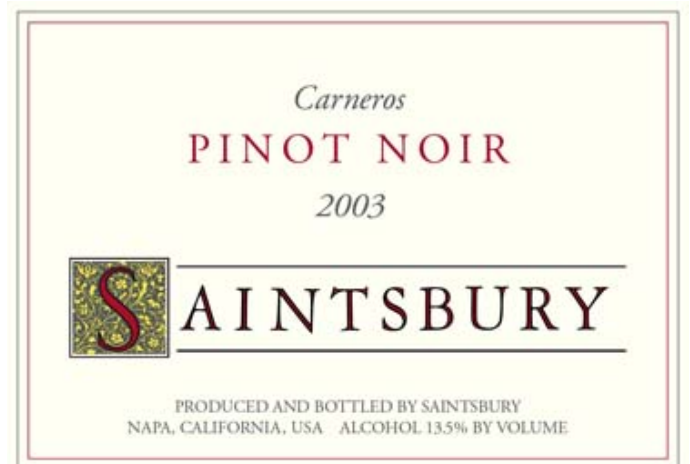
Appellation Montrachet

And the rules are strict in order to maintain traditions and regulate quality. So the rules for the reds in the appellations of Bordeaux state that the wines must be blended from Cabernet and Merlot and a few other grapes. You may not plant Pinot Noir or Syrah in Bordeaux and be allowed to use any of these Bordeaux appellation names. In most of Bordeaux, you are not even allowed to make a wine from a single varietal - even if that varietal is allowed in the appellation, such as Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine of Bordeaux has got to be a blend. That's the rule. On the other hand, if you go to Burgundy, the red wines are made from Pinot Noir exclusively. They aren't blended at all. And the white wines from Burgundy must be made from Chardonnay (with an exception made for Aligote). In Beaujolais, the grape is the Gamay Noir. And in Champagne, the appellation rules state that the wine must be sparkling. That's right! You can't make a still wine in the Champagne district and call it Champagne. Now in Champagne and the other areas, the rules are ultimately based on the terroir. The reason Champagne must be made sparkling is because the climate of the Champagne district is so chilly that it's difficult for grapes to ripen. The sparkling style was invented as a way to make a good wine from grapes that couldn't get ripe enough. And so appellation Champagne requires all wine to be sparkling.

In the New World, the place has always been less important than the grape varieties. Winemakers have always been free to plant whatever varieties they wish - or believe they can sell. The early wine producers in California and Australia, they usually planted the grapes of their homeland. Germans planted Riesling and Italians planted hearty red varieties - no matter where their vines were situated. Until the early 1970s, most major Napa Valley producers offered a range of different varieties - Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel, Gamay - and many of these varieties could be found growing in almost any part of the valley - even though the climate and soil (the terroir) can be quite different in different parts of the valley.



Old World Focus on Place: Appellation Gevrey-Chambertin (made from Pinot Noir)



New World Focus on Varietal and AVA



Early New World producers made wine that reminded them of the home country

In those days many winemakers were experimenting with these different varieties. Since the early 1980s, though, more and more producers have tried to match their grapes to the conditions of the vineyards. So now we see more Pinot Noir and Chardonnay growing in the cooler Carneros region and more Cabernet Sauvignon is growing in the warmer areas of Oakville, St Helena and Calistoga.

But are the Americans beginning to embrace terroir? Yes - to the extent that they are looking at the soils and climates of their vineyards. But the AVA rules in America allow producers to plant whatever they wish. As I said in an earlier podcast, if a wine is labeled with an AVA - such as Napa Valley - all it means is that a majority of the grapes come from Napa Valley.

OK. We've talked about how so much wine in Europe is treated as a local agricultural product tied in with tradition and culture. But in America, wine is only loosely associated with the place it is produced in, and wine isn't really part of American culture. Those American consumers who do drink wine - they may drink wine from all over the world. They're not necessarily attached to the wine of their particular region. We've also talked about terroir and how the terroir influences the rules and regulations associated with labels and appellations in Europe. Those rules and regulations are somewhat different in different countries - but usually they come down to matching a style of wine with a particular place.

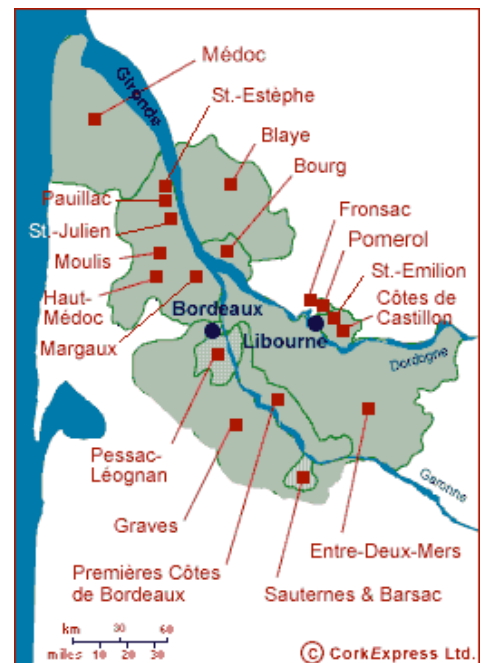
There are several other ways we can discuss the different approaches to wine in the New World and Old World, but I may have to discuss these in a future podcast. I don't want these to go on too long.

So for now I'd just like to say that if you do not belong to a particular wine culture (or even if you do) feel free to explore the whole world of wine. There are great wines and great values that you can find from almost any place.

Thank you for coming along and listening to Wine in Easy English!



Napa Valley AVAs - differences in elevations, soils and average temperatures and rainfall lead to differences in terroir. Pinot Noir is common in the southern section and Cabernet dominates in the north, but there are no firm rules dictating what growers may plant.



Appellations of Bordeaux. The red wines are classic blends with either Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot as the dominant grape.