Bordeaux vs. Bali: The Wine Wars

By Mac Margolis | NEWSWEEK
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Rajeev Samant developed a taste for wine during his years in California, first as a Stanford student and then as an engineer at Oracle in Silicon Valley. So when he returned to his family's picturesque farm northeast of Mumbai, he decided to try growing table grapes. He had his doubts: crops of mangoes, peanuts, and roses had already failed. But the grapevines flourished in the cool nights and sunny days. Samant brought in some ringers from Napa and imported India's first sauvignon blanc and zinfandel grapes, and Sula Vineyards was born. He corked his first bottle in 2000—just as Indians were beginning to catch wine fever. Now the winery uses a pneumatic grape press and giant fermentation tanks to produce 18 different varieties.

Samant is just the kind of upstart winemaker the old guard from Bordeaux and St-Émilion loves to hate. He's young, innovative, and unschooled in the traditions of winemaking. And he's catering to the kind of clientele that Maurice Large, former president of the Beaujolais producers' association, once denounced as "philistines" with a taste for "alcoholic fruit drink." Although total global wine consumption is down slightly for the first time in decades, it is growing rapidly in the developing world. Since 2001, wine consumption in India has soared by 25 percent a year. Brazilians are mobbing wine—appreciation courses, eager to flaunt their command of oenology or even become sommeliers—the hottest new profession since fashion modeling. China, now among the top 10 consumer markets, plants more wine grapes than Australia.

Indeed, where there are wine drinkers, vineyards are sure to follow. In Vermont, a state best known for maple syrup and cheddar cheese, vintners represent a $5 million business. North Africa is paved with grapevines, from Morocco to Egypt, which has doubled its annual output since 2000 to 8.5 million bottles, and now exports to Europe. There's even a successful winery in Bali, encouraging enthusiasts to declare tropical wine a genre unto itself.

To be sure, even weekend oenophiles might turn up their noses at these vintages. So it's not hard to imagine what the old-time winemakers in France and Italy must think. As they see it, the old "New World" producers—Australia, the United States, South America, and South Africa—have been hard enough to stomach. Thanks to them—and falling consumption in many rich countries—European vineyards now account for less than half the world's grape production. In China, Australian and Chilean wines rival those from France. But India? Morocco? Bali? It's just too much for
the traditionalists. Très mal, sniffs Large, who accuses the New World dilettantes of "treating wine like Coca-Cola."

The elite winemakers have always pinned their high-quality product on heritage, the tradition of growing, culling, and fermenting grapes, handed down from generation to generation, that cannot be easily exported or imitated. They also like to boast of terroir—literally, "the land." But to the French, terroir has come to mean a mystical combination of soil, sun, weather, cultural identity, and legacy that the most storied châteaux have leveraged to ennoble their vintages—and their prices.

Lately, though, this powerful conceit has come under assault. Scientists have learned that the land itself is only part of the riddle of producing quality wines, and perhaps not even the most important part. Comparing data on soils, grape varietals, and picking and bottling techniques across 100 vineyards, economists Victor Ginsburgh and Olivier Gergaud have found that natural endowments are overrated. What produces the finest wines are not so much the mysteries locked up in a patch of land but what winemakers put into it. "Making better wines is due to ability, not weather," says Michael White, wine scholar for the Department of Watershed Sciences at Utah State University. Technology is the new terroir.

The war on terroir has heartened the emerging producers who may lack the mystique of terroir but also the prudish strictures of designations like the Appellation D'Origine Contrôlée, the iron code of rules that has governed French winemaking since 1935. The rules determine the alcohol content of wines, which grapes can be grown in different regions, and even how wines should be labeled. Meanwhile, New World winemakers are free to deploy the full arsenal of modern science and technology, including soil research and remote sensing to pinpoint the best plots, seasoning wine with oak chips (instead of in pricey oak barrels), and computerized precision irrigation—methods that are frowned upon or, in the case of irrigation, banned in France’s prime wine country, presumably because it would tamper with the terroir.

New World winemakers are trellising their vines and grading the understory to regulate humidity, compensating for drought. Rosemount, of Australia, is tinkering with sugar levels to ensure that its wines do not vary from harvest to harvest. Chilean vineyards are fine-tuning their harvests with portable spectrometry, using a kind of ray gun that zaps vineyards with near-infrared beams to reveal the exact state of the grapes on the vine instead of hauling them into the laboratory. To make ice wine, which requires mature grapes to freeze at harvest, Bonnie Doon of California is using freezers instead of waiting for the frost. "New World producers are much more tech-savvy," says White.

Even some Old World winemakers are beginning to go modern, forsaking ancient châteaux and weather-beaten farmhouses for sleek new wineries, often designed by big-name architects. In Spain, Norman Foster designed the soon-to-be-completed Bodegas Portia, a superslick single-story building split into three sections and clad in earth-toned tiles made from Cor-Ten steel. Richard Rogers’s Bodegas Protos, near the Spanish city of Valladolid, is built half underground to use land mass to cool the cellar space, which links to a labyrinth of ancient tunnels still used to store wine. "Brands have to face a new context—a global market," says Jan Güell, an associate of Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners and project architect at Protos. "People are very interested in where their favorite wine is made. Protos realized that they had to offer their client something else: a bold architectural scheme." Even Bordeaux wine czar Pierre Lurton has plans to update his 17th-century St-Émilion estate with a concrete cellar and packing depot that resembles an alien battleship.
landing amid the vines.

Clearly, the pressure from the outlands is getting to the wine establishment. In 2007 the EU relaxed some of the strictures of the French classification system to make traditional vineyards more competitive. "All is not well in our wine sector," Mariann Fischer Boel, the EU commissioner for agriculture and rural development, commented in a 2007 paper. "We are losing market share to the dynamic producers in the New World, who are tapping into changing consumer tastes."

Indeed, in the past decade or so, the emerging wine industry has gone from a joke to a niche market to a global industry. Tourists can visit wineries from Patagonia to Prague. And with global warming threatening to shift the range of grape growing, it's impossible to predict where the next hot spot will be. Consider São Joaquim, which for years has been Brazil's monument to winter, attracting visitors to its windblown sierra. Now São Joaquim is banking on wine. Two major vineyards have opened recently, inspired by the rich soil and crisp mountain air. "Brazilians traditionally are not wine drinkers, but that is changing," says Daniela Borges de Freitas, head of Villa Francioni, a boutique winemaker. It's a long way from Tuscany, the home of her ancestors, but it's as good a place as any to sit with a glass of New World cuvée and savor the changing geography of wine.

With Sudip Mazumdar in New Delhi, Sophie Grove in London, and Manuela Zoninsein in Beijing

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