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The Wrath of Grapes

A band of upstart winemakers is trying to redefine what California wine should taste like — and enraging America's most famous oenophile in the process.

By Bruce Schoenfeld

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In the steep hills of Central California near Lompoc, on a slope that runs along Santa Rosa Road, two vineyards lie side by side. To all appearances, the Sea Smoke and Wenzlau properties occupy one continuous parcel of land. The vines are indistinguishable; they grow in the same soil and get the same sunlight. Nevertheless, grapes planted only a few feet apart end up in bottles of pinot noir that have little in common.

Sea Smoke's top releases sell for more than $100, and its intensely flavored wines receive all manner of critical acclaim. But the winemaker who leases the Wenzlau vines next door — Rajat Parr, a former sommelier who is a co-owner of two wine labels, Sandhi and Domaine de la Côte — can't understand why anyone would drink them. He believes that the grapes are picked far too late, when they're far too ripe, and that the resulting wine is devoid of both subtlety and freshness. Parr does things differently from his neighbors at Sea Smoke, starting with when he harvests. "Our wines are fermenting in barrels, we've gone home," he says, "and they haven't picked a berry yet."

Sugar content, which determines alcohol levels, rises as fruit ripens. Parr's wines are full of aromas and flavors that admirers compare to things you would never think to connect to wine, like the leaf-strewn ground in a forest. To Parr, and a growing number of like-minded colleagues, such nuance becomes impossible to achieve when the wines are too alcoholic; it's as if the lilting flutes and oboes of a symphony have been drowned out by a slash of electric guitar. He prefers an alcohol concentration below 14 percent and often far lower, depending on the grape variety, as opposed to the 15 percent and higher that is common in California. So Parr harvests his fruit iconoclastically early. "If you pick a grape off the vine and it tastes yummy," he is fond of saying, "you've already missed it."

Early one recent morning, Parr took me to La Côte vineyard, several miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. The sun was shining when I left Santa Barbara, where the temperature was headed for the 70s. I knew Parr preferred sites that were far cooler than the surrounding area, but it hadn't occurred to me to bring a jacket. By the time we reached the vineyard, rain was falling hard. The temperature was 49 degrees, and the whipping wind made it feel colder. Grapes grew all around me, but it was the least hospitable vineyard I've ever visited, more like a gathering spot for Celtic druids than a setting suitable for the cultivation of fruit.

As we hiked past stick-figure vines, their leaves shivering in the gusts, Parr explained that he wanted the specifics of the place — the shale in the soil, that cutting Pacific wind — to be evident in the taste of the wine itself. He hates the idea of blending top-quality grapes from different vineyards into the same bottle, which many producers do. Those wines might taste good, he admitted, but they lack depth and intrigue. "I don't believe in the 'best' — that the best grapes from different areas come together and create the 'best' wine," he said. "I think there's more to wine than that."

Most California winemakers, it's safe to say, are trying to produce something more like Sea Smoke than Domaine de la Côte. Before Napa Valley's emergence in the 1980s, highly regarded wines were made in regions — mostly various places in France — where cool, wet summers tended to undermine agricultural efforts. The standout vintages were from the warmest years, those infrequent occasions when grapes reached full maturity before being picked. In California, where sunshine is abundant, ripeness is rarely an issue. Fully ripe wines are possible not only once or twice a decade, but just about every year.

If ripe wines are considered good, many California producers reasoned, those made from grapes brought to the brink of desiccation, to the peak of ripeness (or even a bit beyond), should taste even better. That logical leap has created a new American vernacular for wine, a dense, opaque fruitiness well suited to a nation of Pepsi drinkers. More sweet fruit, more of the glycerol that makes wine feel thicker in the mouth, more alcohol. And by extension, more pleasure.

Pleasure is a matter of opinion, of course. But for three decades, the tastes of mainstream American wine drinkers have been shaped by the personal preferences of one man, Robert M. Parker Jr. A 2013 inductee of the California Vintners Hall of Fame — as a *reviewer* — Parker has been anointed by The Atlantic Monthly as "the most influential critic in the world," all genres included. As it happens, he has made a career out of championing exactly the style of wine that Parr and his colleagues disdain. In my conversations with them, no phrase elicited more derision than "Parker wines." It was shorthand, fair or not, for wines they deem generically obvious and overblown.

Until a few years ago, if you wanted to drink a wine with a European sense of proportion, you bought a European wine. In 2011, in reaction to an American marketplace that they perceived to be dismissive of California wines made in anything but the superripe style, Parr and Jasmine Hirsch of Hirsch Vineyards in Sonoma County began soliciting members for a loose confederation of pinot-noir producers called In Pursuit of Balance. The group, which charges a $900 annual fee, conducts what amounts to a political campaign on behalf of viticultural restraint. Most of its 33 members — located from Anderson Valley, about 100 miles north of San Francisco, to Santa Barbara — make modest amounts of wine, somewhere between 40,000 and 60,000 bottles a year. That's too small, typically, to have much of a marketing budget. But by joining the group, which stages tastings around the country (and sometimes abroad), they're able to reach the consumers who are most likely to appreciate their wines.

In recent months, many of these have started appearing in shops and on wine lists. At some restaurants in Brooklyn and certain San Francisco neighborhoods, for example, theirs are the only domestic wines available. The success of this nonconformist group, a sort of guerrilla movement against the California mainstream, has prompted invective-filled exchanges on Internet bulletin boards, blogs and Twitter feeds. Partisans fight over alcohol levels, the proper role of critics and whether restaurants should be trying to influence their customers' tastes by carrying only certain styles of wine.

At its core, though, the debate is about the philosophical purpose of fine wine. Should oenologists try to make beverages that are merely delicious? Or should the ideal be something more profound and intellectually stimulating? Are the best wines the equivalent of Hollywood blockbusters or art-house films? And who gets to decide?

Standing at the rear of a glass-enclosed atrium in TriBeCa one morning in February, Parr looked out over more than a thousand wineglasses, each partly filled with pinot noir. This was the fifth annual In Pursuit of Balance tasting in New York, held for the benefit of perhaps a hundred retailers, journalists and sommeliers and a few wine-geek consumers who paid $125 each to hear dialogues about sugar levels, crop thinning and the Burgundian mind-set.

Onstage, panel after panel of winemakers extolled the benefits of modest alcohol levels. (These included, in addition to enhanced aromatics and more subtlety and elegance, the capacity for a drinker to consume more wine before getting drunk.) The speakers were in such ideological alignment that I might have been watching a campaign rally. "That's when a light bulb went off in my head," one panelist, Bradley Brown of Big Basin Wines, said of his epiphany after drinking a particular bottle of Burgundy. "It has to be possible to make more perfumed — more aromatically driven — wines in California." Beside me, Parr nodded vigorously.

Now 42, with a teddy-bear physique, Parr spent nearly two decades serving wine and putting together wine lists for some of America's most highly esteemed restaurants. Born Rajat Parashar in Kolkata, India, he Anglicized his surname to Parr and later became an American citizen. But he never embraced American wine. In the early 2000s, he recalls, he drank a syrah from the Rhone Valley in France with another sommelier. Like other Rhone wines, it impressed him less with its fruit flavor than with its hints at things that couldn't possibly be in the wine: roasted meat, freshly turned soil. He liked how the wine felt in his mouth, crisp rather than weighty, and how the wine evolved as he drank it, one sip after the next. These, he knew, were hallmarks of bottlings from the finest regions of Europe. When he wondered aloud why similar wines weren't made in California, the other sommelier said it simply wasn't possible.

Rajat Parr in his Domaine de la Côte winery in Lompoc, Calif. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

“That stuck in my head,” Parr says. “California is a big place. How was it not possible?”

In Pursuit of Balance is controversial in wine circles. The name itself is polemical. It seems to imply that those outside its ranks don’t mind if a single attribute of their wines (sweet fruit, perhaps, or alcohol, or the flavors that result from prolonged aging in oak barrels) dominates the rest. Aware that being on the intellectual side of a debate against pure pleasure tends to make his group look severe — the “anti-flavor elite,” as Parker likes to call them — Parr took the stage in TriBeCa to spread good feelings. “It’s not a movement,” he said. “It’s just a discussion among friends.” Moments later, the moderator of a following panel, Ray Isle of Food & Wine Magazine, pushed back. “I had understood you were actually creating an IPOB church,” he said.

In fact, group members do tend to proselytize, which befits a sectarian splinter group trying to challenge established orthodoxy. They point out that Parker’s influence has been so strong over the past quarter-century that he has actively altered winemaking techniques — not only in Napa but also in regions from Europe to Australia. To sell expensive bottles, producers needed access to the American market. And to get that, they needed Parker.

In 1978, while working as a lawyer for a Baltimore bank, Parker started a newsletter called The Wine Advocate. The name played off his occupation as an attorney, but it meant more than that. Convinced that many highly regarded producers were passing off thin, unappealing wines as fashionable, he created a 100-point scoring system and then wielded it like a truncheon. He awarded high numbers to wines that tasted the way he believed good wines ought to taste. He punished others with scores in the 70s and 80s and biting insults to match.

Today, The Wine Advocate, which has some 50,000 subscribers, provides detailed descriptions of wines it rates to help readers gauge if their preferences are similar. Nevertheless, by attaching a precise and easily understood score to the commentary, Parker gives the impression — purposeful or not — that he isn't merely communicating his personal reaction to each wine but quantifying its intrinsic value. For American consumers, the idea that the quality of various wines can be compared as easily as batting averages or stock quotes has proved irresistible. "People would walk into wine shops with the name of a wine and Parker's rating, and not one word about the style or character of the wine," says Michael Mondavi, whose father, Robert, is largely responsible for spreading the fame of Napa Valley wines across America. "Just because of the two digits he'd assigned to it, they'd buy it."

Parker's taste has always been broader than his detractors like to admit. "It's simplistic to say that Bob just wants fruit bombs," says Jeb Dunnuck, who writes reviews for The Wine Advocate. But the wines that receive Parker's highest scores — those 98s, 99s and 100s that have turned previously unknown producers into cult favorites — are typically the most intensely flavored and come from places, like Napa, where the grapes are most consistently ripe.

For wine regions in some of the warmer areas around the world, the lure of Parker's endorsement was overwhelming. "Spain went through a time when a lot of wines were being made a certain way in order to get a score," Ashley Santoro, the wine director of the Standard East Village restaurant in New York, told me during a break between sessions at the Balance tasting. When local distributors came calling at her former restaurant, they were so certain that Santoro would want their wines, they often assumed she didn't need to taste them. Parker liked them — what else mattered? "They'd walk in," Santoro said, "hand me a sheet of paper with a list of scores and say, 'This got 98.' "

As we spoke, a swirl of sommeliers surrounded us, most of them (or so it seemed to me) barely old enough to drink legally. A generation ago, only about five working sommeliers existed in New York. Now they're everywhere — six alone at a single restaurant, the Modern. Their emergence as independent voices, influenced by their curiosity more than by any pronouncements by Parker or other critics, has helped the Balance group get its wines before a generation of drinkers open to all sorts of guidance. These sommeliers have studied wine as they might otherwise have studied Renaissance art; their ambition is not to compile a wine list but to curate one. As a group, they scorn wines, even tasty ones, that lack a sense of place. If Santoro was going to put a wine from Spain on her list, she said, it should taste Spanish, not like a Spanish version of a California cabernet.

These days, the bottles that fill lists like Santoro's are ranging further and further from the Parker-sanctioned standard. They are likely to be made in some corner of Italy that isn't known for wine or from a tongue-twister variety of grape in Croatia or the Caucasus Mountains. They might be bottled without sulfur, which is used by a vast majority of winemakers to ward off bacteria, or aged underground in amphorae. They might look cloudy, or have a slight carbonation, or still be undergoing fermentation. In short, they're just the sort of quirky (and occasionally faulty) beverages that Parker believed he had driven from the earth, or at least from American wine shops. "The kinds of wines," says Lulu McAllister, who has developed a cultish following as the wine director for the San Francisco restaurant Nopa, "that my customers are looking for."

The day after the Balance event in New York, I flew to London to attend the Taste of Greatness Masterclass, held at the Great Hall of the Royal Courts of Justice. This, along with a separate $2,500 dinner at a restaurant with two Michelin stars, was the European portion of The Wine Advocate's Grand World Tour, an intercontinental series of events in which Parker, whose exhaustive tasting-and-writing regimen seems to leave little time for public appearances, could bestow his wisdom to well-heeled wine drinkers.

Ten wines, deemed perfect or near-perfect by Wine Advocate reviewers and validated by Parker's palate, were poured for some 500 attendees in a room with the majesty of a Gothic cathedral. Despite the absence of food of any kind, not even the crackers or bread often served at such functions to neutralize the flavor of one wine before another is sampled, those attending paid the equivalent of $700 to taste them.

Hefty and bearded, Parker sat on a dais with four other reviewers. “Let me tell you how I find greatness,” he began. He explained the criteria that he believes all great wines share, touchstones that any honest oenophile should endorse. His lofty precepts matched the grandeur of the setting. “We know this wine smells of truffles,” he said at one point. “That’s a good descriptor. But sometimes people think we get carried away because truffles are expensive.” He told of flying home from Bordeaux after tasting the 1982 vintage, which he would praise as the best he had encountered, knowing that he had information the world needed to hear. He was anguished. “Here I am, possessed of all this knowledge,” he recalled thinking. “What if the plane crashes?”

The wines were equally immodest, if such a thing were possible. They represented a broad stylistic range; nobody could complain that Parker appreciates only overly alcoholic, unsubtle wines after sipping the 2011 Latricières-Chambertin of Lalou Bize-Leroy or the 1982 Cos d’Estournel. Napa Valley’s Dominus, on the other hand, was undeniably dense. “People say you can never give a wine 100 points,” Parker said. “I disagree completely.” He tasted the Dominus again and pronounced it perfect. “I’m very proud I gave it 100 points,” he said. “It’s as good as it gets.”

Now 67, Parker recently sold control of The Wine Advocate to a group of investors based in Singapore, but he remains its undisputed voice. He has reacted to the growing popularity of wines with modest alcohol, less intense flavor and occasional faults — and the accompanying diminution of his influence — with undisguised aggression. “After 35 years I had thought there was no longer room for revisionist history, outright distortion, deception and clever scams,” he posted on the bulletin board on his website last year.

Slowed by a back injury that has forced him to walk with the aid of two canes, Parker has tried to shift the spotlight at The Wine Advocate toward other reviewers. He referred me to Dunnuck to speak for him. But every so often, his anger at Parr and his sympathizers boils over. “The jihadist movements of nonsulphured wines, green, underripe wines, low alcohol, insipid stuff promoted by the anti-pleasure police & neo-anti-alcohol proponents has run its course as another extreme and useless movement few care about,” he wrote at one point. Though Parr and Hirsch have been careful not to criticize Parker publicly, they have made no secret of their distaste for the style of wine he has come to represent. Occasionally, Parker’s invective back at them turns personal. “No serious person pays any attention to Raj Parr and his zealots,” he wrote, “as it is so obvious they are only trying to sell their own wines.”

Parker’s critics counter that he has lost sight of what wine is really for. “Go back a thousand years, wine is meant to be served at the dinner table,” says Jamie Kutch, a former Nasdaq trader who now makes pinot noirs in Sonoma County. “It’s not about a tasting where you line up 100 wines and give them scores. I’ll pour at tastings and say: ‘This wine is 12.2 percent alcohol. It’s very food-friendly.’ And people will come up to me and say: ‘I can’t thank you enough. I didn’t know there were options like that.’ IPOB would not be successful unless people desired these wines. In the end, the market has spoken.”

At many of the Napa Valley properties that Parker helped make famous, tours and tasting rooms have created a lucrative secondary business. Like most wineries owned by Balance members, though, Steve Matthiasson’s, called Matthiasson, feels more like a dairy or an apple orchard than a tourist attraction. “It’s just not the business I’m in,” he told me.

When I visited, I drove up the driveway of his home inside the Napa city limits and walked around back, past a vegetable garden. We sat at a wobbly formica table outside a barn filled with discarded furniture. I could have been at a farm that was preparing for a yard sale. His wines seem equally out of place in Napa. Several are made from grape varieties that most wine drinkers have never encountered, like ribolla gialla, which is rarely found outside the Italian region of Friuli. The alcohol in all of his wines is under 14 percent.

A viticulturist who works for wineries around Napa Valley, Matthiasson started bottling his own wine as a sideline in 2003. “In those days, a Napa wine would get 100 points from Parker, and it would sell out immediately,” said his wife, Jill Klein Matthiasson. “And we were like: ‘That’s a thing? You can make a wine, and people will go crazy for it? This is a good business!’ We were so

naïve." They set out to produce wines they wanted to drink, in the style of the 1998 Robert Mondavi cabernet sauvignon. At the time, Matthiasson was consulting for the Mondavis. He was able to buy four cases of that 1998 vintage at a discount, for $15 a bottle. "We loved that wine," Jill recalled. "It was insane."

But the 1998 Mondavi, made from fruit grown during one of Napa Valley's rare cool summers, was dismissed by critics. "It was the best wine we owned," Matthiasson said, "but we couldn't bring it to someone's house for dinner, because it was like you were pawning a '98 off on them. Like it was gauche. We'd have to take another wine that we didn't like as much. That's how much the scores mattered."

The early vintages Matthiasson produced were poorly received. Buyers at restaurants all but pushed the couple out the door. "There was a type of old-guard sommelier who was offended by what we were doing," Matthiasson said. "A few of them shouted at me. It was very difficult for us to carve out a spot in the wine world. The people who drink Napa wines didn't care for our wines, and the people who drink European wines didn't want anything that said 'Napa Valley.' "

Without his Balance affiliation, and the periodic access to curious sommeliers it provides, he would have a difficult time overcoming less-than-enthusiastic reviews. "I have two kids to provide for, so I need to have a successful business," he said. "But I choose not to sell out and make wines I don't want to make in order to do that. That's what this is about. It's not a fight to take over the wine world — far from it. It's a fight for our existence."

We continued our conversation over lamb sliders with goat-milk feta at Farmstead, a restaurant a short drive up the valley in a town called St. Helena. After looking intently at the wine list, Matthiasson identified a syrah that was similar to his own style of wine. It was less than 13 percent alcohol and had the vibrant color of a particularly strong glass of Kool-Aid. After an initial taste, I drank it in gulps, like a beer. It reminded me of a wine I might be served in a carafe at an al fresco lunch in southern France.

As we were leaving, our server approached. She had a tattoo of an elephant down one arm and a rapturous look. "You changed my life," she said. Matthiasson swiveled, figuring she was talking to someone else. She wasn't. "I thought I recognized you," she said. "And then the minute he called you Steve, I thought" — she snapped her fingers hard — "It's him!"

It turned out that Matthiasson and two simpatico winemakers had eaten at a restaurant where she had worked and introduced her to a style of California wine that she didn't realize existed. She remembered tasting an uncommon trousseau gris, some low-alcohol syrah and Matthiasson's oddball white and red blends. "I was like, 'I'm in heaven right now!' " she recalled with a shriek. The other customers on the patio stared.

After lunch, I crossed the valley to Silverado Trail. Amid the vines sat grandiose architectural creations, housing some of California's most lauded wineries. I passed fake chateaus, concrete bunkers sunk deep into the soil and too many metal gates to count. At Shafer Vineyards, a souvenir rack in the lobby sold Doug Shafer's book about a life in wine, as well as baseball caps to advertise a wearer's status as a Shafer loyalist. I was sent upstairs, where soft music emanated from invisible speakers.

Two wines had been decanted for me, Shafer's 2002 and 2010 Hillside Selects. Both were rated 100 by Parker. With alcohol levels right at 15 percent, each provided the intense flavor and milky texture that have made the valley rich. "Nobody's twisting anyone's arm to buy these," Shafer told me. "The consumer makes his choice. I've got people knocking the door down. But these new hip somms, they don't give me the time of day."

As I tasted, Shafer explained his philosophy. "My job, and my passion, is to make delicious wine," he said. "Do I love wines from other areas, in different weights and styles? Of course I do. I would love to make Chablis. But this isn't the place to do it."

Shafer's wines didn't surprise me or make me think as much as Matthiasson's, but they tasted really good. I wasn't sure I could identify the specifics of the hill on which the fruit had grown, despite Shafer's prodding. But even through all the alcohol, I could certainly taste the presence of Napa Valley. These wines, it seemed to me, could come from nowhere else. If that's one test of a great wine for Parr, they would pass it. Besides, I couldn't stop sipping them.

Not long ago, Parr served me dinner at his rented home in Santa Barbara. With jazz playing on a stereo, we sat on the terrace overlooking a garden and the treetops beyond. For 18 years, Parr told me, he worked in restaurants nearly every night. He rarely had time to sit at home, sip wine and watch an evening settle in. As if to make up for that, he opened a succession of rarefied bottles, five or six in all, including a 2000 Château Magdelaine Bordeaux and a 1985 Pio Cesare Barolo. All of them, I noticed, were imports from Europe.

After we ate, Parr put on Louis Armstrong and poured his own wines. The various Domaine de la Côte releases, each from grapes grown in a different vineyard, struck me as so diverse that I never would have known they were made by the same winery. One seemed to taste more like minerals than fruit. Another was light and refreshing. A third seemed virtually flavorless, as if the wine wasn't even ready to drink. It would be entirely possible for a customer to be entranced by one, yet find another actively unpleasant. Parr nodded his approval when I told him that, because it meant the vineyard sites were showing through in the wines. But as a business model it seemed perverse. Selling the wines for $45 to $90 a bottle, Parr could hardly expect consumers to use trial and error to figure out what they liked. How, I asked, could anyone have any idea which style she might prefer?

"We don't make these in any style at all," he responded. "They are what they are." He took a sip, and I waited for him to continue. Behind us in the living room, Armstrong rasped his way through "Mack the Knife." Birds squawked in the trees. Parr, seemingly lost in thought, took another sip. While I waited, I did, too. After a while, I realized that he had finished thinking about the question. He wasn't going to say any more. The wine was the answer.