

THE POUR

How the Most Delicious Wines Stay True to Themselves

The desire to achieve greatness in wine often means figuring out how others define it. But the most original wines begin with smaller ambitions.





By Eric Asimov

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There's an old joke about a street with four restaurants side-by-side. The first has a sign saying, "Best Food in the City," and its tables are sparsely populated. The second says, "Best Food in the Country," and even fewer people are inside. The third says, "Best Food in the World," and it's empty. The fourth says, "Best Food on the Block," and it's packed.

The joke could well be about the intentions of wine producers.

Some aspire to make the best wines in their region; others, the country or the world. But for me, the most enlightened approach is simply to try to make the best possible wine from the place where the grapes are grown.

This might sound like the least ambitious path, but it's the most demanding one of all, requiring a strong set of beliefs.

My favorite wine producers look inward, not outward. They ask themselves, "How can I do my utmost to convey the character of this particular patch of earth?" And they often conclude: "I'm going to make the wines that I like to drink. If nobody buys them, I'll drink them myself."

You'd be right to think that this doesn't make much business sense. Successful corporations rely on focus groups and surveys to determine what the public likes and loathes. Their products fit their perception of what will sell, which in the world of wine often results in imitation rather than originality. It's a paint-by-numbers approach that starts with analyzing a wine that received accolades and ends with a facsimile of that wine.

These sorts of wines can, nonetheless, be delicious. Plenty of people will love them and find them satisfying. But a delicious wine is not necessarily the same thing as an original wine. Original wines that are delicious, too, are best of all.

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The most distinctive wines tend to be made by small, family-run producers. They do need to sustain their businesses, but they do not answer to outside forces motivated primarily by sales and profits, or to critics' notions of what is proper and desirable. They are free to define their own aesthetic standards.

They might focus on unpopular or little-known grapes, on places that few deem capable of making good wines or on styles that seem passé or have been critically rejected.

I don't mean to say that small wine producers and vigneronns are always the best judges or that their motives are always pure. Critics have a role to play as consumer advocates, warning the public when well-known, expensive brands let standards fall. But critics also have an important function in calling attention to little-known producers or wines outside the mainstream, rather than acting as establishment gatekeepers.

In that spirit, I'd like to highlight six producers who make glorious wines by following their own muse. (And there are dozens more wines that deserve similar attention.)

These producers are not all tiny or unknown, and their wines are not always cheap. But the successes they have achieved have come about by working in unexpected ways, not by assessing the market and tailoring their approach accordingly. They have simply tried to make the best wines on their blocks.

Six Winemakers Who Prize Originality

La Garagista

At [La Garagista](#), in Vermont, Deirdre Heekin and Caleb Barber have proven that hybrid grapes, grown in the state's cold climate, can be captivating and can express terroir in ways that few imagined.

Before La Garagista, most hybrid wines — crosses between European vinifera vines, which include all the best-known wine grapes, and native American vines — were perfunctory, living up to the low standards set for them. Since few expected greatness, the potential of hybrids was never fully examined. But [Ms. Heekin and Mr. Barber](#), through scrupulous, conscientious farming and meticulous winemaking, revealed just how expressive these grapes could be.

Whether pétillant naturels, still wines, co-fermentations of grapes and apples, or experiments with aging under flor in the style of sherry, their wines are always striking for their originality and delectability.

Sylvain Pataille

[Sylvain Pataille](#) works in the Marsannay region of Burgundy. He makes excellent reds and whites, but his four single-vineyard aligotés from prime Marsannay terroirs are the real eye-openers. [Aligoté](#) has long been a workhorse white in Burgundy, a cheap drink for locals or a base for [kir](#), in which a shot of crème de cassis is added to the wine. Few had ever thought to grow it in the sorts of terroirs reserved for what were deemed superior grapes.

Because he believed in the expressive potential of aligoté, Mr. Pataille planted the grape in areas that might have been used for chardonnay, which can sell for higher prices. Each of his single-vineyard aligotés is different, expressing the character of its vineyard through the medium of the grape. All are resonant and intriguing.

“Aligoté expresses terroir almost more than chardonnay,” he told me in 2017. Not many Burgundy producers would take that position, much less act on it. But Mr. Pataille had the courage of his convictions, and wine lovers are the beneficiaries.

Gaia Ritinitis Nobilis

[Gaia](#) is a fine producer of Greek wines, but I want to single out one of its bottles, which says a lot about the qualities that go into an original wine. It’s [an exceptional retsina](#), a wine infused with the resin of Aleppo pine trees that traces back to the ancient Greeks. Nowadays, tourists who visit Greece are generally warned not to drink retsina, which all too often is bad wine made with bad pine.

But back in the 1990s, Yiannis Paraskevopoulos, a founder of Gaia and the winemaker, was convinced that retsina could be a good wine. It was the national wine of Greece, he believed, a traditional product that should be a source of pride, not of shame, and he was determined to do it right. The result, made with excellent roditis grapes and good-quality resin, is superb.

Like many people, I scoffed at retsina, until I tried Ritinitis Nobilis the first time, with Greek food. I was both taken with the wine, and with the idea that often, we reflexively dismiss wines not because they are inherently bad, but because we’ve only had bad versions. Just as with hybrids and with aligoté, if retsina is made with care, it can be beautiful.

Hiyu Wine Farm

[Hiyu Wine Farm](#) in the [Columbia Gorge](#) region, where Oregon meets Washington at the Columbia River, makes astonishingly unconventional wines. One bottle might be a combination of assyrtiko, fiano, greco and other grapes that are put together because they trace a path from Greece to southern Italy. Another might mix pinot noir and gewürztraminer. Who would do that?

Not a company that only produces what is going to sell. Hiyu is built on taking risks. It's a place that mixes vineyards, fruit trees, vegetable crops and animals in a healthy, polycultural ecosystem.

Hiyu was founded by Nate Ready, a former sommelier, and China Tresemer, a cooking teacher, who believes in natural farming techniques. It hasn't been easy. Hiyu almost lost everything in its first vintage. "The failures are so important," Mr. Ready told me in 2021. Yet the rewards are great.

The wines are singular, expensive and sometimes challenging. But if you allow yourself to go along for the ride, they can be wonderful and transporting.

Cathy Corison

With a prime spot in the Napa Valley, making wines of 100 percent cabernet sauvignon that nowadays sell for upward of \$100 a bottle, [Cathy Corison](#) is hardly off the beaten trail or unacclaimed. But what she has earned has come through sheer determination to stay true to her vision of Napa cabernet.

It hasn't always been easy in her nearly 50 years of making wine in California. Ms. Corison saw the ideal of Napa cabernet stray in the 1990s from the classic lines of fine table wine to a more flamboyant style of plush, powerful, opulent fruit and high alcohol. As other producers veered with the times, receiving critical praise and financial rewards, Ms. Corison plugged onward, making wonderful wines that conveyed her notion of Rutherford and St. Helena terroirs — even as, up through the early 2000s, she was largely ignored.

Now, times have changed again. The subtle, restrained style that she always made is back in demand. Ms. Corison's wines remain superb examples, demonstrating that Napa can be many different things, depending on a producer's intent.

“I feel almost a moral obligation to make wines that let the dirt speak,” she told me in 2015. “One of the things I love about wine is that it speaks of time and place, and marches forward speaking of time and place.”

The Corison wines are both of a time, and timeless.

Matthiasson Wines

When [Steve Matthiasson and Jill Klein Matthiasson](#) began in 2003 to make Napa Valley wines, they wondered if anybody would buy them. The wines, by design, were lower in alcohol and higher in acidity than the norm. In addition to the expected cabernet sauvignons and chardonnays, they were making wines with grapes that were far from the usual, like refosco and riballa gialla.

It was a time when the predominant styles included powerful, alcoholic cabernets and extravagant, sweet pinot noirs that were more suitable as predinner cocktails than accompaniments to food. [A lot of San Francisco restaurants](#) were heavily criticized back then for ignoring California wines on their lists in favor of leaner, more restrained European bottles. The Matthiassons stood out like vegans at a steak party.

But 20 years later, their wines are beloved. Their success inspired many other producers with similar tastes, who perhaps would not have taken the first step on their own. Today, the California wine culture has evolved into a wonderfully diverse world, and the Matthiassons deserve credit as early trailblazers. No consultant back then would have advised them to take the path they chose, but their convictions won out and winemakers everywhere have benefited.