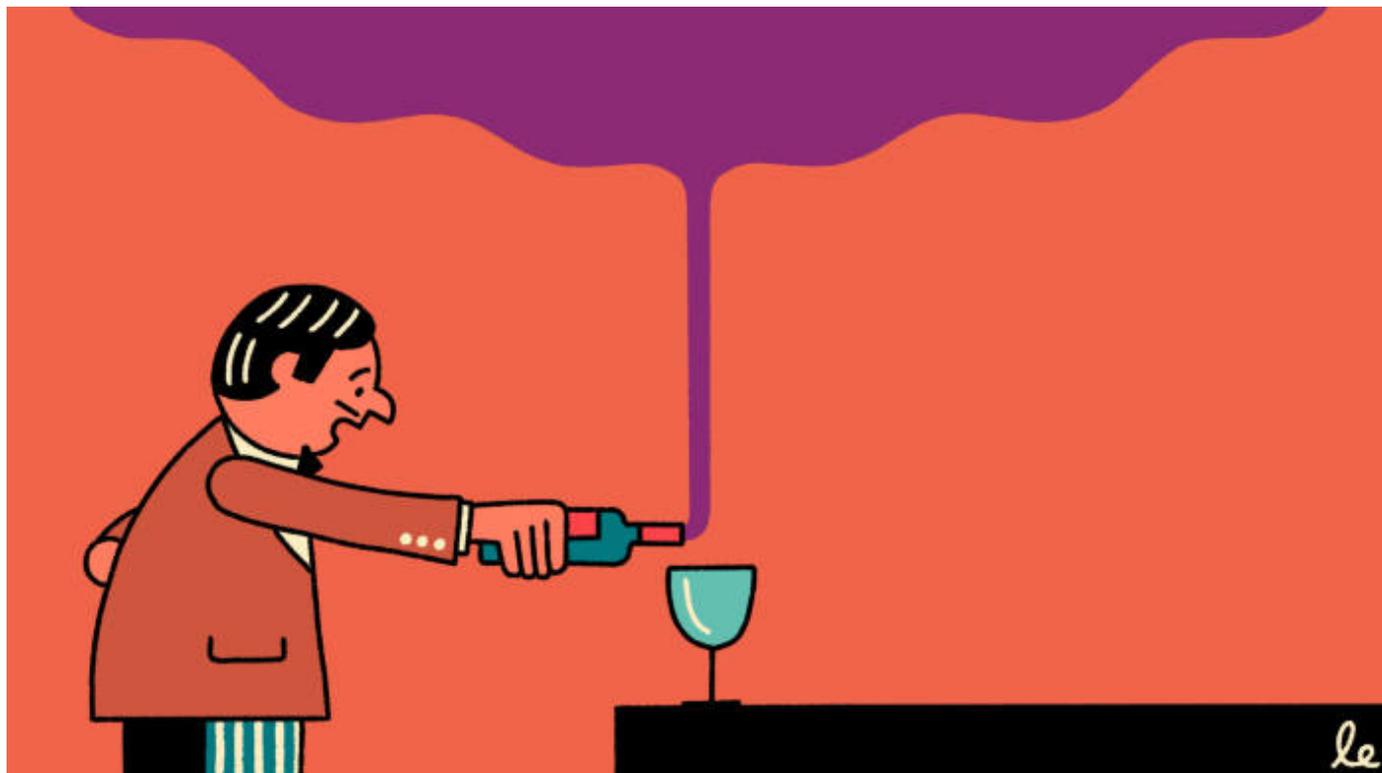


Opinion **Wine**

San Leonardo: an Italian rock in a sea of change

‘This wine has produced a succession of vintages that are spookily similar and of astounding consistency’



Jancis Robinson FEBRUARY 2, 2018

Wine styles have changed enormously over the past 50 years — more than in any other era — even from the same producer, and even from some of the grandest of them. If you could possibly afford to conduct a “vertical tasting” (same wine, a run of different vintages) of the Bordeaux first growths from the 1970s to today, you would see a perceptible increase in concentration and alcohol towards the end of the last century and then, more recently, an increase in refinement and transparency. The same evolution would be apparent lower down the ranks, albeit with rather less subtlety. Fresher wines that communicate terroir rather than what was done in the cellar are now the order of the day.

This switchback of aspiration is very apparent in most of the so-called New World. [South American winemakers](#) today have quite different aims and ideals from even a decade ago. Australian white wines are unrecognisably crisper than their predecessors. These days, most fashionable reds in Australian wine bars and restaurants are light in every sense; the French name Syrah is worn as a badge of honour, signalling a contrast with rich, turbo-charged, stereotypical Australian Shiraz.

Throughout Spain, forward-thinking producers have been seeking out higher-elevation or ocean-influenced sites that yield more refreshing wines than of old. A new wave of their California counterparts are doing the same, making wines that seem to be from another planet compared with the late 20th-century west coast diet of super-ripe Chardonnays and Cabernets.

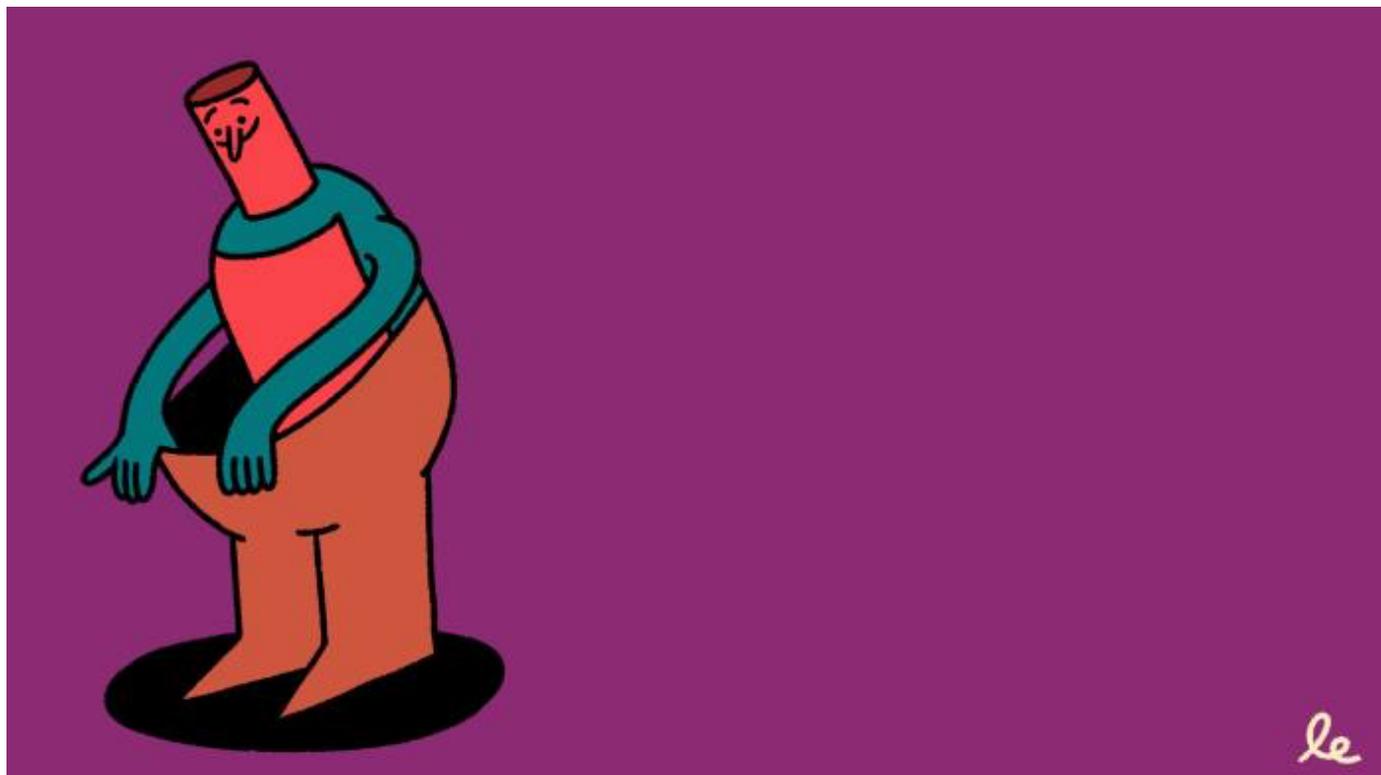
I have been racking my brains to think of wines that have not changed much over recent decades. In the backwaters of Europe there are still, amazingly, some wines that are as disappointing as they ever were, wines that never climbed aboard the wagon of improved winemaking technique and viticultural expertise. Such wines have rarely been exported and have to depend on local demand and ancient loyalties to find a market.

But what I'm after is good wine made by producers who have never really felt the need to make many changes. I think some burgundies would qualify — particularly at the top end. The wines of Armand Rousseau and Michel Lafarge, for instance, don't seem to me to have changed in style over the years. When you have a winning formula and can sell every bottle 20 times over, why tinker?

One important wine-producing country that I have not mentioned yet is Italy, because my prime example of a wine that has hardly changed at all since it was launched with the 1982 vintage is the Cabernet blend of the San Leonardo estate in the subalpine region of Trentino.

[San Leonardo](#) is exceptional in so many ways. For a start, it produces wine almost in a vacuum, north west of Verona towards Lake Garda, well outside the Valpolicella zone, and much further down the Adige valley from the vineyards that supply the sparkling wine of Trento.

Although it's an ancient estate, it did not produce wine until Marchese Carlo Guerrieri Gonzago studied oenology and worked at the Tuscan estate that produces Sassicaia, Italy's prototype Super Tuscan Cabernet in the 1960s. Under the influence of Sassicaia's creator Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, Carlo was keen to see whether similar Bordelais subtlety could also be coaxed out of the infertile clay limestone benchlands of his wife's estate in Trentino.



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A certain stratum of Italian society is so tight-knit it's effectively a pebble. Eighty-year-old Carlo and his son Anselmo are of the hand-kissing sort and share the same tweed and immaculate Roman tailor as head of the eponymous Tuscan wine dynasty Marchese Piero Antinori, who also turns 80 this year. Once Mario Incisa della Rocchetta had lit the winemaking flame, Piero lent his celebrated consultant winemaker Giacomo Tachis to fan it.

The result is a succession of vintages, all of which I have been lucky enough to taste, that are spookily similar and of astounding consistency. When the weather is disobliging, as in 1984, 1989, 1992, 1998 and 2002, no San Leonardo is produced. [Frost](#) destroyed half of the 2017 crop. But virtually any vintage of the principal wine, generally made from 60 per cent Cabernet Sauvignon, 30 per cent Carmenère and 10 per cent Merlot, is beautifully low-key and like the most refined red Bordeaux imaginable.

Carmenère, the grape variety now common in Chile but almost extinct in its Bordeaux homeland, was supplied by mistake when Carlo was establishing his vineyard and expecting Cabernet. Varietal Carmenère tastes green and unripe if the vines are allowed to be too productive and is too concentrated if they are pruned too severely, but Carlo has learnt to tame it.

Only 26 of the estate's 300 hectares are planted with vines. At one stage, they raised cows and Carlo's son Anselmo says he "dreamed of being a gaucho". Instead, at the age of 22, he was charged with selling the family's wine. At that stage, at the turn of the century, his family's Bordeaux blend was dismissed as being too light. Anselmo suggested to his father that they blend in some of the deep-coloured local Teroldego grape. His father called him a *cretino*, which was surely a good call because the style of San Leonardo is just right for today's vogue for lightness, refreshment and

relatively low alcohol.

The San Leonardo website suggests an almost feudal set-up. The major domo Luigino Tinelli was born on the estate. But they have known some tough times. When Anselmo joined the business it was saddled with debt — so much so that there was no question of replacing the Carmenère with the more conventional Cabernet Franc and “there were barrels in every room”. Anselmo worried that the banks might repossess the estate.

Today, the wine has slowly and steadily earned global respect and an average bottle price of over £50. Last December, identifying London as “the place where classic wines are understood and appreciated”, father and son came over to show off 15 of their favourite vintages to media and trade. Carlo said it was the most moving experience of his life.

Where to buy San Leonardo

The US importer is Vias Imports of New York and, according to [winesearcher.com](#), a wide range of vintages is available from retailers at a regular price of about \$70 a bottle but many a deal is currently advertised.

Classic Drinks of Little Island, Co Cork imports the wine into Ireland.

UK importers are FortyFive10 of London SW18 and Inverarity Morton of Glasgow. The wine is offered by the case by several fine wine traders but can also be bought by the single bottle.

2011

- £43.95 Master of Malt, East Sussex; £59.99 Huntsworth Wine, London W8; £61.80 Hedonism, London W1

2010

- £54 Huntsworth Wine, London W8

2007

- £67.20 LadyWine at Satyrio, London EC3

2006

- £79.20 LadyWine at Satyrio, London EC3

2005

- £87.60 LadyWine at Satyrio, London EC3

2003

- £54.95 South Downs Cellars, West Sussex

1999

- £74.80 Hedonism, London W1

Vintages from 1988 are still going strong. Youngest vintage already beginning to drink well is 2011. Favourite vintages for current drinking 1996 and 1999.

International stockists from [winesearcher.com](#). Tasting notes on Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](#)

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