

Wine Future Rioja 2009

by Rebecca Gibb

One of the wine industry's events of the year, Wine Future Rioja was keenly anticipated, with big hitters including Robert Parker, Jancis Robinson MW, and young gun Gary Vaynerchuk starring in the line-up. Despite the questionable absence of speakers from the southern hemisphere, representatives from all corners of the globe made the trip to Logroño in Rioja to attend the two-day conference on November 12–13. Inevitably, some of the high-powered speakers did not live up to expectations, and the cost of the €783 ticket had some attendees wondering whether that money might not have been better spent elsewhere.

But that's a story for another day. There was certainly plenty of food for thought, with discussions ranging from the need (or not) for vintage-dated wines to the demise of the 750ml glass bottle. The specialist area of wine investment also fell under the spotlight, as did the advent of social media such as Facebook and Twitter and the concomitant rise in consumer power, which will affect the whole wine world.

Romantic talk

For fine-wine lovers, knowing the difference between the 1999 and 2000 Bordeaux vintages is as important as remembering your own wedding anniversary. In the film *Sideways*, the female lead, Maya, says, "I like to think about what was going on the year the grapes were growing; how the sun was shining; if it rained. I like to think about all the people who tended and picked the grapes." While this kind of romantic talk is all very well, many consumers are confused by vintages. UK-based wine writer Robert Joseph challenged producers, "How can you get away with being so inconsistent, making

different vintages?" Indeed, as Joseph went on to point out, most drinkers don't understand why that bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape doesn't actually taste as good as the last one. They have come to expect consistency from their everyday purchases, and wine doesn't provide that. As Joseph reminded his audience, "There is quite a successful region—Champagne—that does well without vintages."

Speculation a dirty word

After Parker hosted a Grenache tasting at the end of day one—with a 1945 Marques de Riscal Rioja and an 18.5% ABV Australian blockbuster in the line-up—he joined Robinson and Paul Pontallier of Château Margaux in the closing seminar. The issue of wine speculation inevitably reared its head. Parker, the man who could be accused of fuelling the en primeur fire, said, "I do wish that the word speculation would be banned from use in association with the word wine. To believe that you are producing a wine for speculators, or that it is going to increase in value, is wrong [...] Even though my scores are used for the worst possible scenarios, speculation for me is a dirty word."

All rued the fact that many people buy wine solely for investment. Margaux has done very nicely from speculation, but Pontallier defended its position. "Speculation has affected the market in terms of price, but has not affected the quality, and perhaps even pushed up the quality. But I honestly don't think that anyone in Bordeaux makes wine for the speculators. We make it for the wine lovers who will open the bottle and enjoy it," he insisted.

Twitter ye not

The theme that dominated Wine Future was the rise of social media and consumer empowerment. The larger-than-life host of US website Wine Library TV, Gary Vaynerchuk, set the conference alight with his rousing, unscripted speech, claiming he wanted to change the culture of wine in the USA. "Consumers don't

trust themselves when it comes to wine, but there's no Hot Dog Spectator. People think they need to know something about wine."

Vaynerchuk also told producers they must get on Twitter and Facebook if they wanted to get ahead of the competition, allowing them to tell the story behind the wines to the people who are drinking them. This new—and free—marketing tool will soon replace more traditional methods of selling wine, he predicted.

The Internet has also made consumers more knowledgeable and provided greater price transparency. People can now look for the best deal on price comparison sites such as wine-searcher.com, so that mark-ups by local merchants are under closer scrutiny than ever before.

Goodbye 750?

The future of the 750ml glass bottle was also questioned during the conference. In Sweden, only one third of wine is sold in a glass bottles, the rest in bag-in-box or tetrapak, Ulf Sjodin MW revealed. You may turn your nose up at bag-in-box, but negative perceptions can be changed. Screwcaps weren't acceptable in the British market just ten years ago. At the moment, bag-in-box and plastic PET bottles are used for lower-end wines but, as technology improves, it is not inconceivable that your favorite Chablis will be available in a plastic bottle or bag-in-box. In the meantime, premium wines from Chile and Argentina will move away from those super-heavy bottles that give your arm a workout every time you pour a glass.

The conference also addressed the rise of emerging markets, the current economic crisis, climate change, and more. Some of the predictions seemed more plausible than others, and no one can predict what will happen in what is an uncertain wine future. But despite Parker's denunciation of "dirty" speculation, expect to see fine-wine prices rising, as well as more Twitter tastings and a non-vintage cru classé in a bag-in-box.