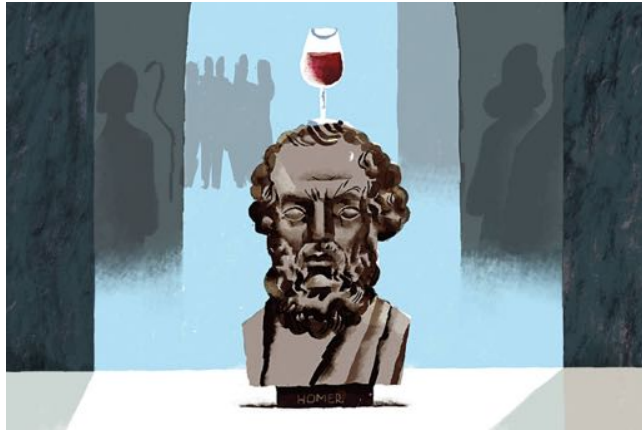


SHARE

FOOD & DRINK | ON WINE

What Makes a Wine a Classic?

Our wine columnist makes a case for the canon and shares her list of wines that define what ‘classic’ means to her



BIG IDEAL For some oenophiles, ‘classic’ is high praise when applied to a wine. For others, the term has negative connotations. **PHOTO:** SERGIY MAIDUKOV



By

Lettie Teague

Jan. 30, 2020 1:09 pm ET

MOST BOOKSTORES have a section marked “classic literature” and another, much larger one where the “fiction” is shelved. What’s the difference? A classic work of literature is an accepted archetype of the genre, a book that has withstood the test of time and taste, while fiction is... everything else. I’d define a classic wine in much the same way: an archetype and an ideal. But I recently discovered that to some wine drinkers, classic means something quite different.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

When it comes to wine, what does ‘classic’ mean to you? Join the conversation below.

This insight arrived a few weeks ago, in a sales catalog from wine importer Terry Theise. His writings, it should be noted, are far from standard sales prose—more like wine books for advanced oenophiles who appreciate inside knowledge delivered with a bit of attitude. In this instance, Mr. Theise describes tasting the “delicious... interesting and distinctive” wines of La

Garagista winery, where Deirdre Heekin makes highly regarded wines from little known grapes grown on the farm she owns with her husband, Caleb Barber, in Barnard, Vt. Mr. Theise considers her wines worthy of the term “classic.” Yet, he writes, when he described them to her as such, he saw “a horizontal flicker of dismay” cross her face.

“‘Classic’ has become so debased in the modern parlance; we think it means ‘boring mainstream wines,’” Mr. Theise writes, “but when I use it I mean wine that tastes like wine *should* taste.”

I decided to poll a few wine drinkers, both professional and amateur, to see what connotations “classic” had for them. According to Jason Jacobeit, wine director of Bâtard restaurant in Manhattan, “In certain circles, ‘classic’ is interchangeable with stodgy.”

‘Knowing what you’re getting is the essence of a classic—predictability in the very best sense of the word.’

I shared this response with my friend Steve while we were drinking Chablis. He noted a hint of un-hipness in the word “classic.” “Like ‘classic rock,’” he observed. “Music for people of a certain age. You know what you are going to get.”

But knowing what you’re getting is the essence of a classic, I replied—predictability in the very best sense of the word. Take, for example, the 2018 Patrick Piuze Chablis Terroir de Chablis we were drinking. Every one of Mr. Piuze’s wines fits my idea of a classic Chablis: crisp and slightly austere with a certain kind of flinty minerality specific to Chardonnay grown in the chalky soils of this cool sub-region of Burgundy. His wines offer the taste of a place, without the interference of new oak; like most great Chablis, they’re aged in used oak or stainless steel for a cleaner result. His Chablis is a model for any Chablis maker, just as Chablis itself is a lodestar for winemakers all over the world producing vibrant, un-oaked Chardonnays.

“A wine is classic if you can say the name and it immediately conjures an image of the wine,” opined my friend Richard, with whom I shared a bottle of 2015 Elio Grasso Gavarini Chiniera Barolo. Admittedly, we consumed it far too young: A classic Barolo like this one is characterized by tenacious youthful tannins that will soften with age, as well as exuberant fruit and a litheness not unlike that of Pinot Noir.

The kind of predictability I love most might be best exemplified by a non-vintage Champagne from a top house or grower. Produced with grapes from several harvests, a non-vintage Champagne is blended to taste exactly the same year after year, consistently expressing the maker’s signature style as opposed to the vagaries of any particular year. The non-vintage Champagne is the calling card of the house.

Champagne is the ideal that sparkling-wine producers outside the French region invoke to denote the gravitas of their own efforts. Producers of serious Cava or Prosecco or even sparkling wine from Sonoma, Calif., have adopted the Champagne production technique, wherein the wine is twice

fermented in bottle and aged on its lees for years. They might also use the classic Champagne varieties, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. In terms of style, the objectives are elegance and refinement. These are the hallmarks of the non-vintage Brut Réserve from the venerable Champagne house Pol Roger, an undisputed classic and one of my favorites.

Other wines I'd readily deem classics include the Napa Cabernets made by Cathy Corison —beautifully balanced wines that only improve over time— and the Rieslings from great producers in Germany's Saar region such as Egon Müller and his equally gifted peer Peter Lauer (whose wines are less stratospherically priced). These are wines of such particularity and distinction they inspire winemakers around the world.

The transcendent aspect of the classic wines I've cited depends as much on the producer as the place. The people who make them are “the best in their neighborhood” according to Matt Tunstall, co-owner of Stems & Skins, a natural wine bar in North Charleston, S.C. “Tasting, understanding and qualifying classic wines is the base of wine education in my opinion,” Mr. Tunstall wrote in an email. “That is how one can grab ahold of what wines from that particular region should taste like and the characteristics of varietals done in their native area.”

So why would Ms. Heekin oppose the use of the word classic to describe her wines? I called her at home in Vermont for a chat. When I read Mr. Theise's account of the “flicker of dismay” this epithet had elicited, Ms. Heekin laughed. She recalled the exchange, but that was a few years ago. “Maybe at the time I felt that way—that ‘classic’ represented something staid,” she said. “From where I sit now, my desire is to make classical wines.”

OENOFILE / FIVE WINES THAT ARE THE SIPPABLE EQUIVALENTS OF ENDURING LITERATURE



1. Pol Roger Non Vintage Brut Réserve Champagne; 2. 2018 Patrick Piuze Chablis Terroir de Chablis; 3. 2018 Lauer Ayler Kupp Riesling Senior Fass 6; 4. 2016 Corison Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon; 5. 2015 Elio Grasso Gavarini Chiniera Barolo. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Pol Roger Non Vintage Brut Réserve Champagne \$40

Esteemed family-owned Champagne house Pol Roger was, famously,

Winston Churchill's favorite. The Brut Réserve non vintage is a reliably elegant, rather creamy blend of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier.

2018 Patrick Piuze Chablis Terroir de Chablis \$28

Though not a Chablis native, Patrick Piuze has made truly classic wines there for decades. Produced from parcels near top premier-cru sites, the Terroir de Chablis, one of his entry-level wines, is dry, bracingly mineral and tangy.

2018 Lauer Ayler Kupp Riesling Senior Fass 6 \$26

Winemaker Florian Lauer, of the esteemed Peter Lauer winery in the Saar district of Germany, nods to his grandfather with the pure, slightly off dry and beautifully aromatic Senior Riesling. (Fass means cask).

2016 Corison Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon \$95

Cathy Corison has quietly built one of the best track records for producing top Napa Cabernet over several decades. This subtle, polished and notably low-alcohol (13%) Cabernet is a shining star in the Napa firmament.

2015 Elio Grasso Gavarini Chiniera Barolo \$75

From the prestigious Monforte d'Alba district of Italy's Piedmont, this wine reveals the aromatic beauty of the Nebbiolo grape as well as its structured, tannic side. Decant before drinking or hold for a decade or more

Email Lettie at wine@wsj.com

The Wall Street Journal is not compensated by retailers listed in its articles as outlets for products. Listed retailers frequently are not the sole retail outlets.

MORE IN FOOD & DRINK

- • Online Wine Auctions: A Beginner's Guide January 17, 2020
- • How Tariffs Could Devastate the Wine World January 8, 2020
- • When Worlds Collide: A Shifting Wine Map January 2, 2020
- • In a Few Remarkable Bottles, A Winemaker Lives On December 18, 2019
- • Our Wine Pro's Holiday-Gift Game Plan December 12, 2019

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.