

# Jancis Robinson



'A strong wind of change has blown through the winelands of South Africa, Chile and Australia – so how are these new wines faring in the US?'

## Welcome to the USA

Independence day weekend seems as good a time as any to examine one aspect of American independence of thought – about a certain class of wines in this case. In late 2013, on a visit to New York, I was shocked to be told by a fellow wine writer that southern hemisphere wines were out of fashion. What? All of South America? South Africa? Australia and New Zealand?

I have been trying to establish whether things have changed since then. Because there has been such a strong wind of change blowing through the winelands of South Africa, Chile and Australia, I was particularly concerned about how these new wines were faring in the US.

The dominant US importer of new wave Cape wines, Bartholomew Broadbent (son of Michael, the man responsible in the 1960s for re-establishing wine auctions in London), is bullish about American demand for South African wines. He describes them as "the most exciting and newsworthy part of our portfolio. People like Adi Badenhorst and Eben Sadie have hit the market at exactly the right time." To illustrate his point, Broadbent noted that his distributor in New York, Martin Scott Wines, used to have a dress code for its sales staff – "it was always jacket and tie". About a year and a half ago, this quarter-century-old wine distributor "decided that the sales people were forbidden from wearing coat and ties. The reason: the profile of the wine buyers and most influential voices has changed. Today, hipsters are the wine buyers and they don't give the time of day to a stuffy suit."

He adds that "Adi and Eben are the greatest and most natural hipsters in the wine business... highly intelligent, totally irreverent and truly among the best winemakers in the world right now. [They're] lovers of the quirky and low-alcohol wines that are all the rage in the USA today." This combination, he notes, "makes them and their wines highly desirable in today's US wine market, especially appealing to the young somm[elier] community who speak the same language, smoke the same weed and think along the same lines."

Who would have thought that smoking habits would be so important to wine sales? Broadbent represents just one Chilean producer and reckons Chile is a tougher sell. Overtaken by



### SOME RECOMMENDED UNDERDOGS

I could recommend hundreds of exciting new wave wines from South Africa, Chile and Australia and, indeed, have done on JancisRobinson.com but here are a few favourite new wave producers. And, of course, there are hundreds of admirable established ones too.

#### SOUTH AFRICA

- Alheit
- AA Badenhorst
- Blackwater
- Crystallum
- David
- Memento
- Mullineux
- Rall
- Sadie Family Wines
- Savage
- Thorne & Daughters

#### CHILE

- Antiyal
- Calyptra
- Clos des Fous
- De Martino
- Garcia y Schwaderer
- Gillmore
- Koyle

#### AUSTRALIA

- William Downie
- Jamsheed
- Luke Lambert
- Ochota Barrels
- Teusner
- Ullthorne

the popularity of Argentine Malbec, which has been seen as a cheaper alternative to the hefty and polished Napa Valley Cabernet, Chile has come to be associated by American wine drinkers with a handful of big companies that can offer value but not much to titillate discerning drinkers.

Agustin Huneeus is ideally placed to comment on the fortunes of Chilean wine in the US.

A Chilean who once ran the country's biggest wine company Concha y Toro, he now has extensive holdings in high quality California wine and is based in San Francisco. He explains that the big Chilean companies naturally sought big distributors in the US, which has had the result of corralling Chilean wine strictly in retail rather than on restaurant wine lists.

Vine Connections is a small company based in Sausalito in California's Bay Area that has been trying to break out of this limitation. It began with Argentine wine in 1999 "when Americans were hard-pressed to find Argentina on a map and Malbec was basically unknown", according to partner Ed Lehman. Soon afterwards, he and his colleagues introduced top quality Japanese sake to the US market. "In 2001, Japanese sake was known only as cheap, hot, US-produced liquid served in sake bombs that resulted in more than a few hangovers. We have successfully shown that both places deserve broad recognition as producers of excellent beverages."

But, more recently, the masochists at Vine Connections have added a third string to their bow. "We started with Chile in 2013 and felt that it lay in between Argentina's and Japan's challenges. Many people have the idea that Chilean wine is just one thing [cheap and cheerful], because the artisan, estate, family wine industry is fairly new, and many regions in Chile weren't even producing wine 15 years ago." He adds there was little knowledge of specific soil types and micro climates, "something people like [soil scientist] Pedro Parra are fixing, and quickly. So Chile has the challenge of being misunderstood [like sake] and the challenge of being new [as Argentina was]."

"Chile will succeed in the US with commitment, perseverance and education, three things that Vine Connections and our Chilean wineries have in spades. At the end of the day, Americans love newcomers and underdogs."

Australia's new, lighter wines have the same problem, compounded by the fact that Australia, ▶

Illustration Ingram Pinn