

## The New Wine Philosophy During Lockdown



If you've turned to the bottle to endure the tedium of being homebound, no one is judging. But this is not the time to skimp on quality.

There's a cardboard crate of wine sitting near my desk that feels, in the context of our Covid-19-fixated world, like a relic from a bygone era. "Don't get off the couch," it urges in a large, friendly voice. "It's wine o'clock." It seems to harken back to a time when a spell on the couch with a glass sounded like a tempting indulgence, rather than the only option after yet another set of plans got Covid-cancelled. Indeed, who among us has not logged more couch time than we ever thought possible? In this work-from-home, learn-from-home, play-from-home era, it's certainly understandable to seek a little escapism through wine, which, with its inextricable link to its place of origin, can transport us to remote places and eras, at least in our minds.

However, there's a fine line between an escape hatch and a black hole. I'm often reminded of a joke from the beloved series *Modern Family* when the frazzled mother, Claire Dunphy, reminisces fondly about trips to "wine country", which, it emerges, is code for lying on the trampoline drinking chardonnay. These days, we're all like Claire, and it doesn't always feel particularly funny.

The sneaky problem is that the pandemic has changed the complexion of enjoying responsibly. Overindulgence is easy without the sticker shock of restaurant mark-ups, no friends to judge you or even the need to remain sober enough to drive home. Virtual cocktail hours across different time zones have eroded our sense of what is an appropriate hour for a drink and, with the boom in e-commerce, wine can be summoned home with less effort than ever before.

You might think the industry would be delighted by these developments, but many of us are a bit disturbed by the nature of this consumption boom. The sad truth is that the wine world has seen the rich get richer and the marginalised fade further into the margins: wines with established brand identities and acknowledged appeal have flourished, while small producers from lesser-known regions with lesser-known varieties have been decimated.

*Many prominent wine industry voices have come out in support of the motto "less but better."*

The movement was under way pre-pandemic, but has since become more urgent. I would add it's well overdue from environmental, health and economic sustainability standpoints as well. Really good wine is not cheap to produce and we should be thinking twice before shipping anything less than that around the planet in heavy glass bottles.

To be clear, I am not suggesting everyone drink Domaine de la Romanée-Conti every night or that consumption should be an exclusively elitist pursuit. This is not about choosing wines that are arbitrarily more expensive for packaging or marketing reasons, but wines made with a greater degree of care. In fact, my recommendations in this pursuit include not only some moderately high-end bottles, but also many that are as accessibly priced as those you might find in any grocery store (just not as good as these). The hope is that the carrot of a more fulfilling, even transporting experience combined with the stick of a higher price will encourage us to treat wine as one of life's little moments of grace: a means to connect with the world around us rather than blur it out. So, if you'd like to support businesses that make

wine with a higher purpose, here are some ideas:

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**Better Basic: Hamilton Russell Pinot Noir 2018**

Virtually every wine-producing country with any ambition seems intent on crafting pinots in a “Burgundian” style, but few have the confidence to go their own way. Hamilton Russell’s delights with a sleek outer coating of fresh strawberries and pomegranate seeds, all glistening with acid, and a firm pine and cedarwood core.

**Branching Out: Passopisciaro Contrada R 2011**

Much as I bristle at all the chatter about Etna as the “Burgundy of Italy”—why can’t it just be the Etna of Italy?—I’ll happily recommend Etna to Burgundy lovers because they too appreciate subtle differences between sites and translucent, palate glazing reds.

This decade-old, single-contrada bottling smells the way you imagine lava might—broodingly smoky, bubbling with life force—and continues with an ethereal, fragrant bath of herbs, dried berries and wilted flowers.

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