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I've Written This Wine Column for 15 Years. What's Changed—And What Hasn't

In 2010, the U.S. had just become the world's top wine-consuming nation. A recession and a global wine glut had left us reeling, but still thirsty. On the 15th anniversary of her On Wine column, Lettie Teague looks back.



By [Lettie Teague](#) [Follow](#)

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Fifteen years ago this month, I became this paper's wine columnist. A few hundred "On Wine" columns later, there's still much to report. But on this quinquennial anniversary, I decided to look back at a few of those early columns, and what was happening in the wine world.

In 2010, winemakers were still recovering from the effects of a recession and a subsequent wine glut that left vintners all over the world awash in unsold wine. The U.S. became the world's leading wine-consuming nation, overtaking former leader France, and Sauvignon Blanc was (already) ubiquitous. Another constant between then and now? The wines that impressed me the most 15 years ago continue to impress me today.

Gaming the Glut

One of my [early columns](#) profiled Cameron Hughes, a California-based négociant who built a hugely successful brand thanks to the aforementioned wine glut. I first heard about Hughes at a dinner party of Chicago collectors in late 2009; a few months later I arranged a lunch with him in New York and purchased a case of his wines. Hughes was taking \$100 bottles of first-rate Cabernet that had gone begging thanks to the glut and selling them for a fraction of their original price, under his own labels. For example, the 2007 Cameron Hughes Lot 164 Rutherford Hills Cabernet Sauvignon sold for \$22. These were remarkable wines for the price and quickly sold out.

By 2015, the glut was over and the company was in receivership. (It was later acquired by Vintage Wine Estates.) But Hughes has since founded a mail-order steak company, Holy Grail Steak, and is now launching the Négociant Wine Company, featuring wines ranging from \$10 to \$15 a bottle that will be available soon.

Some Strong Feelings

High-alcohol wines were much debated among wine professionals 15 years ago, when I [interviewed Rajat Parr](#), then wine director of the San Francisco-based Michael Mina restaurant group. "I won't taste wines over 14% alcohol, because I want a balanced wine and I think 14% is the threshold," Mr. Parr said of the policy at one of his restaurants, RN74. A year later, he and winemaker Jasmine Hirsch of Hirsch Vineyards co-founded In Pursuit of Balance (IPOB), a group of a few dozen wine professionals aiming to promote more balanced wines, with a focus on Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Parr has since become a winemaker, producing under various labels from his home in Cambria, Calif. And while IPOB disbanded in 2016, it did presage a

growing demand for balanced, lower-alcohol alternatives. Journal readers have confirmed that demand in messages to me, and I've obliged with [several columns](#) offering recommendations.

When I contacted Hirsch recently, she connected the organization's focus to the growing appreciation of natural wines. (They tend to be lower in alcohol.)

“People want to feel that the wines they're drinking are unforced, authentic and true expressions of nature,” she said.



A Whole New Fizz

As natural wines have become much more popular, so have some once-forgotten wines—like Lambrusco. When I wrote about this [fizzy red from Emilia-Romagna, Italy, in 2010](#), it was scarce on store shelves and still largely synonymous with one example: Riunite.

Notable less for its taste than its great tagline—“Riunite on ice, that's nice!”—this wine left drinkers with the impression that all Lambruscos are sweet and cheap. Fast forward 15 years and quality dry Lambruscos are ubiquitous on hip restaurant wine lists and easy to find on store shelves. The prices have remained reasonable, too. You can still find a really good dry Lambrusco for less than \$20 a bottle.

Back to the Future(s)

When I wrote about [Beaujolais in 2010](#), the jolly French reds were so fervently sought after that one prominent wine merchant even said he was considering selling Beaujolais “futures”—wines sold in advance of their actual arrival in stores, a practice normally reserved for collectible wines like Bordeaux. The 2009 Beaujolais vintage was just that good and hugely hyped by critics and merchants alike.

I haven't heard that kind of talk about Beaujolais since, despite plenty more good vintages. As with Lambrusco, prices for Beaujolais have remained reasonable. As I found in my [June 2023 column on the Beaujolais cru Fleurie](#), the wines are stone-cold bargains compared to their stratospherically priced counterparts from Burgundy.

Bubbly and Blanc

[Prosecco](#) and [Sauvignon Blanc](#), both covered in those early columns, have maintained their most-favored standing among wine drinkers. Happily, most of the producers who were making notable wines back then still do so today.

In 2010, my favorite Proseccos included Nino Franco Rustico Prosecco Valdobbiadene and Mionetto Prosecco di Valdobbiadene. I'd stand by them today and add a few Prosecco rosés—La Gioiosa, Bisol 542 Jeio Brut and Natale Verga—I featured in an [April 2021 column](#).

The Sauvignon Blancs I tasted in 2010 were produced all over the world, from California to France, South Africa and New Zealand. Some producers I recommended—notably Cloudy Bay in New Zealand and Lucien Crochet in Sancerre, France—still offer solid examples of the grape. Another favorite in 2010, the terrific Tiefenbrunner Kirchleiten Sauvignon Blanc from Alto Adige, is no longer produced, but Alto Adige yields lots of other great whites, as I noted [last April](#). And Australia has since become an excellent Sauvignon Blanc source.

Happily Ever After

Perhaps my [favorite column from 2010](#) was one devoted to the selection of good wedding wines—a topic as evergreen as weddings themselves. I'd toured a few potential wedding sites with then-newly-engaged friends Lauren and Ben, and

after tasting the terrible wines those venues proposed, I offered to find some better options.

To that end I bought a number of bottles of reasonably priced sparkling, white and red wines. (No one wants to spend more on wine for their wedding than they do on flowers, alas.) Some ultimately made the cut for the wedding, which I attended. I'd still recommend the winners for a wedding today. The Roederer Estate Brut non-vintage sparkling wine from Anderson Valley, Calif., tastes like Champagne but costs half as much; two whites, the Inama Soave Classico, and Schloss Gobelsburg Gruner Veltiner, remain excellent bargains as well. As for Lauren and Ben? I'm pleased to report they're still happily married.

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