I’ve covered wine for 50 years. Here are 50 ways it changed

Over five decades, Jancis Robinson has seen her supposedly sleepy, tradition-obsessed world transformed

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It seems incredible now but when I started writing about wine, on December 1 1975, the best-selling wine in Britain, and important enough in the US to warrant major advertising campaigns, was a sweet sherry: Harveys Bristol Cream. It sold 12mn bottles a year and was unavoidable. It was a stablemate of Babycham (marketed as “the champagne perry”) when I was taken on as assistant editor of a now-defunct wine trade magazine, Wine & Spirit, a job that I might not have been given had the publisher asked whether I could type.

Champagne’s lawyers were yet to unsuccessfully sue Babycham for abuse of the name they have so assiduously protected since. And the sherry capital, Jerez de la Frontera in Andalusia, was where I was most often sent in my quest for wine trade “news” (a loose term). I got used to seeing various luminaries of the wine trade pop up in the pool of the Hotel Jerez.

A 1970s advert for Babycham, a sparkling perry popular in the 1960s and 70s © Alamy

Sherry exports reached a peak in 1979 — despite competition from Cyprus, South Africa and Australia, all of which blithely sold a wine called sherry in that less regulated era. Then the quality of genuine Spanish sherry suffered, not least because of the dangerously rapid expansion of a company called Rumasa, the indirect result of an exclusive supply deal done by Harveys in 1964. (Rumasa notoriously bought three banks in one day.) Most unfortunately, sherry today has become a niche wine beloved, like Alsace wine and Riesling, by professionals but spurned by the mass market.

Back in 1975, we wine writers were helped considerably by an innovative new wine book. Before it, few wine books were aimed at the general public, other than the odd encyclopedia of wine and reminiscences of particular bottles consumed by well-heeled gentlemen amateurs. They had titles such as Stay Me With Flagons and Wayward Tendrils of the Vine. But Hugh Johnson's The World Atlas of Wine, first published in 1971, actually showed for the first time the geography that created each of the world's wines. Wine is, after all, geography in a bottle — and one of the few things we buy that signal clearly the exact spot on the globe responsible for them.

Seventy-four pages were devoted to France, 24 to Germany, and 14 to all of Italy, which was bundled with the likes of "Jugoslavia" and "Cyprus and Malta" under the heading "Southern and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean". As for "The New World", South America was allotted a total of two pages, New Zealand seven words.

Jancis Robinson in her early days as a wine writer in the 1970s © UC Davis Library, Archives and Special Collections

Decades on, we're about to launch the ninth edition of The World Atlas of Wine, the fifth for which I've been an author. Doubtless future generations, commenting on a future edition available in some as-yet-undreamt-of medium, will scoff at the fact that in 2026 we allotted only two pages to the wines of Scandinavia and the Baltics.

Forget for a moment the claims of terroir and tradition: the pace of change over this period has been electric. Here are 50 developments that I have observed in my 50 years covering the supposedly sleepy world of wine.

Grape expectations

Consider where we buy wine these days. Fifty years ago, wine was largely sold by rather terrifying specialist merchants, presumed wine experts, in whose shops customers were required to pronounce the (foreign) names of what they were after. No wonder the Brits have shown they much prefer buying wine in the supermarkets that got in on the act in the late 1970s — and now account for the lion's share of UK retail wine sales.

It is not the same everywhere, of course. In the US, the distribution of alcoholic drink, including the finest wine, is quite extraordinarily convoluted. A hangover from Prohibition a century ago, and perpetuated by powerful vested interests, is the punitive three-tier system whereby wine has to pass through three different hoops, each of them a tax-collection point: a producer or importer, a distributor or wholesaler, and finally the retailer.

No wonder DTC, standing for “direct-to-consumer”, has become wine producers’ favourite acronym, first in the US but increasingly elsewhere. More than half of all American wineries’ revenues now come either via “wine clubs” (ordered direct from the producer) or in the tasting rooms that have mushroomed in the US. One of the challenges of mapping producers is that producers’ own retail outlets (called “cellar doors” in Australia), the places that welcome visitors, are often so distant from the wineries themselves. In Santa Barbara County in southern California, for instance, tasting rooms have to be corralled into specific zones. The tiny town of Los Olivos (population 1,202) has about 50.

The sort of wine tourism portrayed in the popular 2004 movie Sideways (which inspired a massive increase in plantings of Pinot Noir at the expense of Merlot) would have been unthinkable when I started out. Back then, a very much smaller proportion of wine drinkers even knew the names of wine grapes.

An American writer and wine consultant who did much to develop the US market for fine burgundy, Frank Schoonmaker, is credited with introducing American wine producers to varietal labelling, putting the name of the dominant grape on the label rather than borrowing European terms such as Chablis and Burgundy, which had little to do with the contents of the bottle. The practice became increasingly widespread as the 1970s wore on — although to the French, raised on the primacy of their minutely controlled geographical appellations, such wines, vins de cépage, were, and still are, seen as decidedly infra dig.

Until varietally labelled wines established themselves in anglophone countries, the cheaper end of the wine market was dominated by brands. I have particularly fond memories of Hirondelle Rosé at 59p a litre; other Brits will remember, with more or less affection, Lutomer Riesling (a sweetish Slovenian white imported in bulk to London docks) and Bull’s Blood from Hungary. In the US Gallo Hearty Burgundy (sic) was one of the best-selling reds. Mateus Rosé and Blue Nun Liebfraumilch were hugely popular on both sides of the Atlantic. A new pretender arrived in the 1970s in the form of the hugely successful Le Piat d’Or, which we were told (quite wrongly) that the French adored.

The first grape varieties to really take off were Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. This was largely because at the time white burgundy and red bordeaux were seen as the pinnacles of wine aspiration by producers, all of whom wanted to make a fair copy of them — wherever they were and however unsuitable their natural conditions. (In fact Merlot was and is more widely planted in Bordeaux than Cabernet but the latter is the dominant grape in the famous Médoc first growths — and Brits loved the value offered by a Bulgarian version for a while.)

But in the 1970s and much of the 1980s, white wine was much more popular than red, so Chardonnay plants were massively sought after. Such was the shortage of genuine Chardonnay that wines so labelled were routinely bulked out by more widely planted, cheaper grapes such as Colombard and Chenin Blanc in both California and Australia (which in 1980 had only about 30 hectares of Chardonnay, as opposed to more than 21,000 today).

What followed in the American market, shadowed to a lesser extent in the UK, was a surge in popularity of Lambrusco, the lightly sparkling red of Emilia-Romagna in central Italy. Italians knew it as a dry wine but for the US market it was sweetened up and advertised mercilessly, to such an extent that its 1985 annual sales total of 138mn bottles has yet to be matched.

Thanks to the success of the leading brand of Lambrusco, Riunite, its US importers, the Mariani family's Banfi Vintners, were able to develop 700 hectares of vineyards in what would become one of the most prized wine regions of Italy, Montalcino. Eventually Lambrusco would come in all three colours and a wide range of levels of sweetness and sparkle. Top-quality red Lambrusco has recently enjoyed a limited comeback.

After Lambrusco came Beaujolais Nouveau — especially in the UK (today, strangely, it is most popular with the Japanese). The dominant producer, the late Georges Duboeuf, was largely to blame. I say blame mainly because the poor quality of this high-speed fermentation of local Gamay grapes did much to harm the reputation of more serious wines from this bucolic region north of Lyon. And the Beaujolais Nouveau race, made much of by the newspaper I then wrote for, The Sunday Times, could be pretty dangerous. Few of those racing the first bottles of the new vintage back to London wine bars every November were completely sober when they took the wheel.

Meanwhile, the fine wine market was evolving rapidly. Christie's had established a specialist wine department in London in 1966, swiftly followed by Sotheby's, and between them they encouraged the establishment of a veritable underbelly of new fine wine traders in and around London, mirroring the somewhat incestuous worlds of antique and art dealers. The auctions and traders in turn spawned a sharp rise in demand for wine storage facilities, with many an underground wartime space repurposed and filled with wooden cases of wine owned by wine collectors around the globe.

The most notorious wine auction was in 1985, when a bottle of Château Lafite 1787, supposedly ordered by Thomas Jefferson and engraved with his initials, was acquired for the American publisher Malcolm Forbes in a Christie's auction for the record sum of £105,000. Having been displayed upright under warm lights, it came to a sorry end when the cork shrivelled and fell into what rapidly became vinegar.

Furthermore, these Jefferson bottles were later proved to be the work of Hardy Rodenstock, one of the most famous of a new sort of counterfeiter attracted by the dramatic increase in fine wine prices. Much to the ire of another American billionaire collector, Bill Koch, the German Rodenstock refused to stand trial in the US. His technique of gaining the confidence of collectors by exceptional connoisseurship was mirrored by the next high-profile wine forger, Rudy Kurniawan, who spent seven years in a Texas penitentiary as a result, and has recently been demonstrating his skills as a copyist at events in Singapore.

While Rodenstock and Kurniawan's victims were too well off to elicit much sympathy, a wave of investment scams was aimed at anyone with a little spare cash and, preferably, little knowledge of fine wine. The beauty of the scam was that the wine the victims supposedly bought was held in storage, and never seen by the "investor", who was expected to sit on it for years as it matured — probably until the perpetrators had moved on from the accommodation address listed on their deliberately hyperbolic websites.

Going global

The late 20th century was dominated by an obsession with New and Old Worlds of wine. The former being supposedly all about technology, technique and a reliable climate, while the latter was a bastion of terroir, tradition and variable vintages.

California proved it could make fine wine, and not just in the famous Judgment of Paris taste-off 50 years ago — when much to the surprise of the organiser, the late Steven Spurrier, the US state “won” in a contest with France. A weak dollar helped California make an impact in Europe around 1980 when Orson Welles appeared on television assuring us that Paul Masson “will sell no wine before its time”.

This tide of wine from the West Coast was followed by a massive influx from Australia, which at the start of the new century not only adopted screwcaps en masse because of exasperation at the poor quality of natural corks sent Down Under, but also overtook France to become the most important source of wine in the UK. Ripe, oaky Australian Chardonnay was massively popular with Brits, helped by Bridget Jones’s enthusiasm for it, whereas Americans subsequently, but all too briefly, fell for Australian Shiraz.

This was when big, bold reds were all the rage, a long-gone phenomenon fuelled by the American wine critic Robert M Parker Jr, whose preferences were interpreted in that direction. In the 1990s and 2000s he wielded more power than any wine critic before or since — in fact I think he coined the phrase wine critic (those who preceded him were more likely to regard themselves as wine writers). He introduced wine scores out of 100, a notion derided by some but latched on to by wine merchants as sales aids, with many virtually abandoning making their own wine selections in favour of slavishly following Parker’s taste.

Numbers also had the useful virtue of being comprehensible in any language. Parker scores certainly helped fuel the Chinese wine boom. A catalyst was Hong Kong’s canny reduction of wine duty to zero in 2008, announced by the wine-loving then financial secretary Henry Tang. British fine wine merchants flocked there; the Chinese bought there. Until President Xi Jinping’s crackdown, fancily packaged or highly scored wine was the “gift” of choice in Chinese business, and a whole new class of Chinese drinkers were eager to buy Bordeaux’s best (red of course) and, in many cases, even invest their money in wine estates there.

It was substantially Chinese interest in the 2009 and 2010 Bordeaux vintages that sent prices sky-high. It would take years before market prices reached the inflated levels of futures in those vintages offered en primeur many months before the wines were even bottled, a cheeky commercial ploy whose death is regularly forecast.

Getting local

These are all trends in buying and selling wine, but what about making it? Globalisation was portrayed as demonic in the 2004 film Mondovino (one of many to focus on wine then, including the SOMM documentary series about competitive wine waiters) but it has had a beneficial effect on wine quality. In the late 1980s and 1990s highly trained Australian flying winemakers swept through underachieving European cellars, often co-operatives, instilling hygiene and technical knowhow helped by the fact that the grape harvests in each hemisphere are about six months apart.

On the other hand, today there are few young vignerons in classic European wine regions who have not worked elsewhere, often in multiple locations and both hemispheres. The result has been an erosion of differences between New and Old Worlds, with both tradition and technology better understood by all, coupled with an overarching desire to express local conditions to the max, increasingly through indigenous grape varieties rather than imported international ones.

The wine stars of the 1990s were winemakers and in particular consultant oenologists such as the late Bordelais Michel Rolland and a host of them in Italy and the Napa Valley, accused by some of churning out the same wine wherever they consulted.

But today the focus has switched from cellar to vineyard. No longer do wine producers boast of how many new barrels they have bought (a 1990s fixation, whereas concrete vats have recently made a comeback). Instead, they are more likely to boast of their sustainability credentials, notably organic certification, guaranteeing much-reduced use of agrochemicals, or perhaps their adoption of biodynamic viticulture, which in its purest form includes natural preparations buried in cow horns according to phases of the moon. (Amazingly, it works.)

And the latest trend is to concentrate on what’s below the surface of the vineyard. Soil health, biodiversity and regenerative viticulture have overtaken vine health as a preoccupation (although vine trunk diseases continue their predations, and mildew seems to be on the increase). To that end, cover crops are increasingly planted to retain moisture and encourage microbial life. Bare earth in a vineyard is no longer a virtue. And vignerons in the more monocultural regions are busy planting trees.

As for what lies beneath the topsoil, this is an unresolved issue. Geologists argue that bedrock cannot possibly affect the character of a wine, except in the supply of moisture to the vine. Meanwhile, different soil or rock types and ages thereof form the bedrock, so to speak, of wine marketing in many a region. And soil pits, dug to reveal exactly which soils and rocks are encountered by the vine roots, are a current badge of honour for vine growers.

A changing climate

No survey of the past few decades of wine can ignore the natural wine craze which has divided generations. Depending on your age, you view it either as healthy liberation from winemaking intervention or an unacceptable and undrinkable hijacking of a misleading term. Orange wine, which became popular at about the same time, is white wine made like red in contact with grape skins and comes in varying degrees of “naturalness”.

Prosecco can be almost as polarising as natural wine; it may have definitively overtaken champagne, with impressive speed, as the world's most popular fizz — but those who dislike it really dislike it.

The one aspect of wine that we can all agree on is the inexorable rise of rosé since Sacha Lichine sold his father's Bordeaux château to launch Whispering Angel Provençal rosé in 2006. It started out as the produce of his Château d'Esclans but now, under LVMH ownership, its 12mn bottles a year are filled with wine from all over Provence.

Rosé has been a popular choice for the army of celebrity wines to have taken a march on a shrinking market. I welcome what Brad Pitt and Kylie Minogue have so successfully done to fight the current decline in wine sales. There is much moaning that young people are not doing their bit to reverse this, and it's true that there has been a decrease in offline encounters, but this is true for all age groups, and wine has never been the overwhelming alcoholic drink of choice for the under-30s.

The single biggest phenomenon to affect wine production this century, however, is climate change, which has brought forward the annual grape harvest by an average of two weeks, is subjecting vine growers to wildfires (with their risk of smoke taint in the resulting wines), frost, hail and flooding to an extent never seen before. It has also extended the world wine map polewards (hence our additional page on England and two new pages on Northern Europe in the new World Atlas of Wine).

Perhaps most seriously, it is compromising wine production itself, particularly in view of prolonged drought in many of the world's warmer wine regions. Outside Europe, irrigation has been de rigueur for decades and now many a European wine region is discussing whether to allow it. But it pains me to admit that in a world desperately short of water, wine may increasingly be seen, like golf courses, as an unnecessary luxury.

Meanwhile, conscious of the fact that the production and transport of glass bottles constitute wine's greatest contribution to the planet's carbon footprint, a significant and heartening number of wine and bottle producers and bottlers have dramatically reduced bottle weights during the past few years. Perhaps that will earn them a few more years' grace.

The ninth edition of 'The World Atlas of Wine' is published by Mitchell Beazley on September 24