

The winemakers' winemakers

What greater accolade can there be than being judged best in the world by your peers? We asked leading winemakers around the world which three of their peers they most admired. The criteria were that they could be making wine in any part of the world but must have made at least 10 vintages and must still be making wine today. They could be working at a winery or as a consultant. When we number-crunched the 133 responses, these were the names that came out top

The winemaker today



THERE CAN BE no doubt that winemakers, flying and not, have had an immense and largely positive impact on how wine tastes today. Thanks to their training and experience, drinking flawed or unpleasant efforts is rare:

gone are the days of white wines oxidised soon after bottling or barely palatable, rustic reds.

Over the past 30 years, winemakers have become pivotal, thanks to skills ranging from a superior sense of taste and smell honed by years of experience and travels, to specific knowledge about one grape variety or terroir. For example, among the top 15 winemakers profiled here, Michel Rolland is famous for his skill at blending, Attilio Pagli is universally regarded as a Malbec expert, and perhaps nobody knows and understands Bordeaux's Left Bank terroirs better than Eric Boissenot.

In fact, the winemaker's role has evolved to encompass not only making the wines but everything from the growing of vines – many of today's most famous winemakers are also trained in viticulture – to their distribution, and acting as ambassadors for their estates.

Though the best have moved towards a 'less-is-more approach' in the cellar, they keep abreast of the latest advances in technology so as to work with the best possible grapes and make the best possible wines. Satellite imaging (to study characteristics of single parcels of vines), high-tech irrigation, integrated pest

control (to reduce the need for herbicides and pesticides), use of selected yeast or wild yeasts (so-called 'natural' ferments), reduction of total alcohol levels in wines (by use of reverse osmosis or spinning cones) and selecting specific coopers and oak varieties in which to age the wines are all part of a good modern-day winemaker's armoury.

A fine balance

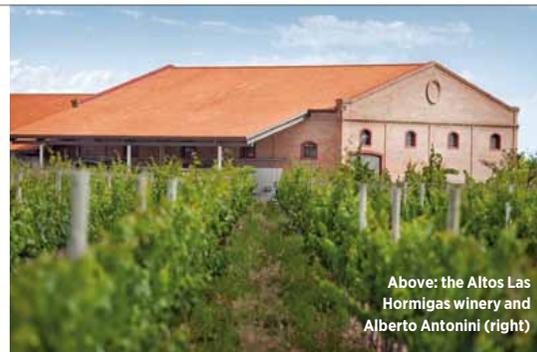
However, those very strengths can become a problem. Far too many wines nowadays taste more or less the same, no matter where they are made. Is that really desirable, even if the wines 'taste good'? I don't think so. Using cultured yeasts (naturally occurring ones are often characterised by less predictable behaviours) can also lead to standardised wines, all showcasing the same perceived desirable traits. For example, should all Fianos, Vermentinos or Albariños really taste of banana and the same tropical fruit?

Clearly estate owners should resist the temptation of delegating total control to the winemaker, and ask tough questions. But wine writers also need to do a better job, and become more knowledgeable about their subject.

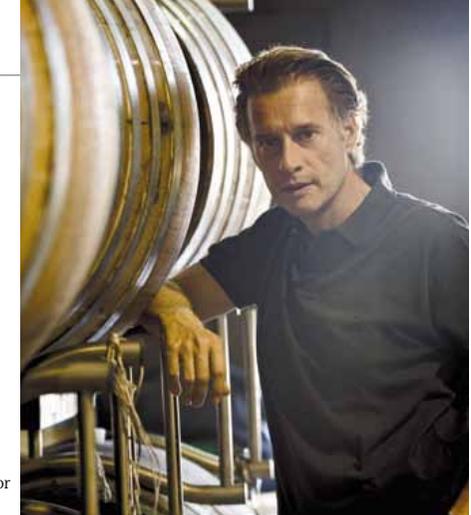
Ultimately, the greatest winemakers (including this top 15) don't just pay lip service to the philosophy that 'great wines start in the vineyard', but truly work to achieve that. Sometimes just playing the cards you have been dealt is the right thing to do.

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'The greatest winemakers don't just pay lip service to the philosophy that 'great wines start in the vineyard', but truly work to achieve that'



Above: the Altos Las Hormigas winery and Alberto Antonini (right)



The top five

(in alphabetical order)

Alberto Antonini

As part of the consulting work Antonini does around the world, in 2010 he was offered a job in the region of Yeghegnadzor, Armenia. In their first conversation, the producer told him he wanted a 'modern' wine. Antonini, his voice calm, his manner zen-like, replied that if what he meant was a wine from local grapes and fermented in amphorae, like the wines made 6,000 years ago in Yeghegnadzor, then that was the 'modern' wine he needed. 'The wine of the future will be the wine of the past,' says Antonini. And that's the vision that, even after a 30-year career, sparks this Italian winemaker's excitement – the idea of returning to absolute simplicity in order to achieve the best possible interpretation of where wines are born.

But that wasn't always his goal. Antonini today advises wineries in places as diverse as Maldonado on the Uruguayan coast, or Caltanissetta on the island of Sicily. But it all started in Florence, where he graduated in oenology and viticulture in 1985. His first job was as an assistant winemaker at Frescobaldi, and then he became technical manager at remarkable Tuscan wineries like Col d'Orcia and Antinori. In 1997, however, he decided to work as a consultant, and it was then that his influence began to be felt.

Many of his clients are in Italy and he has his own winery, Poggiotondo, in Tuscany, where he lives when not travelling. But his influence is the strongest in South America, where he arrived in 1995. In Argentina, together with winemaker Attilio Pagli (see p37) and his friend Antonio Morescalchi, he founded Altos Las Hormigas, in 1996.

At that time Merlot and Cabernet were the stars. Bucking the trend, Antonini set his sights on Malbec, and the partners agreed that the project would revolve around it. The winery was successful, especially in the US,

and was an example for other Argentinian producers. The fashion

at the time, however, was for super-ripe and sweet wines, where it was very difficult to identify either any sense of place or tradition. While it would be unfair to say that the wines from Altos Las Hormigas were an example of this, they did exhibit some of these characteristics.

About seven years ago, Antonini says he realised that the path was not selling a grape, but a place. 'The idea was to forget the Bordeaux formula, responsible for the global colonisation of most wine regions of the world, with its strong standardisation of varieties and wine styles,' says Antonini. Through him, Altos Las Hormigas has been one of the leaders in the transformation of Malbec, reducing the excess of oak and overripeness, and focusing efforts on showing the site before the grape.

In Chile, his presence is also evident. He advises at Concha y Toro, Montgras, Viña Leyda and Luis Felipe Edwards among others. His style, not at all pompous, hides the influence he has here, but without doubt his expertise has helped to guide some of the most important Chilean winemakers, and his vision has helped to change the wine in this country as well as more widely in South America.

Patricio Tapia

'Having worked with Alberto for almost 15 years at Concha y Toro, there's no question in my mind that he's a great and remarkable winemaker. His knowledge, understanding and expertise is extraordinary. However, what always impresses me most about him is his respect for authenticity and quality.' **Marcelo Papa, Concha y Toro**

'I've known Alberto for more than 15 years. I first met him at Gruppo Matura, Italy's top consulting team. Since then his international experience has made him one of the world's most admired and influential winemakers. For me, the secret of his success is that he is traditional with a modern approach.' **Emiliano Falsini, consultant** >

Top 30

(in alphabetical order)

- Alberto Antonini
- Lalou Bize-Leroy
- Eric Boissenot
- Jean-Louis Chave
- Stéphane Derenoncourt
- Aubert de Villaine
- Helmut Dönnhoff
- Paul Draper
- Alvaro Espinoza
- Richard Geoffroy
- Nadine Gublin
- Marcel Guigal
- Paul Hobbs
- Olivier Humbrecht
- Frédéric Lafarge
- Dominique Lafon
- Zelma Long
- François Millet
- Egon Müller
- Attilio Pagli
- Alvaro Palacios
- Mariano di Paola
- Paul Pontallier
- Ignacio Recabarren
- Marcelo Retamal
- Jorge Riccitelli
- Michel Rolland
- Christophe Roumier
- Eric Rousseau
- Alejandro Vigil