

In the past few weeks the Department of Agriculture has gazetted regulations which recognise new categories and styles of winemaking. As a result “orange” wines (white wines which have had extended skin contact) and extended barrel-aged white wines can now come to market with Wine and Spirits Board certification.

Producers of these more crafted wines generally consider them to be on the opposite side of the spectrum to modern “industrial” wines - but that’s because they believe that modern winemaking processes compromise authenticity and provenance in the interests of commercial efficiency. In a way, in their approach there’s a return to a more bucolic era - one which prevailed to a lesser or greater extent until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Cold fermentation - which preserved the freshness and primary fruit in (mainly) white wines - is pretty much a post-World War Two technology. Until the arrival of stainless steel in the cellar, oxidation was an inevitable part of white wine-making. Avoiding the deterioration which comes with exposure to air became something of mandatory expectation - especially in New World wine producing countries. A whole generation of wine judges were programmed to reject as “faulty” any white wine with even the slightest whiff of oxidation. (Alongside the hermeneutics of vinous orthodoxy, the medieval church is a study in tolerance.) I remember, in the 1990s, bringing a bottle of Savennieres from the Loire (an extraordinarily long-lived Chenin Blanc - but often made in the “old style”) for benchmarking purposes to a Chenin Blanc Challenge judging. None of my fellow panellists were ready to consider its more oxidative character a legitimate expression of the variety.

The amendment in the regulations is significant: without recognition that these are legitimate styles, producers whose white wines were deemed too dark in colour or “not fresh enough” found their route to market blocked by the Wine and Spirit Board. Without certification by the Board, there can be no declaration of vintage, variety or origin. It should also be said that the relative speed with which the authorities recognised the need to amend the regulations, and then managed to get the changes gazetted, is a happy and significant improvement on the snail's pace of the past. It took over 30 years to impose a prohibition on the use of the name “Riesling” for the inferior and once widely planted Crouchen Blanc.

Oxidation and its consequent chemical changes has long been a legitimate part of the wine-making process. I have just returned from a visit to the Sherry bodegas of Jerez de la Frontera, where there is an entire industry which depends on the transformation which takes place when wine is kept in a partially filled barrel. True, the fino-type sheries are partly preserved by the appearance of a yeast veil (known as flor) which coats the surface of the dry, slightly fortified Palomino wine. This mould consumes every last gram of sugar and imparts the aldehydic note which is the peculiarity of the appellation. The Olorosos, on the other hand, have no such layer between the wine and the air inside the casks: more heavily fortified, they are saved from qualitative deterioration only by the alcohol and the slightly higher percentage of residual sugar.

No one seriously disputes the quality or age-worthiness of the best examples. It is possible to buy extraordinary Finos that have been cask-aged for up to half a century - without sugar or excessive amounts of alcohol to keep their mortality in check. Great Amontillados and Olorosos, preserved with more alcohol and more sugar (though often still quite dry on the palate) are timeless monuments to the art of the long-dead winemakers who produced them.

The newly gazetted regulations governing the production of a whole range of previously prohibited wine styles are not just an arcane footnote of little relevance to any except handful of edgy winemakers. They could open the door for museum quality wines which might one day amaze and seduce future generations.