

# 40 Wines That Changed the Way We Drink

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## Wine

Some wines are good, some are bad, and some are significant. Here are 40 that made a difference.

By

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Photo: Justin Walker

What was the first wine? There's no way to know, though the oldest evidence of winemaking dates back 8,000 years, to Stone Age villages in the mountains south of Tbilisi, Georgia. But whoever made that first wine, man or woman, priest or peasant, we owe them a big debt. Some wines are good, some are bad, and some — a very few, like that first one — are significant. Maybe they shatter preconceptions about the potential of a grape or region; maybe they shock us with a new flavor or set of tastes; maybe they even leave us taken aback by the fact that they're packaged in cans. Here are 40 that made a difference.

### **1. Ruinart Rosé Champagne (1764)**

Think rosé is a new trend? Ruinart, the first Champagne house (founded in 1729, the year after France's King Louis XV first allowed wine to be sold in bottles), was also first off the bat with pink fizz. Referred to at the time as *oeil de perdrix* — eye of the partridge, a reference to its hue — it probably tasted very different from the dry, crisp NV Ruinart Brut Rosé (\$89) sold now; almost all Champagnes were sweet until about 1850. Even so, it could be said to have launched one of the world's most drawn-out trends.



Courtesy of Ruinart

### **2. Schloss Johannisburg Spätlese (1775)**

If you think all Riesling is sweet, thank Germany's Schloss Johannisberg estate for that. Or at least the Prince-Abbot of Fulda, whose courier arrived several weeks late in 1775 with permission to start harvesting. Once those hyper-ripe grapes were picked, sweet Riesling was

born — a fine example being the peachy 2015 Schloss Johannisberg Grünlack Riesling Spätlese (\$55).

### **3. Veuve Clicquot Champagne (1810)**

Without the widow, or *veuve*, Clicquot, Champagne might still be sold with a sediment of leftover yeast in the bottle. Riddling, the crucial process Barbe-Nicole Clicquot helped develop in the early 1800s, removes that yeast efficiently. The result? Mass production of a luxury wine, such as Clicquot's ubiquitous, toasty NV Yellow Label Brut (\$49).

### **4. Ricasoli Chianti Classico (1872)**

Wine has been made in the Chianti region for centuries, but until 1872 no one had ever codified exactly what Chianti's wines *ought* to be. After years of research, the Baron Ricasoli developed the first formal "recipe" for this classic wine: Sangiovese for its aroma and "a certain vigor in taste," Canaiolo to soften it, and white Malvasia to make the wine "lighter and more readily suitable for daily consumption." As of 2006, white grapes are no longer allowed in the Chianti blend, but even so, the forest-scented 2013 Barone Ricasoli Castello di Brolio Chianti Classico Gran Selezione (\$65) would surely please the Baron.

### **5. Louis Roederer Cristal (1876)**

Without the Russian Czar Alexander II, the first prestige Champagne might never have been made. His demands to the Roederer family were simple: top quality (of course), sweet (still the popular style at the time), gold label (duh), and a clear crystal bottle — hence Cristal — to make sure no bombs were hidden inside. (The czar's fears were well-founded: Dynamite, though not in a Champagne bottle, got him in the end.) The 2009 Louis Roederer Cristal Brut (\$249) is suave, complex, not at all sweet — and, of course, entirely bomb-free.

### **6. Inglenook Claret (1889)**

Long before the famed Judgment of Paris in 1976, a California wine stunned doubters and garnered international attention by taking a gold medal at the 1889 Paris world's fair. Later years saw Inglenook's reputation fall, rise, and fall again, but under current owner Francis Ford Coppola, quality has rocketed up, and wines like the cassis-rich, luscious 2014 Rubicon (\$210) deserve their storied name.



Courtesy of Inglenook  
Winery

### **7. Penfolds Grange (1951)**

When Penfolds winemaker Max Schubert created Australia's most famous wine, Grange, a Shiraz-based red meant to age for decades like the great wines of Europe, it was at first utterly rejected by Penfolds' management. (Schubert actually had to hide the 1957–59 vintages to keep them from being destroyed.) No doubt he would have been stunned that in 2017 a single bottle of that initial '51 vintage sold for almost 52,000 Australian dollars (\$41,100). Bargain hunters, however, can pick up another great vintage, the intense 2013 Penfolds Grange, for a mere (ahem) \$850.

### **8. Robert Mondavi Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (1966)**

The first vintage of the definitive wine from the first winery established in Napa Valley after Prohibition, made by the man who did more to promote the quality of California wine than any other person before or since. Enough said. The 2015 Robert Mondavi Winery Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$34) is ripe and polished, full of black currant fruit, and, appropriately, deeply Napa Valley Cabernet-ish.



Robert Mondavi Winery

### **9. Ridge Geyserville (1966)**

Ridge's Geyserville was one of the first domestic wines to draw attention to the idea of "old vines" and to what a single mature vineyard (dating back to the 1880s) of mixed black grape varieties can produce. Labeled as Zinfandel in its early days, it's actually a blend of Zin, Carignane, Petite Sirah, and Mourvèdre. Look for the boysenberry-scented 2015 (\$40) for a taste of California viticultural history.



Heidi Nigen / Ridge  
Vineyards

### **10. Gaja Sorì San Lorenzo (1967)**

The message was clear: In the hands of an unparalleled winemaker like Angelo Gaja, Barbaresco's greatest vineyards could be as fully distinctive and terroir-expressive as those of Burgundy. The original 1967 vintage of this wine was his first single-vineyard Barbaresco and one of the first in the region; the 2013 Gaja Sorì San Lorenzo (\$475) is thrillingly aromatic, powerfully structured, and still revelatory, more than 50 years later.

### **11. The Eyrie Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (1970)**

There's a reason they called David Lett (above) "Papa Pinot." He and his wife, Diana, planted the first Pinot Noir vineyards in Oregon's Willamette Valley in 1966, and their first wine, released in 1970, proved their instincts about the region correct. Today the valley is one of the world's great Pinot zones, and Eyrie's fragrant 2014 Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$37), made by son Jason Lett, is as good as ever.



Eyrie Vineyards / Diana  
Lett

## **12. Antinori Tignanello (1971)**

Tignanello was the wine that opened the Super-Tuscan gates. Piero Antinori's decisions, with winemaker Giacomo Tachis, to blend nontraditional varieties with Sangiovese, to use French barriques rather than big Slavonian casks, and to eschew the Chianti classification for his top wine were all wildly controversial at the time. These days, the wine — e.g., the lightly minty, cherry-driven 2014 (\$110) — is a classic.

## **13. Sanford Winery Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Pinot Noir (1971)**

The 2014 vintage of this earthy, herb-scented Pinot still comes from the original vines that Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict planted back in 1971: the first Pinot Noir vines grown in California's Santa Barbara County. Now, many years and one influential movie (*Sideways*) later, Santa Barbara's prime growing region is world-renowned for Pinot Noir.

## **14 & 15. Joseph Phelps Syrah & Insignia (1974)**

Doubling down on one vintage, Napa vigneron Joseph Phelps managed to introduce two groundbreaking wines: the first commercially released Syrah in the United States (kicking off the California "Rhône Ranger" movement) *and* the first California Bordeaux-style blend with a proprietary name, Insignia. The winery still makes both: most recently the peppery 2014 Napa Syrah (\$75) and the profound, layered 2014 Insignia (\$250).

## **16. Sutter Home White Zinfandel (1975)**

Sometimes the gods of chance smile on you. In 1975, Bob Trinchero planned to make a dry, white version of Zinfandel. Instead, the fermentation "stuck," leaving him with a tankful of pink, lightly sweet wine. Rather than dump it, he bottled what he had, and people loved it. In fact, they *really* loved it — so much so that by the early '80s, White Zinfandel was the most popular wine in America. Sutter Home still sells around 10 million cases of the nonvintage version (\$8) per year. Not bad for an accident.



Courtesy of Sutter Home

### **17. Tinto Pesquera (1975)**

Pesquera founder Alejandro Fernández did more than anyone else to put Spain's Ribera del Duero region on the international wine map. His first vintage was 1975; even today, a sip of his formidable 2012 Pesquera Reserva (\$55) gives a sense of how he did it.

### **18. Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (1976)**

When English wine writer Steven Spurrier arranged a blind taste-off of California versus French wines in Paris in 1976, little did he know it would change the world of wine forever. The judges were French; the French wines were from famed vineyards; California won; and the world took notice. The 1973 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon took top place, beating out storied names like Haut-Brion and Mouton Rothschild. The silky 2014 Stag's Leap Wine Cellars S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon (\$145), from the same vineyard, offers ripe blackberry fruit with subtle graphite notes.

### **19. Chateau Montelena Chardonnay (1976)**

Cabernet wasn't California's only triumph in Paris in the United States' bicentennial year. The 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay, made by then-winemaker Mike Grgich with grapes from both Napa and Sonoma, also took top honors. Today Montelena's Chardonnay is still made in the same restrained, elegant style — the graceful 2015 vintage (\$50) being a fine example.

### **20. Calera Selleck Vineyard Pinot Noir (1978)**

"Terroir" didn't get much play in U.S. winemaking back in 1978, when Josh Jensen founded Calera high up in California's Gabilan Mountains. But what he proved with his first wines, from the Jensen, Selleck, and Reed vineyards, was that California Pinot Noir could show nuances of site just as fully as Burgundy's great wines could — as in the bay- and raspberry-scented 2014 Jensen Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$85).

### **21. Mas De Daumas Gassac (1978)**

At the time Aimé Guibert founded this singular estate, the Languedoc region was known for bottom-shelf French supermarket wine. Guibert planted vines in a secluded valley, and within a few years his long-aging red was world-renowned — and generating a wave of ambitious projects throughout the region. Look for the refined, currant-y 2015 (\$45).



Hervé Leclair /  
aspheries.com

## **22. Chateau Musar (1979)**

In 1979, at a tasting in England, critics awarded a wine from this estate in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley their highest prize — opening the world's eyes to the idea that great wine could be produced in unexpected regions. Musar, founded by Gaston Hochar in 1930 and later overseen by his son Serge (above), also proved that the desire to produce great wine could prevail over the grimmest circumstances (e.g., 15 years of civil war). Try the spicy 2009 Chateau Musar Red (\$60) to get a sense of the Hochar family's indomitable drive.

## **23. Williams Selyem Sonoma County Pinot Noir (1981)**

Burt Williams and Ed Selyem's first Pinot Noir was actually released under the Hacienda del Rio name, but after the existing Hacienda winery objected, they switched to Williams Selyem. Smart move. Their wines soon became the first "cult" Pinot Noirs; by 1990 over 5,000 people were on the waiting list to get a single bottle. That fervor has cooled (a little), but you'll still need to hunt to try the luscious 2015 Williams Selyem Sonoma County Pinot Noir (\$75).



Courtesy of Williams  
Selyem

## **24. Nicolas Joly Clos De La Coulée De Serrant (1981)**

Nicolas Joly's choice to convert one of the Loire Valley's greatest vineyards to biodynamics — the organic-meets-spiritual farming philosophy — yielded the 1981 Clos de la Coulée de Serrant. That wine, plus his brilliantly indefatigable promotion of this philosophy, helped bring biodynamics to international attention. The apple orchard-scented 2015 vintage (\$115) is one of his best in years.

## **25. Marcel Lapierre Morgon (1981)**

In 1981, Beaujolais producer Lapierre adopted the "natural" approach to making wine pioneered by French enologist Jules Chauvet (minimal or no sulfur; no pesticides, fertilizers, enzymes, or chemicals; as little human intervention as possible). And thanks to influential importer Kermit Lynch championing Lapierre, he was many U.S. wine drinkers' first exposure to this radical school of winemaking. The 2016 (\$34), made by his son Mathieu, is classic: wild strawberries, violets, and an almost vibrating intensity.

## **26. Georges Duboeuf Beaujolais Nouveau (1982)**

The phrase "*Le Beaujolais Nouveau est arrivé!*" may seem overfamiliar now, but in 1982 it provoked the kind of buzz marketers dream about. The French had been celebrating the mid-November arrival of the new Beaujolais vintage for decades; Duboeuf's genius was to thrill Americans to the idea. The 2017 vintage of this simple, sprightly wine is long gone now; look forward to the next vintage, appearing, as always, on store shelves the third Thursday in November.



Courtesy of Les Vins  
Georges Duboeuf

### **27. Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay (1983)**

Was this the wine that launched a million fern bars? Back when shoulder pads were big and hair was even bigger, Chardonnay took off. By 1994 it was America's number one white wine. Vintner's Reserve drove that market, and for 25 years now it's been the best-selling Chardonnay in America. The 2016 (\$17) is rich and inviting, full of pineapple fruit and vanilla spice.



Courtesy of Kendall-  
Jackson

### **28. Bonny Doon Le Cigare Volant (1984)**

The 1980s launch of this irreverent Rhône blend from winemaker Randall Grahm, its label showing a cigar-shaped UFO zapping a modest French vigneron, upended decades of staid wine-label traditions. Confronted now by a bottle of "Fat Bastard" or "Pinot Evil," Grahm might well respond, "Après moi, le déluge" — but unlike some of its descendants, Le Cigare Volant is also very good. Witness the plummy, mocha-inflected 2012 vintage (\$45).



Courtesy of Bonny Doon  
Cigare Volant

### **29. Rosemount Diamond Label Shiraz (1984)**

Well before Yellow Tail's trademark kangaroo took its first hop, Rosemount effectively created the American thirst for Australian wines with its juicy Diamond Label Shiraz. And it's still a lush rendition of Australia's signature grape, as the 2016 vintage (\$9) shows.

### **30. Cloudy Bay Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (1985)**



Believe it or not, there was a time when people didn't associate New Zealand and Sauvignon Blanc. Then along came Cloudy Bay, founded in 1985, to wake people up to the country's pungent, green, peppery, passion fruit–vivid style. The [gooseberry-bright 2017 vintage](#) (\$30) expresses it clearly.



Courtesy of Cloudy Bay  
Vineyards

### **31. Egly-Ouriet NV Brut Tradition Grand Cru Champagne (1985)**

Grower Champagnes, from owners of individual small properties, are all the rage right now. But for many years, the only Champagnes in the U.S. were from big houses such as Moët. Egly-Ouriet, imported by California's North Berkeley Imports starting in 1985, was one of the very first grower estates — possibly *the* first — to appear on these shores. Try the subtly toasty [NV Brut Tradition Grand Cru](#) (\$95).

### **32. Clos Mogador Priorat (1989)**

Which wine put Spain's famed Priorat region on the map? The 1989 Clos Doff? 1989 Clos Erasmus? The 1989 from Clos Martinet, Clos de l'Obac, or Clos Mogador? Strangely enough, they were all exactly the same wine. A collective of friends brought the Priorat back to blazing life — but in that first vintage, they simply divvied up the tiny amount of wine they'd made and bottled each portion separately. So let the honors go to René Barbier, the group's linchpin. Try his stony, powerful [2015 Clos Mogador](#) (\$98).

### **33. Catena Malbec (1994)**

Laura Catena recalls: "We first came to the U.S. [from Argentina] in '94, and I remember going out with bottles of our wine, and buyers would say, 'I really love this, but I can't buy it because it won't sell ... Nobody knows what Malbec is.'" The Catena family was first out of the gate to change that hard-to-imagine situation. Today millions of cases of Malbec are sold in the U.S. every year. Catena's, like [the plum-peppery 2015](#) (\$24), is still among the best.

### **34. Plumpjack Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (2000)**

Sealing a wine with a screw cap instead of a cork? Not news. Sealing half a run of Napa Cabernet with one? *That* was news. The wine was PlumpJack's 1997 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, the first vintage the winery released and a watershed in the ongoing cork-versus-cap debate. To this day the winery seals some of its wines under screw cap, including [the seductive 2012 vintage](#) (\$300).





Courtesy of PlumpJack  
Winery

### **35. Gravner Ribolla Gialla (2001)**

Make wine in big clay jars buried under the ground? Well, why not — Georgians have for thousands of years. When Friuli's Josko Gravner decided in 2001 to embrace this ancient winemaking style, his wines were seen as odd by some ... and by others as truly extraordinary. Amphora experiments are now everywhere, but Gravner, as with his amber-hued, gingery 2008 Ribolla Gialla (\$99), remains the benchmark.

### **36. Three Thieves Bandit Pinot Grigio (2004)**

Sometimes a wine is revolutionary simply because of what it is in. In 2004, partners Joel Gott, Charles Bieler, and Roger Scommegna had a simple, brilliant idea: Why not put wine in a Tetra Pak? Recyclable, lightweight, low CO2 footprint — maybe not ideal for cellaring, but with an appealing bargain like the juicy Bandit Pinot Grigio (\$10), you might just start a movement.

### **37. Scholium Project The Prince in His Caves (2006)**

Ah, California, land of big, fruity Cabs and oaky Chards. Well, as a late-2000s wave of alternative winemakers said: Not so fast. The first to gain fame was Abe Schoener, with his brilliantly offbeat Scholium Project wines. Why *shouldn't* the Golden State be known for orange-hued, esoteric Sauvignon Blanc, like his 2016 The Prince in His Caves (\$50)?

### **38. Domaines Ott Rosé (2006)**

Before there was Whispering Angel, the rosé trend got its U.S. kick start in New York's summer playground for rich scenesters (The Hamptons) with (oddly) the venerable Domaines Ott. 2006 was the year it became the ubiquitous pool-party drink of choice. Look for the pale pink, lively 2017 BY.OTT Rosé (\$25).



Courtesy of Domaines Ott

### **39. The Infinite Monkey Theorem Moscato (2011)**

Infinite Monkey Theorem founder Ben Parsons wasn't the first to put wine in a can, but he was definitely the first to make it cool. The edgy radioactive-monkey label and the quirky name caught a cultural buzz, and he's now producing over 120,000 cases a year (\$15 for a four-pack) — while canned wine overall is growing at a breakneck pace.



Courtesy of The Infinite  
Monkey Theorem

#### **40. Ava Winery Synthetic Wine (2017)**

Is it good? Is it even wine? That depends on your definition of both those words, but there's no question that this San Francisco tech startup, with its ambitions of creating chemically identical versions of great wines — without a winery, a winemaker, or even grapes — is breaking new ground.

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