Old World, New Wine

MEET the REBEL WINEMAKERS Behind the Best Bottles YOU'VE NEVER TASTED

← A winemaking abbey in Jura, France, that doubles as a postcard.
→ Sicilian winemaker Arianna Occhipinti inspects Frappato, a signature grape of hers.

FOR DECADES—CENTURIES, really—the rules of the European wine world were sacrosanct: Plant this. Drink that. And turn up your nose at anything novel. But now a new generation of rebel winemakers in **Greece, Corsica, Sicily, and beyond** are saying: Screw that. Try this. What's coming out of that revolution is radically tasty, and redrawing everything we knew. **Alan Richman** helps you navigate the new wine map

PERHAPS THIS HAS already happened to you. If not, consider it inevitable. Your glass holds an unexpected style of wine, one that comes from a place you might not know makes wine. The flavors will be mysterious but alluring. But you will not be drinking Cabernet or another grape that has joined the brotherhood of the super-extracted or the legion of the profoundly oaky. The bottles most coveted since wine's revival in the 1980s are now so overpriced that only old-timers with family fortunes and youngsters with tech start-ups have the means to drink them. All the grandiose cru red Burgundies, polished-to-a-spit-shine California Cabernets, haughty-as-hell red Bordeaux, and Montrachets that glow like pirates' gold, while still the pinnacle of collectability, are no longer for the rational, only for the rich. They are to this century what Fabergé eggs were to the last: playthings of the privileged. If you've never had them and wonder what you're missing, they're tasty enough but oddly similar.

Wine critic Robert Parker, whose rise to power catalyzed wine's comeback and whose 100-point scoring system became its backbone, isn't entirely to blame for what he wrought—an unhealthy worldwide devotion to bombastic wines selling at monumental prices. At the beginning, he was an impassioned reformer whose critiques rescued a faltering industry. He was adamant that winemaking standards had to improve, steadfastly stood up for the consumer, and introduced important winemakers to the public. The end of his usefulness occurred not long ago, about the time his scoring system stopped making sense, new-oak aging became a bore, wines started to lose their soul, and prices rose absurdly. These days the most sought-after vineyards are often bought and run by people who understand how to make fortunes, not wines.

There's hope: A new and admirable era is upon us. It's not about an upstart wine country such as Argentina or South Africa, its winemakers eager to join the existing wine community, gaining entry by producing an alternative to Bordeaux or a cheaper Merlot. Such producers weren't rebels; they merely embraced the status quo. It's different now. The old world of wine was about elegance and prosperity. The emerging wine pioneers are eccentric, idealistic, and passionate. Some are admirably poor.

They wear T-shirts faded by the sun and bearing the logo of an agricultural fair they attended years ago. They are sinewy, a consequence of working the fields and having no interest in hosting three-star luncheons. If they have an extra $500, they spend it on farm equipment, not haircuts. They exude personal authenticity. Their philosophy of wine and life is taking hold in scattered regions of the world, particularly in Europe.

You'll find them in Jura, an overlooked *département* of France best known for cheese; in Macedonia, a northerly region of Greece that was Alexander the Great's old stomping ground; on Corsica, an island that belongs to France but owes much of its past to Italy; and even in the forgotten farmlands of Sicily.

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Arianna Occhipinti swirls a decanter of Albanello—a grape that was once popular in Sicily but has fallen out of favor for being difficult to grow and late to ripen.

These winemakers depend, for the most part, on unknown native grapes you've never heard of: Poulsard, Xinomavro, and Frappato, to mention a few. They tend to live in the countryside, near or in their vineyards, which are often organic (no artificial fertilizers or pesticides in the vineyard; limited preservatives in the wine) and sometimes biodynamic (organic plus holistic benefits). They seek to work the land patiently and strive to understand hilly, sometimes even shaggy, vineyards that some of these winemakers have planted themselves. They are enamored with odd pieces of ancient equipment, like wooden de-stemmers that date from the seventeenth century.

They're not obsessed with new oak, the holy grail of twentieth-century wine. They do not rely on consultants—well-paid enologists who jet in to upgrade wine production and, some say, make all wines taste distressingly alike. They are restoring randomness to wine, rejecting the cloning that takes place in nurseries and severely limits genetic diversity. Instead, they are grafting in vineyards, embracing untamed vines. These upstart winemakers are forever changing their blends, their grapes, their styles, whenever inspiration strikes, rather than striving for sameness in perpetuity. What emerges from their bottles is fresh, juicy, spicy, energetic, often a touch rustic, sometimes twinkling in the mouth. Rarely are their wines made to be aged. These wines do one thing, for certain: They plant new ideas in your head.

Sampling them is like dining in the kitchen of a gifted cook living in a country you've never visited before, and have only just begun to explore. You're startled, then transfixed. Food is sometimes said to be made with love; these wines are unfailingly made that way. At a time when diners demand something novel every time they order a dish, we're finally starting to apply those identical standards to what's filling our stemware. The compelling force behind the movement is not critics who score wines but, of all things, young American sommeliers who are open-minded in a way their long-established French counterparts are not. Their research takes them beyond dusty encyclopedias and into Instagram; their travels take them across borders disregarded by traditional sommeliers. They rely on their instincts, not decades-old hierarchies, and they are willing to recommend bottles with price tags in two figures, not three or four. They are the champions of the new era of rebel winemakers.

So let's begin meals with something other than a glass of Pinot Grigio. Let's allow the sommelier to bring out his favorite bottle. But first, let's learn about the winemakers who are altering everything you've come to expect from wine, and the rules they live by.

OPENING PAGE: BROWN W. CANNON/INTERSECTION PHOTOS. PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE: THE SELBY.

RULE 1

Keep sacred the grape.

Domaine Comte Abbatucci, Corsica

OVER THE HILL COMES a John Deere electric-powered utility vehicle, Jean-Charles Abbatucci at the wheel. I climb in. Abbatucci floors it. That means fifteen miles per hour, actually quite fast in a mountainside vineyard, the tiny truck tilting on the uneven ground—Mr. Abbatucci's Wild Ride.

"Disneyland?" I yell into his ear.

"Corsica-land," he says, laughing.

Clearly, life on this precipitous Mediterranean island is as wonderful as legends and travel guides say. It's a little French, inasmuch as it is politically connected to that country. It's a little Italian, inasmuch as it's slightly closer in nautical miles to Italy and pizza appears to be a popular snack.

I've been on innumerable vineyard tours, but this is the first where I'd have been happy to buy a ticket. It's not just the riotous vehicle, the laughing driver, the infinite twists through the hills. Nor is it the grapes, biodynamic since 2000. Our ride takes us past big, good-natured workhorses that Jean-Charles brought here from mainland France. We pause to study dozens of wild plants: lavender, fennel, immortelle (a flower with supposed anti-aging properties), an untamed botanical garden of unparalleled diversity.

When I first arrived in the seaside community of Porto Pollo—pronounced *porto poll* if you're speaking Corsican-accented French but spelled Porti Poddu in Corsican—I telephoned Abbatucci's partner to request driving directions to the winery. She told me to make a left out of my hotel, drive ten kilometers, make a right at the yellow mailbox onto a narrow road, proceed over the winding bridge, look for the restaurant that says Abbatucci, ignore it, then stop in front of the big electric door with no name on it.

This is one of Earth's most spectacular destinations, basically a mountain range plopped into the sea. Just as incomparable is Abbatucci. The fame of the present-day Jean-Charles—there have been other Abbatuccis with the name—comes in part from his reputation as a historian of his island, his family, and the local grapes, and also from his skills as a grower, producer, blender, and master of the vineyard. His top-of-the-line bottling, the Cuvée Collection, is made from ancient vines planted in part by his father in 1965 and grown in a secluded plot almost sacred in its aura, one that he calls "the bible of the vineyards of Corsica." The three Cuvées are named for his ancestors, more fabulous than yours, in all likelihood: The name Abbatucci is inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, signifying that a relative was a general in the army of Napoleon. Throughout history, the Abbatuccis could make war or wine with equal proficiency.

JOSEPHINE SCHIELE

Go Beyond the Pinot

Set aside your usual pour just this once and take an eight-bottle tour of new-era winemaking

TAKE THE JURA CHALLENGE

• Jura is France's emerging region; Stéphane Tissot is its artist in residence. His red 2014 DD ($33) is an earthy, zippy blend of Jura's three main red grapes, while the 2013 Patchwork Chardonnay ($27) is tart—be prepared.

THE GREEK FREAKS

• Kir-Yianni's 2013 Samaropetra ($16) white is a rare artisan Greek blend, and surprising in its complexity. The 2010 Ramnista ($24), all Xinomavro grapes, is tannic, tasty, and young. Grab the superb 2011 vintage and stack cases in your cellar.

THE SICILIAN WAY

• Dominated by an ancient Moscato, Occhipinti's white 2013 SP68 ($25) is flowery and easy to drink. The 2012 Siccagno Nero d'Avola red ($40) is dark, rich, and admirably balanced—a nice change for a stalwart grape of Southern Italian winemaking.

YES, YOU CORSICAN

• Comte Abbatucci's old-vines Faustine *blanc* ($30) is pure Vermentino, pale, lean, and lovely, but its red 2012 CN ($80) is the eye-opener. Made from nearly extinct Carcajolu-Neru grapes, it's a noseful of warm North African spices.—A.R.

He showed me a tome produced by his father in the mid–twentieth century, the title translating as *Contribution to the Knowledge of Blending,* within it details of the native grapes of his country and the locales where they grew. Vermentino is the grape that built the island's reputation, if indeed it has one. There are other grapes, though many are vanishing due to a lack of interest or people to care for them. Abbatucci cares, though. He, like many rebel winemakers, seeks out abandoned vines, often traveling to remote villages where they might once have grown.

I drink an impeccable white from the Cuvée Collection called Il Cavalière Diplomate d'Empire, named for Jacques-Pascal Abbatucci, a diplomat. The grapes in it are all, save one, virtually unknown to the rest of the world: Biancu Gentile, Brustiano, Genovese, Rossola Bianca, and of course, Vermentino. Abbatucci's wines are wildly scented, smoky, herbal, and floral—but at the same time often more silken than blends from traditional wine regions. They stand out for their purity. He boasts that his wines have "all the perfume of Corsica."

The Abbatucci family history goes back centuries to men who were papal guards. Some of the old stone houses in Corsican villages are 400 years old, but the Abbatucci ancestral home in Zicavo, where Jean-Charles lived as a boy, is 500 years old. It is as close to a château as can be found in Corsica. The heirlooms scattered about are treasures, really: a cabinet of medals, clothing of generals and ministers, a gold-braided coat, a pistol with bayonet attached.

He shows me a letter promoting an Abbatucci to *général de division* in l'Armée d'Italie. The document is dated 1787 and signed "Bonaparte." The history of Corsica is real, tangible. In the case of Abbatucci's wines, it is on the tip of your tongue.

RULE 2

Experiment and get funky.

Domaine André et Mireille Tissot, Jura, France

THE JURA REGION in France is minuscule—nestled into the country's eastern curve spooning Switzerland—and if that isn't enough of a handicap, it's cold, too. It is, however, next door to Burgundy, which means it should have been discovered by sommeliers and wine buyers long before now. Except few bothered making the trip, not much more than an hour's drive. "There was no reason to," says Robert Bohr, wine director at the restaurant Charlie Bird in New York City. "Until six or seven years ago, Burgundy wasn't that expensive. You could find Bourgogne Blanc and village-level reds for $50 to $60. None exist at that price anymore. Burgundy has become prohibitively expensive."

Jura could have been more famous if only Pinot Noir grew as well here as in Burgundy. (The Pinot Noir of Jura is charming, not collectible.) Instead, the red grapes for which Jura is known are Poulsard and Trousseau, which take a little getting used to—they are curiously light and exotically scented, startling, gamey, bracing, about as different from the staples of the conventional wine world as can be. They are also captivating. The wines of Jura are now so well regarded that even Guillaume d'Angerville of the estate Marquis d'Angerville, a Burgundy stalwart, has purchased land there and is producing white wine. Some vineyards in his Burgundy neighborhood sell for a million euros a hectare, though, as he tells me, "not for the best land."

In the fields of Domaine André et Mireille Tissot in Jura, Stéphane Tissot seeks the best. It is 6:45 A.M., still dark, and already he frets. The harvest must begin at dawn, and fifteen or twenty pickers have yet to arrive.

The night has been alive with thunder and moments of rain, and he suspects the worst: that the pickers believe the harvest has been postponed. But it is on schedule, and the estate, ordinarily charming in a Hansel and Gretel way, now looks like a military encampment, a jumping-off place for a looming battle: trucks flashing yellow lights, equipment being checked—pruning shears, plastic pails. The missing men and women finally arrive. Tissot relaxes momentarily.

His father, André, who came back from the war in Algeria in 1962 and started the estate, is in charge of quality control, but he is largely cherished for his Maurice Chevalier–like charm. Most everyone calls him "Papa." In Algeria he met people from Bordeaux who persuaded him to bottle his own wine, not sell his grapes to a cooperative or a *négociant*. They taught him that with wine, it was what went into the bottle that counted. That is how one of the greatest estates of Jura came to be.

For two days, I ride alongside Tissot as he oversees the September harvest. He dresses the same both days: baseball cap, golf shirt, shorts, and almost-knee-high rubber boots that he removes by hooking a heel on the trailer hitch of his Toyota Land Cruiser and yanking out his leg. On day one he says, "This is a big day for the selection of the *vin rouge*. You work all year, and in two weeks you make the wine. You cannot make mistakes." He pulls out with me in the passenger seat, hanging on. He is the only person I have known to look at his iPhone while driving in reverse. When he stops, he opens the door and jumps out, not bothering to close it, like in a cop movie, only he is not returning fire. He is everywhere, looking in every direction.

Tissot is a perfectionist. This appears to be a time of pleasure and camaraderie for the family and the pickers, but for him it is a time of stress and vigilance. He is alert for the inevitable crisis, usually occurring when the pickers are not doing the selection as precisely as he wishes. "If you want quality, every grape must be checked," he says. That is why he pays them by the hour, not by the kilogram; he wants them to freely discard unworthy grapes.

Shriveled bunches are tossed; those with undesirable pink berries are saved for the production of Crémant—a sparkling white made outside the Champagne region—and his is among the best. At lunch I ask Mireille to tell me who is the better winemaker, her husband or her son, and she says, "Stéphane." Even André admits Stéphane's wines are more drinkable and refreshing.

The wines of Domaine André et Mireille Tissot are more celebrated now than ever before. The range is vast—Stéphane is always curious, always experimental. He could very well be Chief Winemaker for the Emerging Wine World. He has wine aging in amphorae. He makes wine from the local Savagnin grape, which by tradition is deliberately oxidized. He has grapes drying on the roof of his winery, reached by a spiral staircase.

"I'm more of a classicist than a guy who appreciates natural wines, but I love Tissot because he makes both," says Robert Bohr of Charlie Bird. "You can have a wine for people like me. Or you can have the adventurous kind that's beloved in Paris wine bars."

Every time we stop to taste or talk, Stéphane is uneasy. Every moment is crucial to him; the pickers must be watched because they lack his meticulousness. "All wine is precise," he says. Stéphane hurries me, tells me to get in the SUV. We are off, but to where? He looks at me, laughs. "We are going to see a doctor for my hyperactivity."

RULE 3

Keep it cheap (and unpronounceable).

Kir-Yianni, Macedonia, Greece

BEFORE THE SADNESS—the hail that destroys a harvest—there is the good news: Greece is blessed, not from a fiscal standpoint but as an emerging wine country with a multitude of promising regions. This is not an island country of beaches, as generally thought, but a mountainous land of slopes ideal for vineyards. The climate is Mediterranean, the soil diverse, the winemakers industrious, the desire for vitality and innovation apparent, the potential endless. "Greece today is different than Americans think," says Stellios Boutaris, owner of the wine estate

← A truckload of Xinomavro grapes from one of the Kir-Yianni estate's vineyards in Greece, ready to reach their beautiful bottled potential.
↙ Stéphane Tissot and the barrels of wine in his cellar that are helping make a name for the Jura region of France.

Kir-Yianni, located in Greek Macedonia (not to be confused with the Republic of Macedonia, a landlocked country stacked directly above). "We are not a country of moussaka, ouzo, and donkeys."

Kir-Yianni came about when Stellios's father, Yiannis, now the mayor of Thessaloniki, left the family wine business in 1996 and set out on his own, establishing the estate on land he bought in 1968. Stellios took over in 2004, expanding a rare-for-its-time independent brand with terroir-driven wines.

Greece's emerging wine regions are specializing in indigenous, approachable grapes: Xinomavro in Macedonia, Agiorgitiko in Neméa, Assyrtiko in Santorini, and the list goes on—all essentially unknown to the wider world. How does an American sommelier persuade someone to take a chance on a mystifying bottle from a radical winemaker? He could evangelize. If that fails, he might emphasize new-era value and the similarity of the unknown grape to familiar ones. In Greece's case, you might learn that Assyrtiko references Albariño from Spain, Moschofilero brings to mind Muscat or Vermentino, Xinomavro suggests Nebbiolo from Italy. At dinner one evening, Boutaris paired his 2001 Ramnista, made entirely from Xinomavro, with summer-truffle risotto, bringing the aura and aromas of Italy to Greece. Unlike many of the wines from the world's emerging regions, Ramnista is made to age, and does so beautifully. And unlike many wines that age beautifully, a bottle costs only $25, maybe less.

If a wine is this affordable, the kind of destruction wrought by a massive hailstorm—like the one that hit Kir-Yianni's Náoussa vineyards on July 22, 2014—hurts all the more. "At 6 P.M., the hail started," recalls Boutaris. "It is a sad story. It only lasted an hour. Usually the Greek Department of Agriculture contracts planes to fly into the mountains, shoot chemicals into the clouds to defreeze them and create rain, but last year there is a problem with the contract and there are no planes."

When the hailstorm began, Boutaris was in Thessaloniki and quickly set course for his estate. "I was driving and crying," he says. I arrived a few months later, and the vineyards still resembled battlefields. Outside the redbrick office was an employee's Volkswagen, its hail-pockmarked roof glittering in the bright sunshine like a disco ball. Boutaris showed me smashed grapes still on the ground, the result of ice balls the size of quail eggs crushing whatever they struck. At the end there was no Xinomavro to harvest. The few grapes remaining were unusable. Hail is not unknown in wine-producing regions—it happens frequently in Burgundy, where it hasn't diminished the staggering prosperity—but recovery is always slower in emerging regions. A lost vintage from Boutaris's best vineyard is difficult to absorb. New-era winemakers are hardy, but they're not invincible.

What they are is resilient and resourceful, respectful of the ways of the past but wide open to the future. Boutaris straddles both the old wine world and the new, part patrician and part artisan. At the time Kir-Yianni was born, it stood as cutting-edge, and today he remains a pioneer of the embryonic modern Greek wine industry. He says the old ways of wine can be pretentious, but the new ways—funky, biodynamic—can be self-righteous. Asked which way he is tipping, he replies, "I might be wearing a shirt and jacket, but my approach is like those wearing T-shirts and boots. I have not put a tie on for some time."

RULE 4

Do it yourself. *All* of it.
Occhipinti, Sicily

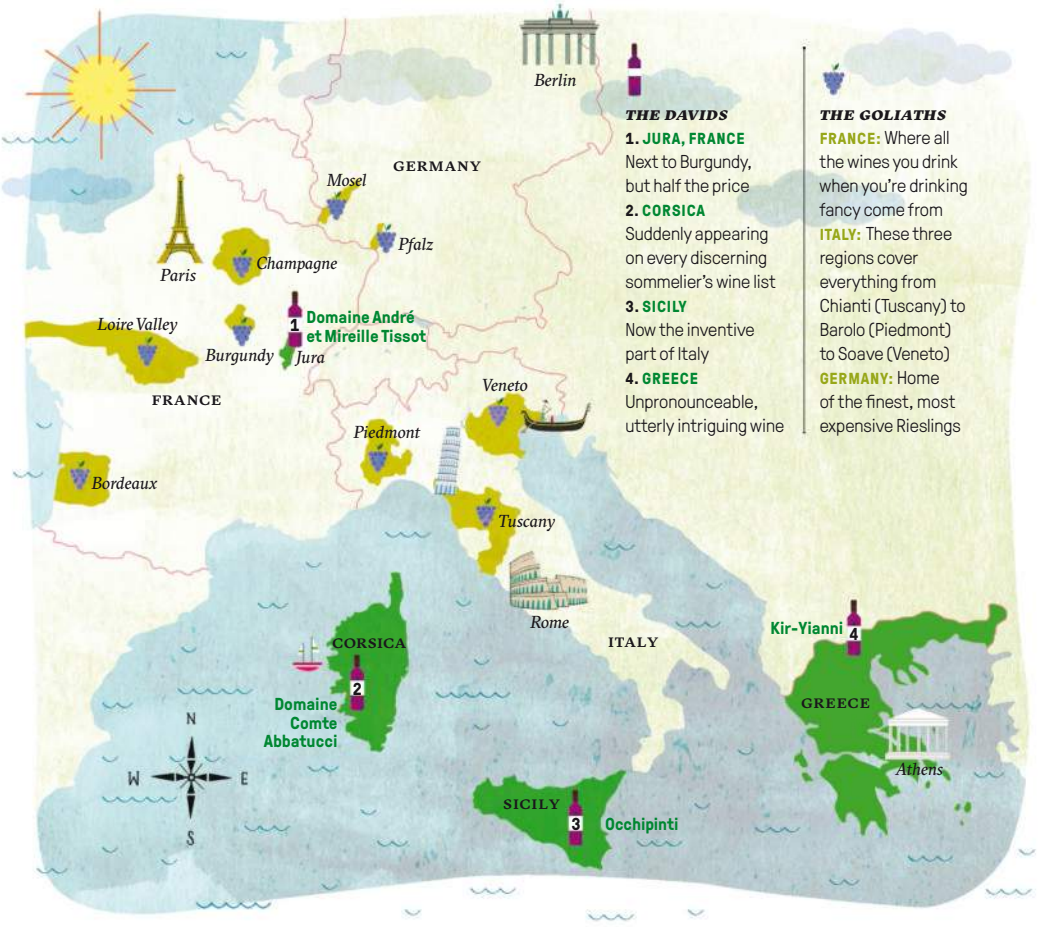
SHE'S A VISION from a fourteenth-century Italian altarpiece: round face, black eyes, features as elemental and timeless as Sicily itself. Her English is broken but mellifluous. The term "pH" becomes *pi-ach-e,* three syllables, gorgeously elongated. In action, she is in the moment and then she has left the moment, moving too fast.

Arianna Occhipinti is entirely about elegance, you think when you meet her, and then she drives you to an industrial complex where she is picking up metal grates for the floor of her winery, because this is what a working winemaker does. She drives three times the posted speed and has an excuse: The limits are unjustly low. She maneuvers her winery forklift with the reflexes of a Ferrari race-car driver, zipping stainless-steel tanks out the door so she can replace them with concrete vats, the old way having become fashionable again. Her confidence never falters, at least not publicly, but she bites her nails as she drives.

Her winery sits deep in the south of Sicily, in the Vittoria *(continued on page 251)*

Here Be Rebels

Your map to Europe's upstart winemaking regions and the stodgy standbys that they're up against



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