



# As The Pendulum Swings

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



“What goes around comes around.” “Everything old is new again.” “Back to the future.” All are different ways of saying the same thing. Fashions come and go. Ties and lapels get narrower and wider and narrow again. Hemlines and heel heights go up and down and up again. Cars move from rounded to angular and back again. And so on ...

Cooking and food are not immune to this. The best restaurants in the US went from French cooking in the '70s (remember the early 80's when Tony's menu said “The Poetry of French Cooking” – or was it “Dining”? - and their wine list had virtually no Italian wine) to Italian cooking ruling the '90s. Now we have a welcome resurgence in French cooking. Locally, I remember when Grotto and Carraba's were single units and Tony's was transitioning from French/Continental to Italian cooking. At that time, Chez Nous in Humble and Chez Georges in west Houston were about the only options for French cooking. Now we have Bistro Provence, Café Rabelais, Le Mistral, Au Petit Paris, Bistro Don Camillo, Brasserie Max and Julie, Bistro Calais, Bistro Le Cep, and Bistro des Amis among a number of others. Each is a unique single unit restaurant with a loyal following and a distinct food and wine program.

Remember Julia Child and “It's better with Butter”? Then we had nouvelle cuisine and heart healthy entrees. Now we have Iron Chef Michael Symon and “It's better with Bacon.” And Alton Brown on Good Eats explaining to us that it can be healthier to cook with LARD.

The wine pendulum continues to swing as well. If you've been drinking wine long enough, you remember the contradicting trends. Riesling was hot in the 1980s, not in the 1990s, and hot again over the last ten years. You remember when French wine was the best and you remember the backlash against all things French in 2003. You also know that French wine, at least at the high end, has come all the way back. Fine Bordeaux and Burgundy have never drawn more interest and the Rhone is at an all time high in popularity.

As a wine lover and as a wine industry observer, it's fun to watch but sometimes it is all a bit frustrating. I've watched Australia go from a source of mostly value wines garnering little international wine geek acclaim to a celebrated wine producing country offering wines earning top scores from the top critics to being a caricature and now back down to its current crash. Despite all the current negatives (out of fashion, a grape glut, lots of drought, R wines in receivership, the backlash against high alcohol, manipulated wines, etc.), there are too many excellent wines from Australia for that business to stay down.

Remember when Chile dominated South American wine sales and you couldn't give Argentine Malbec away? Now all the buzz is about Argentina. Chile still makes excellent wines (even Malbec) and in fact is now making better wines than ever – but there is little or no popular buzz about it. When will the pendulum swing the other way?

During my career, Zinfandel has gone from claret weight wines produced by “the four Rs” (Ridge, Ravenswood, Rosenblum, and Raffanelli) to the extravagance of 17+ percent alcohol monsters from Turley and the like. Now we are seeing a swing back toward more reasonable levels of ripeness (alcohol) and balance with Ridge regaining its position as a top Zin producer. Of course I also remember when a customer came into Spec's and asked for Zinfandel, we had to ask “Red or white?”

Remember the '80s when Chardonnay was king? Remember the ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) movement of the early '90s? Remember the No-No (no oak and no malolactic) movement from the late '90s into the 'oughties'. Now California Chardonnay with a balance of oak is making a comeback. Or did it ever really go away?

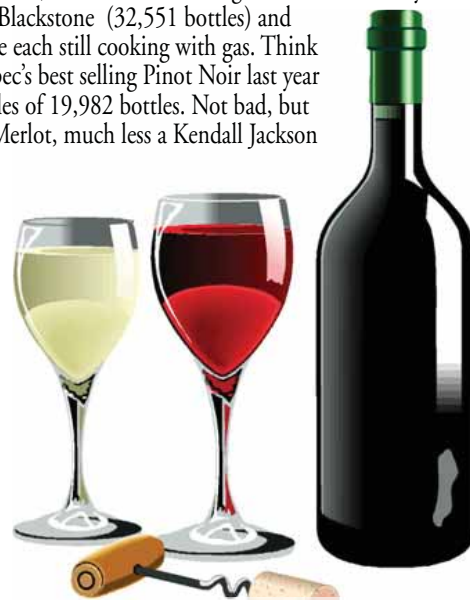
One night in the late 90's, I was sitting in my office tasting through about 25 Chardonnays for an article I was writing when, on about wine number seven, I began to feel a bit of a buzz. I was spitting but I was still absorbing (sub-lingual absorption) enough alcohol to get buzzed so I started checking the alcohol contents on all the labels. The wine were all higher in alcohol than I expected with several topping 14% and a few topping 15%. This was the start of a trend toward higher alcohol wines that seems to be reversing today. Nevertheless, there are still plenty of producers out there going for the last degree of ripeness so they will have ever higher alcohol contents.

Remember when Pinot Noir was a pale red? That was back when the only great Pinot Noirs came from Burgundy. By the late '90s, we were seeing better and better Pinot Noir from all over the world and those wines were getting darker and darker. A lot of this had to do with a once influential, then out of fashion, now somewhat rehabilitated Burgundian consultant named Guy Accad. He advocated extended “cold soaks” before the wines were allowed to start fermenting. The fashion has changed, cold soaks are now shorter, and even new world Pinots are getting paler (or at least less purple) again.

I have noticed a few things about all these pendulum swings (or, if you like, trends). They mostly affect the middle and while they are real, they often appear bigger than they are due to a fair amount of hype.

The wines at the bottom end of the price scale are much slower to show a trend and sometimes don't seem to let go. That's why old favorites like Yellow Tail Chardonnay (14,767 bottles and 22,982 magnums sold at Spec's last year), Beringer White Zinfandel (47,263 bottles and 22,315 magnums), Cavit Pinot Grigio (8,606 bottles and 43,863 magnums), Folie a Deux Menage a Trois Red (75,181 bottles) and Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Chardonnay (102,039 bottles) are still rockin' along. Even after Sideways and its slams on Merlot, Blackstone (32,551 bottles) and Bogle (29,914 bottles) are each still cooking with gas. Think Pinot Noir is popular? Spec's best selling Pinot Noir last year was Clos du Bois with sales of 19,982 bottles. Not bad, but certainly no Blackstone Merlot, much less a Kendall Jackson Chardonnay.

And the trophy wines at the top end are still going strong as their will always be those collectors who live to trophy hunt. How else to explain people lining up to pay over a thousand dollars a bottle for the most highly rated 2009 Bordeaux or hundreds of dollars a bottle for tiny allocations of cult Cabernets?



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It is the wines in the middle – wines that sell from \$12.00 to \$100.00 per bottle - that swing with the pendulum. Nevertheless, no matter how strong the buzz is, the pendulum never swings as far as we think; the hype just makes it look that way. It is always the wines at the furthest edge that get the most buzz and illustrate the trend. If the “food wines” of the eighties where one end of the swing, the high alcohol Zins and Shirazes (and even Cabernets) that peaked around 2005 to 2007 were the other end. During that time, oaky Chardonnay with lots of buttery malolactic character never stopped selling (witness “KJ Vinter’s Chardonnay” among many others at many price points).

The point of all this? Drink (and eat) what you like but keep an open mind. You’ll enjoy wine more if you drink what you like than if you try to follow every trend. Nonetheless, trends can be useful. They can point you toward exciting new things that you may find interesting and even encourage you to give them a try. Just remember that if you find that you like a new un-oaked Chardonnay, that doesn’t mean you have to give up on the oak-barrel-fermented Chardonnay you also like. If you find that you like a good red Burgundy (say a nice \$25.00 Marsannay) with dinner, it doesn’t mean you can’t still enjoy a glass of 15.9% alcohol Zinfandel after dinner. Rather, it means that you have broadened your wine drinking horizons and you have more fun wines to choose from.

It also helps to remember that if what you are drinking is out of fashion right now, you could very well be a trendsetter next month (or next year, or maybe not). In any case, drink wine for your enjoyment and you’ll enjoy it all the more – no matter which way the pendulum swings. 🍷