How Modern Architecture is helping Wine to a New Change of Status?
Analysis of the Phenomenon of New Modern Wineries built by Known Architects

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Introduction

Our research focuses on the link between architecture and wine. Ten years ago in my University, I directed the first Master thesis on the subject. I had a student who was highly motivated by the topic and of course by the prospect of some wine tasting being part of the job. Santiago Calatrava had designed la Bodega Ysios in Laguardia the year before, as had Christian de Portzamparc the Château Cheval Blanc in Saint-Emilion. Frank Gehry had not yet started on the design for the future Bodega de Marques de Riscal and, of course, no one yet spoke about the project of Jean Nouvel at Château La Dominigue.

We tried to find any connection between these well-known architects and the wineries or the wine regions. Directly we found that Rioja and Bordeaux were two of the wine regions to focus on. At the end of that first work, no pattern was apparent. The study was in fact more a description of the wineries from an architectural point of view than a deep analysis of the phenomenon linking the rising status of wine to the use of famous architects to design wineries. This was in 2002.

It was as being part of the (last) XIXth century about wine. The Asian market was driving up wine prices, but the phenomenon was not so important as it is currently. We had not yet gone through the 2005 vintage and the crazy prices reached at the En Primeur release. Nobody foresaw the world economic crisis of 2008 and then 2011. Wine was not considered as important an asset for the financial markets ‘economic funds’ as it is now. The Luxembourg based fund Noble Cru didn’t exist, it would be founded six years after our first study. The Live-ex descriptor had only been in existence for three years and the Liv-Ex Bordeaux classification would be issued more than seven years after. Ancient times.

Currently, I am directing new Master theses and researches on the subject. In addition to describing the non-specialist have been designed and built since our first research project, we want to identify a pattern that could explain the phenomenon. Of course our work is still in progress Nonetheless, here are some hypotheses that quite possibly can explain some of the basic trends. Our main assumption is that at the beginning of this new century, the status of wine changed just as it changed status before.

Definition of architecture & Wine

Before discussing the topic, I would like to define what we mean by “architecture and wine” or more easily what we do not mean by the terms “architecture” and “wine”. We won’t focus on technical issues like planning, volumes or space for wineries. We won’t focus on issues like gravitation as a way of production for wine, the construction of conical tanks nor the planning of a winery on a slope; the flooring nor the coating of the life tanks. It may seem strange, but we will not even focus on the aesthetic point of view. The beauty of a building or the emotion that a building can trigger is not our concern. What we mean by the terms “architecture” and “wine” is the design of a winery by a very well known architect, let us say, one of the ten best and most expensive living architects. The four architects we selected are part of that definition.

Main question

In a few words, the question is “How can we explain the interest of some of the greatest wineries, part of the greatest wine regions, in asking some of the most world renowned and expensive architects to design their new buildings?” So the basic question is why, why did these wineries choose this style of architecture? The answer, in our opinion, is to be found in the changing status of wine.

Short history of wine status

In Ancient Greek and Roman times, wine was considered as a medium to enable the drinker enter a new psychological state, a sort of gateway to a new state of consciousness and of knowledge.

In the Middle Ages, wine was considered more as an everyday component of the diet /aliment and also as a safe drink. The water in towns was not healthy. Wine - and beer of course - were considered the healthiest and safest options. At the same time, the powerful used wine as part of their marketing project. Consider the Dukes of Burgundy who wanted the best wines to be served at their court. That was one of the reasons Philip the Bold, considered the first Duke, wanted to get rid of the “disloyal Gaamez” as in spite of its ability to grow in abundance it was full of “very great and horrible harshness”, and to replace it with the more “elegant” Pinot Noir. Sixty years later, Philip the Good, the third duke of Burgundy, issued another edict against Gamay in which he stated the reasoning for the ban was that “the Dukes of Burgundy are known as the lords of the best wines in Christendom. We will maintain our reputation”.

The concept of wine as an aliment lasted until after Pasteur and his work “Studies on wine” (in 1863) the source of the often quoted phrase “Wine is the healthful and most hygienic of beverages”. This work was carried out on the orders of the French Emperor, Napoleon III, the same Emperor that classified the Medoc in 1855. Why did he order the already well known (even at that time) scientist to carry out such a study about wine? The wine industry was undergoing the most serious crisis since its foundation. Diseases were everywhere. Oidium, mildew and, of course the
most dangerous: phylloxera. The French government could not abandon to its fate an industry as important as the wine industry without doing something. This was not only an economic problem but also a health and food supply issue for the entire population. Wine was the “most healthful and most hygienic of beverages”.

In the meantime, in Turin, the Count of Cavour hired the well-known Bordeaux oenologist Louis Oudart to help him make the best wines of the Piemont. The unification of Italy was at stake; and you could not negotiate properly if you had poor wine at your table! So wine continued to be considered an everyday drink for the masses and a marketing tool for the powerful.

At the beginning of the last century, right up through the First World War, the economic crisis of 1929 and the Second World War, wine was still considered as an aliment. At the beginning of the 60’s an annual average of 120 litres of wine was drunk per inhabitant in France (the figure is an average and includes all the French population, inclusive children). In the 30’s the French government set up the basis for the change of status of wine. This was the Decree of September 11th 1936 on the Appellation of Origin. The idea was followed more than 30 years later in Italy and Spain, then Portugal and other wine producing countries. Since (1992) and in fact 2006, there is a Council Regulation (EC No 510/2006 of 20 March 2006) for the protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indication (PGI), and traditional speciality guaranteed (TSG).

But the French members of the House of Representative in accepting the Decree between the two World Wars didn’t know that 70 years later this would become a European standard and, more importantly, that it was the basic framework wine needed to change its status.

1957 can be seen as the beginning of a new era in Europe. On the 25th of March, began a never seen before period of peace and prosperity with the Treaty of Rome, the forerunner of the European Union, leading up to the Noble Peace Prize awarded to the EU in 2012. France and Italy, the two biggest wine producers, were among the founding nations of the EU. Spain and Portugal joined the EC as it was then known in 1986. With mass consumption and the enlarging leisure society, wine changed from a healthy beverage to a hedonistic pleasure. The gap between the powerful and the masses narrowed. The decline of the basic wine with less alcohol, the so-called Vin de Table, had started. At the same time the demand for more quality wines, the Appellation Wines/ Vins d’appellation, increased. There was a change in the way wine was consumed, which implied a change in the products proposed to the consumers.

Studies show that the number of regular consumers of wine has decreased since the 60’s while the number of occasional consumers has increased. If our parents drank wine every day at dinner, our children won’t. So wine was seen as a cultural product, something more sophisticated. Emile Peynaud the second most important oenologist after Pasteur published in 1981 his famous treaty “Le Goût du vin” aimed at popularising the idea of sensorial analysis for the masses. This book has been re-edited since then, almost every year, and is still on the bestseller lists, more than six years after Peynaud’s death.

Facts and figures

This was the situation we were in ten years ago, in our previous study. What changed since then? We already gave some clues in the beginning of this talk. The wine market is now totally globalized and there is a sort of standardization of the products, wine critics have played their part in that phenomenon. But the most important thing is the explosion in prices for the first classified growth in Bordeaux and a number of other wines. 2005 was a particularly good vintage, which was well noted and prices reached heights never seen before. That was the beginning or, to be more accurate, the end of the process of the changing of status. Wine was no longer an affordable product, even with some financial effort. There was a division in wines between those you can buy and drink, and those that you cannot buy, and even if you did you would not open the bottle for dinner at home. These are the mythical wines that are more spoken of than drunk. When these wines are opened it’s mostly at public relation occasions, such as wine tastings or dinners for the press. These are wines that are no longer made for the purpose wine was first produced: a fermentation of vine grapes put in a glass bottle to be opened and drunk while eating.

If you look at the figure that shows sales in value and volume in Bordeaux in the last years, you’ll see in 2007 a change in the slope of the curves. Wine in volume is less and less sold while its value increases. So there’s something happening in the first decade of the new century.

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Note: 1 We said the process reached an end at the beginning of the new century. In fact, if you think about the second wines of the First Classified Growths, this could perhaps be seen as the very slow beginning of the process. To be clear, we don’t think about second wines in their original purpose: to maintain the quality of the first wine, especially in the poor vintages, but in the modern assumption: second wines being the sole one you can afford any more. So that’s what we called the creation of an archetype of wine.
At the same time, in 2008 to be precise, in Spain Monica Matellanes in her study “Gestion del enoturismo a través de internet” stated about the Spanish wine industry: “This is a fragmented industry, chaotic prices, lack of projections, preventing any planning beyond the year harvest, nor reliability, nor constant quality, the emphasis being on tradition more than innovation, with the strong conviction that the producer is the king, nor the consumer”.

There are more than 8 millions of oenotourists per year in France and more than 3 in Spain. These figures increase constantly. In Spain, in 2008, we had only 1.5 millions of oenotourists. In four years, Spain multiplied by 2 the number of vineyards’ visitors, and even an increased of 18 % between 2008 and 2009. This was just after the first financial crisis.

If you look at Bordeaux, in 2005 only 6.6 % of the tourists were interested in vineyard discoveries. Now they are more than 40 %.

New wine status

So it’s clear that there something happening in the past years. As a matter of fact, can we say, that wine entered a sort of museum? Let’s take an example. You have an idea of Château Léoville Las Cases, but there are less and less people who drink it. At best, you can afford the Clos du Marquis, their former second wine which is now a growth on its own, or more usually the Petit Lion de Léoville, their real second wine. With the development of the Internet and of the information society, this has been compensated for with numerous articles, blogs, describing the special taste of these museum wines, thus making the experience of some happy few drinking some of the most expensive wines accessible for everybody.

If wine has entered the museum, shouldn’t it be necessary to build real museums to house it? This is the point where we can find some parallel tracks between these special buildings designed by the most well known architects for some of the most well known wines. For some, it could be like the true envelope, the real museum holding what is becoming more an idea of wine than a product to buy and drink, for some others it could be some kind of way to force entrance into the select club.

In an interview at the newspaper Le Monde in 2012, Alain Dourthe CEO of Château Faugère told: “Why do you think that so many domains are building new wineries? For the love of art? For technical reasons? Let’s admit that. To answer international concurrence? I’ll accept it. But why since three years, why just now? You should know that the classification of Saint-Émilion is being revised. The classified growths want to stay in the club and the small ones want to enter it. To achieve that goal, all means are good”. And here come the last and true reason: “and for a wine less known as ours, it’s an opportunity to be under the spotlight”. To be talked about. Architecture constructs and reinforces the brand and the marketing asset of the wine. And architecture is directly involved in the classification of the first growth.
The impact of the renovation of the wineries is amazing. Just look at the example of the la bodega Marques de Riscal we spooked of and which was built by Frank Gehry. The architect realizes a complex which is a luxury hotel, wellness centre, reception rooms, restaurants, ... Before the architect intervention, we had in 2005 grossly 9,300 visitors per year. In 2011 the number increases till 70,000. It is an increase of more than 750 % of the visitors’ number in just 5 years. After the inauguration in 2006, the complex received 30,000 visitors, 60,000 the next year.

This is only the beginning. Architecture is on its way to enter the well known wineries. Currently, a lot of Bordeaux Castles are closed for renovation eg: Château Latour, closed till 2014; Château Mouton Rothschild, closed for an undefined period; Château Margaux, closed till April 2013; Château Pavie, closed till June 2013; Château Angelus, closed till June 2013; Château la Mission haut-Brion; and many others.

One final consideration, the visitors is not an expert. In the Bordeaux region, only 1 % of the visitors are visiting the region only for wine purpose.

The image of high level architecture as being an asset for the winery is exceeding expectations. The image and the reputation of the Wine Castle take an important place in the consumer’s choice. In the Bordeaux region, for example, 27 % of the tourists are visiting a winery on its reputation, or the reputation of its vineyard or its producer.

Before concluding, let consider a final remark about the way consumers visit wine regions. A wine trip is no longer seen as going to wineries in a region you like, tasting some wines and then buying boxes to bring back home. For the wines considered to be in the Pantheon of the most celebrated wines, it is more a global experience you can speak of. Often, you cannot even buy a single bottle after visiting the winery. How can you make this experience unforgettable? That’s where the architecture comes in. In fact, visiting a winery is more a description of an attitude. The important element here, behind the scenes, is that there are new ways of understanding wine, new ways of visiting wineries. Even smaller winemakers, for example, are starting to propose all included ‘wine tours’ and ‘wine weeks’ with visits of the wineries, journeys in vines, lunch or dinner, and so on. This is what we like to describe as a global wine experience and it is certainly a trend for the future. This trend is surely one of the explanations for these impressive new architectures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our paper showed that wine is undergoing a new change of status as it has undergone changes of status before. What makes the analysis more difficult is the fact that the changing is taking place just under our eyes. We are on the edge of having some wines entering the ‘museum’, being considered more an ‘archetype’ than for the basic purpose they were designed: a fermentation of vine grapes put in a glass bottle to be opened and drunk while eating. Architecture is playing a major part in this phenomenon: first as the constructed ‘envelope’ of the new wine museum; second as a way to make wine join the select club of monuments and paintings; third by helping some less know wines enter the club of the already ‘inaccessible’ wines. The fact that almost the major Bordeaux’ castles or Rioja’ bodegas are building new wineries, new hotels, new visitors centre by some of the most popular architects is just a consequence of this major trend. We can wonder if this trend will last for decades, or if it will just be a fashion for some years. That part of the story is yet to be written.