

# Wine Needs a New Social Contract

It's time for a reset from vineyards to restaurants

## By Robert Camuto

*Robert Camuto is a prize-winning American author and journalist based in Verona, Italy, who has spent more than two decades writing about the human side of wine, food, culture, and travel for major publications and in books such as *Corkscrewed* and *South of Somewhere*. He now publishes his [newsletter Italy Matters on Substack](#).*

You can't talk with anyone in the wine world nowadays without discussing THE CRISIS: consumption is down, Millennials and Gen Z are turning to cocktails or mocktails, and U.S. tariffs and threats make for (as my grandparents would say holding their abdomen) *agita*.

Wine crises come and go, sure. But this time feels different because everything else in our world is in crisis. And that all mashes up into the worlds of wine and hospitality.

People are hurting economically, a dollar is no longer worth a dollar, humans are getting laid off to be replaced with AI. Then there's the new synonyms for a world turned upside down: Greenland, Minneapolis, even Canada!

The Old World is dumbstruck. Life goes on, but who knows where it's going? This moment feels pretty late-1970s. Only now we're older and don't have the release of punk rock.

In this climate, the culinary origami of \$250 lunches, wine lists that start near \$100 a bottle and climb well into four-figures of the cultosphere, and \$50 for a glass of Barolo, seem not only out of reach but preciously out of touch.

A bubble? I think we've reached the apogee of a half-century boom of wine and food sophistication that's gone from the corporal and spiritual nourishment of farm to table to a luxury acquisition.

Wine in this century has often been a heated subject or a platform allowing us to show off our exquisite taste and selves. We've started tribes around it that can be predicted by reading someone's demographic profile or tattoos.

I have a problem with that. Because wine and food should never separate people. Wine and food should bring people together.

What I am proposing is a new social contract between wine producers, the hospitality industry and consumers. Herewith....

Article 1: There is a glut of special cuvées from wine producers self-proclaimed “important wines” that in fact aren’t. Legendary wines aren’t made overnight. The wine world doesn’t need more icons but solid “good” wines.

Article 2: What is a good wine? Good wines respect their environment, their workers and consumers. They are farmed without pesticides and herbicides (fungicides is a much more delicate question). They taste of fermented grapes and their land, and aren’t burdened by excessive alcohol, wood, or for that matter defects from high Volatile Acidity or Brettanomyces that are sometimes excused as “natural.”

Article 3: For environmental sustainability, we need to review everything in vineyards from placement and pruning systems to vinestock. As the climate has changed, vine diseases have evolved and vines have not. In that area we need to be open to gene editing (not GMOs) to increase plant resistance.

Article 4: Wine in moderation at table can be part of a healthy lifestyle.

Article 5: Wine in moderation at table can also build healthy character in our leaders. Taking a quick unscientific look at rolls of abstainers, I see Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Putin and POTUS—imbalanced narcissists all. American presidents with wine cellars started with Washington and Jefferson. Modern day wine loving presidents from two sides of the political spectrum-- Barack Obama and Ronald Reagan--both admired for personal qualities.

Article 6: Producers need to be transparent about every ingredient that goes into wine. If a jam producer puts citric acid or gum arabic in their product, they are listed as ingredients. Same should go for wine.

Article 7: The hospitality industry cannot continue to milk wine as its cash cow. I know many restaurants are faced with greedy landlords and crazy tax bills. But wine markups are out of control. In U.S. cities one \$25 glass of wine often at a wine bar or restaurant pays the costs of an entire bottle. The prices are a turn-off that turn wine into something elite and less than accessible. Who wants to experiment at those prices?

Article 8: Wine is about food and sharing. Let’s put more focus on the table as a place to enjoy each other’s company.

Article 9: We don’t necessarily need more celebrity chefs, but we need more good chefs and great cooks. In Italy—where cuisine has evolved over centuries as a culture to coax the best from nature without waste-- the best *trattorie* and restaurants express their locales and regions with grace and simplicity. Cuisine, like wine, is agriculture and craft—not contemporary art.

Article 10: We need a new definition of luxury. Real luxury is not being interrupted by a server who has been trained to explain the technical details of what you are about to eat or drink. Luxury is having a moment of sharing and self-restoration in a world gone mad. We don't need a lecture. We need a hug.