

Katherine Cole

‘I think of moulded plywood and feel hopeful’

The Eames chair is an iconic status symbol in today's modern home. Did you know that its sleek lines were originally a response to a wartime surgeon's plea for strong, lightweight, affordably mass-produced leg splints? Necessity is the mother and all that. We oenophiles know this well. After all, grapevines that struggle – pushing their roots deep into the subsoil to reach nutrients and groundwater – make wines of character.

2024 has proved to be rough for wine, from plummeting Bordeaux prices to dire health warnings. In the US, per-capita consumption of wine is back at 2011 levels. But as we enter the year's final stretch, I think of moulded plywood and feel hopeful.

Economic and social constraints are forcing the wine industry to pare back and reset. And maybe that's okay; maybe that's making wine leaner and more flexible than ever. If you admire the clean lines of mid-century modern design, consider the possibility that for wine lovers less is more in 2024, as evidenced by the following trends.

Chillable reds As younger consumers started seeking out light-bodied wine styles, 'chillable' became the catchphrase for lower-alcohol reds on wine lists and retail shelves. As a longtime fan of lightweights such as Lambrusco, I'd like to think this is more than a passing fad. (After all, American boxed-wine supermarket brand Franzia has been shilling 'Chillable Red' since the 1970s.) Of course, any red wine is best enjoyed when initially served at a cool cellar temperature, and lower-alcohol, higher-acid reds simply pair gracefully with most foods.

Quiet tasting rooms The post-pandemic rush of tourists to wine country in 2021 and 2022 created overcrowding, forcing visitors to book appointments months in advance and prepay exorbitant tasting room fees, which in turn projected an image of inaccessibility. That began to change this past year, as wineries quietly began taking walk-ins again, making it once again possible to discover a great destination in a delightful, old-fashioned way – by asking your tasting room host, 'Where should I go next?'



IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

On a recent trip to Austria, a highlight was a tasting session with Willi Bründlmayer and Andreas Wickhoff MW that included Bründlmayer's Ried Heiligenstein Lyra Riesling 2010, from vines trained to the lyre trellising system from a vineyard surely destined for Grosse Lage (grand cru) status.

Reticent in its youth, Ried Heiligenstein blossoms with age, displaying notes of spice, stone and tropical fruit, brine and pineapple and mouthwatering acidity.

Waning festivals Willamette Valley's vaunted International Pinot Noir Celebration took its final bow in 2024, at least in the format it has taken for decades. The festival was an absolute joy to experience, but it was also pricey, at \$1,742 for the weekend, before lodging. And it was an exhausting, days-long bacchanal that left even those with the strongest constitutions nursing hangovers. Several other US wine festivals announced this year that they would be ceasing operations due to waning attendance numbers and increasing costs. But never fear: the era of the wine fest isn't over. Instead, expect smaller, more manageable single-day gatherings, to be followed by a day of detox.

Shrinking bottles Wine's dirtiest secret is its elegant façade. Glass manufacturing potentially exposes workers to hazardous chemicals, and the glass alone can account for as much as half of a bottle of wine's carbon footprint. That all started to change following last October's groundbreaking Sustainable Wine Roundtable Bottle Weight Accord. We've recently seen breakthroughs, too, in hydrogen-based glass production and the development of the lightest-ever Champagne bottle. And, on my home turf of Willamette Valley, bottles from the wash-and-reuse company Revino hit store shelves this past summer, with an initial release of up to 720,000 refillable bottles from 16 Oregon wineries that will avert about 900 tonnes of CO₂ emissions. Less glass in the waste stream is a huge win for wine.

Eating earlier Since the pandemic, restaurant patrons have been stepping out earlier – especially in New York City, where reservations are nearly impossible to score due to a sub-culture of 'table scalping'. What does this mean for wine? Aperitifs are now accompanying entrees. Between chillable reds (see above) and Sancerre (the Taylor Swift effect), the welterweight wine is in its prime, and I'm all for it. It's like moulded plywood furniture: clean-lined and universally appealing. □

Katherine Cole is the author of five books on wine, as well as host and executive producer of James Beard Award-winning podcast *The Four Top*

