

Katherine Cole

‘Even the most secretive estates are reconsidering their codes of silence’



Remember when the finest wine was not only delicious, but also exclusive and intimidating? To get on the waitlist for an icon wine such as Screaming Eagle or Vega Sicilia, you had to either know or kill someone (ideally a parent, so that you could inherit their allocation).

But these days, when an influencer sommelier can sell out a competitor's wine overnight, even the most secretive estates are reconsidering their codes of silence. In place of the old, arcane website and the single annual release letter sent via snail mail, we're seeing effervescent marketing emails, welcoming hospitality programs and open online storefronts.

Even Heidi Barrett, of Screaming Eagle fame, has opened her first-ever tasting room. What's the world coming to when anyone armed with a credit card can pay \$50 to rub elbows with the woman Robert Parker once dubbed the Queen of Cult Cabernet?

I'm of two minds about this. On the one hand, I'm an enthusiastic supporter of widening the wine umbrella.

The more folks we invite in, the better wine will do and the more fun we'll all have. But clearly part of wine's allure stems from the fact that the best bottles and producers have historically been out of reach.

There's something genuinely enticing about cultivated indifference. Would Thomas Pynchon be so revered if he had ever given an interview? Would Banksy's art and Daft Punk's music be so compelling if people knew what they looked like? I once interviewed a cult Rhône winemaker who claimed he never poured his wines for visitors; he simply played music. He was essentially unfindable online. All of this was helping, not hindering, his sales.

But here in the US, formerly taciturn wine brands are increasingly emerging from the shadows with big, friendly fonts, sun-saturated photography and wide welcome mats. On blogs and message boards, Napa Valley in general, and 150-year-old Far Niente in particular, are being likened to Disneyland.

Dr Liz Thach MW, president of the Wine Market Council and author of several books on the wine

business, takes issue with this characterisation. Far Niente, she notes, still sells its Benson Vale Cabernet for a cool \$500 (albeit to any customer who lands on its website). And it has savvily navigated the recent drop in demand by launching Bella Union, a more accessible sibling brand.

And wineries that can afford it, Thach adds, are maintaining the mystique by simply sitting this downturn out. ‘True luxury brands are saying, “Sorry, we are not going to sell wine this year. We are holding it in our library.”’

Peter Yeung, co-author (with Thach) of *Luxury Wine Marketing* and interim CEO of Wente Vineyards,

agrees that inaccessibility and visibility need not be mutually exclusive. Hermès manages to make Birkin bags feel out of reach while marketing aggressively; Nike creates cult shoes while remaining one of the world's most recognised brands. ‘You can be more open,’ he says, ‘while still making the path to purchase challenging.’

The Champenoise, Yeung notes, worked this out long ago.

Dom Pérignon is both ubiquitous and aspirational. The trick is establishing just enough of a footprint for the right people to whisper about you in the right rooms. ‘The democratisation of media means that to be known the way you used to be, you must have a digital presence,’ he says. ‘Otherwise, in a sea of wine brands, you will never be talked about.’

So forget the code of silence, he says, because the litmus test has changed. As with the most coveted Nike sneakers, icon status is now measured on the secondary market, where Screaming Eagle, Harlan and Opus One all still trade strongly, and MacDonald Vineyards' Cabernet, which lists at around \$200 to its allocation members, sells from around \$600 up from merchants and auction houses.

‘And if people are counterfeiting your wine,’ he adds, ‘you know you have really arrived.’ **D**

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IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

Moët & Chandon purportedly produces five million bottles of its prestige cuvée **Dom Pérignon** each year, and yet the brand somehow maintains its air of exclusivity. The secret, I think, is a combination of discipline and patience: it's never non-vintage, ages a minimum of seven years before release, and is produced only in the finest years. I recently enjoyed the **2006** (£130ib-£315 Widely available), which struck me as richer and more tropical than I remembered from past vintages. But it was just as delicious as ever.



PHOTOGRAPH SHE SAW THINGS