

The future of wine lies in professionalism, not romanticism

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Wine journalist Felicity Carter argues the industry must abandon romantic idealism and embrace professionalism to survive. She discusses wine's cultural relevance, the importance of market access over terroir narratives, and how successful wine businesses balance artistic vision with pragmatic management. The future demands financial literacy alongside winemaking expertise.

Felicity Carter is one of the most influential international wine journalists and commentators. **Founder of Drinks Insider podcast, newsletter and consultancy**, she has built a career connecting journalism, markets, and culture. Her reflections cut through the noise of the global wine world, revealing what

wine truly says about our societies, our values, and our future. **In this conversation, she shares her views on** how wine culture is evolving, what communication needs to stay relevant, and how the industry can redefine its future

Felicity, you've dedicated years to analysing the global wine world through journalism, think-tanks, and advisory work. If you look at wine as a mirror of society, what does the current wine culture reveal about the way we live and think today?

It's a sign of how much better our life is in the modern world, compared to the past. In the past, wine was either a luxury for aristocrats and the rich, or it was a rustic drink that you created from your own vines, or the vines around your village. But now, almost anybody can have access to wine of a historically high quality; most supermarket wine is better than the wine enjoyed by many mediaeval monarchs, because it comes from riper grapes and is more stable.

It's also a sign of how sophisticated and interconnected our world is, because the only way this wine culture can exist is by a global system of logistics. We take all of this for granted, but it's pretty astounding.

Many say the wine world suffers from a crisis of meaning – too much data, not enough emotion. In your view, what would it take for wine communication to become truly culturally relevant?

For wine communication to be culturally relevant, wine would

have to be more central to society. If you look at other cultural areas, like books, gastronomy and films, you can see that the level of commentary rises and falls with the overall level of interest in the area. Films remain a cultural touchstone, so every major release is greeted with commentary and reviews, both in the media and on online forums. Over my lifetime, chefs have gone from being people who cook, to giant celebrities, and restaurant reviews from top reviewers are not just read, they're passed around.

Books, on the other hand, used to command an endless amount of critical and popular attention. Today, the book review columns are shrunken relics of their former selves, or they have disappeared altogether – it's a sign of books losing their cultural primacy.

The power of the commentary comes from how relevant the cultural good is, and wine is not of central importance to popular culture. Alas.

If you had to imagine the ideal wine communicator of the next decade, what qualities – intellectual, ethical, or creative – would define them?

I have to admit, I loathe the term “communicator” because I am never sure what it means. Critic, journalist, and influencer are all lumped under this word, and they all mean very different things.

The requirements of the job don't change very much. Critics need an excellent palate and a deep knowledge. Journalists need the ability to recognise a good story when they see one. Influencers need to be good at the technicalities of social media production, while also knowing how to unlock brand funding.

When I'm asked what people who want to become wine writers should do to advance their career, I always advise them to "marry someone rich". People laugh, but I'm serious. The ideal wine communicator will be somebody who has another income stream, so they're not stressed out by money the whole time.

As someone who bridges media and markets, you've seen how narratives shape value. Do you think the next real source of value in wine will come from terroir, from transparency, from imagination or from what else?

The biggest source of value in wine comes from its ability to access the market. This has always been true – the great wines of the past, from Mosel Rieslings to Bordeaux reds, were able to build their reputations because producers were on waterways and so had access to the great trading hubs of the world. Wine regions that didn't have that access never developed very much.

Today, getting access to the market means finding a good distributor, and that's getting harder and harder to achieve, particularly in the key US market.

Wine cannot exist unless it can be sold, and that means it needs a vibrant on-trade and hospitality sector. For as long as we have that, we'll have wine.

Public discussions around alcohol, health and sustainability often turn confrontational. What can wine communicators do to take a clear stance

on these issues while maintaining trust and openness with their audiences?

In general, it's better if most wine writers/influencers stay away from discussions on health, unless they have specific expertise or access to people with specialist knowledge. It's a complex topic that's easy to get wrong and, in any case, wine should not be presented as some kind of health potion.

The way to win trust with readers, on any topic, is to be fair and open minded, and include a range of viewpoints.

Luxury wine once stood for rarity and reputation. Today, younger consumers seek purpose and ethics. How should fine wine reinvent its identity to remain aspirational in this new moral economy?

Luxury wine and fine wine are generally considered different things – luxury wines are created to be positioned as prestige products. These are the very expensive trophy wines that people create specifically for the purposes of prestige. When the market is no longer interested in them, they will disappear or morph into something else.

Fine wine, on the other hand, is wine that's recognised for *intrinsic and cultural value*, which comes from origin, craftsmanship, and ageing potential. I don't think this group of wines need to reinvent themselves. One of the most interesting things that's happened in the past few years is that a much younger group of wine lovers is embracing fine wine – auction houses are reporting that the 28-40-year-old cohort is playing a bigger role. That's a group they've never seen before. It seems that heritage and culture still matters. As does rarity.

You've met many influential figures in wine. What has surprised you most about how real leadership shows up, and what it reveals about power and self-awareness in this industry?

Very successful wine companies, especially in the fine wine sector, take the business of wine extremely seriously. They go out of their way to employ talented people and they spend a lot of time talking to their customers and trying to understand their needs.

The real leaders in wine also generally stand for something. Many people think they stand for something, because their wines are made sustainably or whatever, but they don't really have a point of view. Real leaders have a vision of who they want to be, and they're simultaneously pragmatic and uncompromising.

Looking ahead, what single idea or belief about wine do you hope will *not* survive the next ten years, and what new idea would you like to see take its place?

One of the most frustrating things about being a business journalist reporting on wine has been talking to so many people who have bought into the romance of wine, who think that producing a product that they personally like is enough. There are too many people who think that if they're business-like it means they will have to create shoddy products, and that responding to the market is the same thing as being shamelessly commercial.

I would like to see a professionalisation of the sector, where finance and good management are taken as seriously as knowing

about trellising and terroir. This is how the arts works. Opera and theatre companies think all the time about their finances and how to balance the need for crowd-pleasing shows that will bring in the money, with more esoteric and demanding artistic projects. If art galleries can take this seriously, then wine companies can too.

Key points

1. **Wine's quality reflects modern wealth:** even supermarket wines surpass historical standards once reserved for monarchs.
2. **Market access determines wine's value:** distribution networks matter more than terroir for commercial success and reputation.
3. **Wine lacks cultural centrality:** unlike films or gastronomy, wine remains peripheral to popular culture today.
4. **Young collectors embrace fine wine:** the 28-40 age group increasingly drives auction markets, valuing heritage and rarity.
5. **Professionalism must replace romanticism:** the industry needs financial management as rigorous as winemaking craft itself.