



# GENIUS OF THE BOTTLE

Michel Rolland's presence is felt throughout the world of wine and he has arguably changed forever the vinification process, yet his scientific techniques have become highly controversial. Richard Middleton speaks to an oenological revolutionary.



Everyone seems to agree, whether you are speaking to a fan or a critic that, over his 35 year career, Michel Rolland has changed the face of the multi-billion pound wine industry. With his hotly debated techniques for transforming dwindling vineyards into productive, and of course, profitable concerns, he has positioned himself as a wine guru. But his projects certainly pay financial dividends. And he's stirred up a fair amount of controversy along the way.

'I came into the wine business in 1973 and at that time everything was wrong because the 60s and 70s were only oriented to production, not quality,' Rolland says. 'At that time nobody was speaking about the New World, and the historical vintages were 1961, 1959, 1947, 1945 and 1929 – five very good vintages in almost 70 years – it's not that many.'

### Root and branch

So Rolland dissected what made those years great, a seemingly simple idea but one which would transform the techniques used by hundreds if not thousands of vineyards across the world.

'When we look for why certain vintages were great, some common factors become obvious: warm years, good ripeness and small production. And all those vintages were harvested by hand – no crushing, no screwing, no pumping, just gravity – showing a great respect for the grapes' integrity.

'My technique has been simply to return to the traditional concepts. First of all, we had to produce the best grapes, because none of the years are the same. Removing leaves was the first thing we did in a few vineyards, to allow more sun through and to avoid diseases like powdery mildew or botrytis.

Critics of Rolland argue this is the problem. He is, to them, an all-consuming global force, reducing the art and finesse of wine production to a mere formula.

The controversy and Rolland's celebrity status resulted in one of the wine world's definitive big-screen moments, Jonathan Nossiter's 2004 film *Mondovino*. In the film Nossiter explored just what made Rolland's techniques so controversial. He contrasted converts' adoration with the opinions of those who argued that producers' are too easily won over by 'Parker-friendly wines (controversial wine critic Robert Parker).

In the film, Rolland is the first to implore those against him to taste the variety of the wines he helps to produce and is quick to point out the huge variation of wine he helps to create. He works with several hundred vineyards and it is an eclectic array of clients: it was Rolland who developed Californian wine brand Mondavi's Merlot, producing around 100 million bottles each year. And yet he also works closely with ex-Cartier boss Alain Perrin's modestly sized but well regarded Chateau Lagrezette vineyard, producing a mere 250,000 bottles a year.

Rolland was born into wine. Growing up on his family's Le Bon Pasteur estate, he later studied at the esteemed Bordeaux Oenology Institute, where his talents inevitably bubbled to the surface. In 1973, he joined what has become one of the world's most influential wine laboratories – testing, recording and examining 800 different wine samples each year. While Rolland's business developed exponentially from then on, he has witnessed an industry in constant flux and, some would argue, the demise of the French monopoly on great wines.

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'Step by step, we began green harvesting, to establish more even production from plant to plant. Mother Nature is not really controlling the number of grapes and even less so the number we can have on each plant – this part has certainly been the most difficult because we had to learn how to do it well.'

It was this obsessive attention to detail that ensured Rolland's success. While the grapes that were produced created better wines, the facilities and logistics of his processes were time-heavy, he explains.

'We came back to more respectful treatment for the grapes,' he says. 'No crushing, no pumping, using smaller tanks to keep the different parcels separate. In the mid 80s, temperature control gave us greater ability to manage the process and to establish the right vinification for all types of grape.'

As these techniques flourished, Rolland's opinion of terroir and its importance developed. 'All these modern techniques gave us more chance to reveal the *terroir*. I don't want to be unfair but everybody remembers great names producing very poor wines by their standards in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Now, it's definitely more consistent.'

### Wine scientist

By 1985 Rolland had begun consulting in the US and his role, and that of the traditional oenologist, had been transformed. He would visit each vineyard, taking samples of the soils and the wines, keeping a constant check on the proceedings with scientific precision.

'When I began to work, the oenologist's role was to avoid problems,' he says candidly. 'In the 90s it was to improve the quality and now it's to try making the best wine in any case – that's why we don't have bad vintages like we had before. Every year is different – simple or more complex, but we can produce many more consistent wines.'

'In the beginning, three countries were producing more than 60% of wine production, and two of them were controlling 80% of exports,' he explains. But as the New World became more known for its wines and the general public's knowledge of wine developed, vineyards had to adapt to a radically different scene. 'And now of course the market is even larger now, with consumption growing in Brazil, Russia, China and India.'

### The French disconnection

And it is, Rolland argues, the Old World's inaction that is at the root of the problem.

'The biggest threat comes from our ability to develop,' he explains. 'And it's much more difficult in the Old World where we have traditions, which are sometimes too heavy. In the New World, they have no limits.'

'But all wine concepts are from the Old World and, if you have a look carefully, everyone competes with the Old World. The US is comparing their production with French wines: nobody is saying, "I did better than Chile or Australia".'

Rolland is equally supportive of the global wine industry. 'There are more and more good wines that come from all over the world, and they're all creating good competition and making the wine business very attractive for the consumer. Wine has always been a social and cultural phenomenon in the Old World and it's now beginning to be the same in the New World.'

Though it is close to four decades since Rolland first began experimenting, he has no plans to quit. And there is certainly no shying away from his influence on the wine industry as a whole, a point it seems he is well aware of. 'Certainly, in the good sense, everybody agrees with that today.' ■