ON WINE

The LeBron Factor: Who Drives Wine Trends Today

When LeBron James uncorks a bottle, the effect is viral. In this era of social-media influencers and crowdsourced ratings, which sources can wine drinkers trust?

ILLUSTRATION: LINCOLN AGNEW
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LAST NOVEMBER, LeBron James posted a photo of the 2014 Jordan Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon on his Instagram account (@kingjames). The following day, a user named Meg posted a review of a Jordan Chardonnay on Vivino, the popular wine app, awarding the wine 4.5 out of 5 stars. Her tasting note read simply “LeBron.”

Mr. James isn’t merely a legendary power forward for the Los Angeles Lakers; he’s also one of the most influential social-media stars today, with over 42 million followers on Twitter and 47 million on Instagram. Many of those followers are focused less on his athletic prowess than on the wines that he drinks. (Lots of fancy California Cabernets and Super Tuscanes, as it happens.)

Not so very long ago, it would have been unthinkable for a pro athlete to be one of the most influential voices in wine; these days, it’s a different ballgame. Today’s oenophiles are attentive to all kinds of opinions, including those that are crowdsourced.

Lisa Mattson, marketing director at Jordan Winery in Healdsburg, Calif., was alerted to Mr. James’s post by colleagues and customers, many of whom follow the basketball star on Instagram. Why, I asked, did she think the Vivino user Meg wrote “LeBron” in her review of a Jordan Chardonnay and not the Jordan Cabernet Mr. James actually posted about? Ms. Mattson speculated that Meg might simply have preferred Chardonnay. “Or she might not have wanted to spend $50 on Cabernet,” she added. (Jordan Chardonnay, by comparison, costs about $30.) Either way, the nod acknowledged that the influence of the basketball great extends far beyond an NBA court.

Whether it’s an Instagram post by a celebrity, a rating on a wine app made by a stranger or a casual conversation among friends, myriad sources influence oenophiles in their buying decisions today. A recent Instagram story from Kim Kardashian West, for instance, doubled the number of social-media followers for JNSQ Rosé Cru, according to Clarence Chia, senior vice president of marketing and e-commerce for JNSQ Wines. And Ms. Kardashian West wasn’t the only boldfaced name linked to the unmistakable flagon-shaped JNSQ bottle with its rose-shaped stopper: Martha Stewart posted her own photo of it in an Instagram story, noting the “excellent” packaging—though she said nothing about how the wine tasted.

It’s a very different landscape than it was 20 years ago, when a handful of powerful critics held sway. Back then, one person’s name and scores mattered most of all. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the lawyer-turned-critic Robert M. Parker, Jr., regularly appeared on the covers of magazines, wine-related and otherwise, and was even the subject of a profile on CBS’s “60
Minutes II.” When he awarded a 100-point score in his newsletter, “The Wine Advocate,” the winery’s reputation was made and the wine was guaranteed to sell out.

But by the time Mr. Parker sold his majority stake in the Wine Advocate, in late 2012, his influence was waning as other critics and platforms—from blogs and online chat forums to apps and podcasts—vied for attention. The Wine Advocate cycled through critics after that; some of the best known, including Antonio Galloni and Jeb Dunnuck, eventually left to start their own newsletters.

Mr. Galloni has been particularly prolific, adding prominent critics from other publications to the team at his Vinous newsletter. Their scores appear on the shelves at wine stores along with those of long-established publications such as Wine Spectator, Wine Enthusiast and Wine & Spirits.

With so many critics entering the fray, individual name recognition has eroded; scores have become the sole focus of many drinkers, with little regard for the person or publication bestowing them. Not a single (nonprofessional) wine drinker I polled named a particular critic or publication as their most-trusted source. My sample of two dozen or so was so single-mindedly score-focused they didn’t note whether scores were awarded by individual critics in established publications or a crowd of users on wine forums or apps.

The creators of the app Vivino harnessed the power of crowdsourcing when they launched in 2010. Some Vivino reviewers are wine professionals but most are “regular” drinkers; in total, registered users number about 35 million according to Vivino CEO Chris Tsakalakis. Their 120 million-plus wine ratings and 41 million reviews can be accessed by anyone who downloads the free app. The company provides the opportunity to buy wine via the app, too, with access to a
network of stores all over the U.S. and in nine other countries. Participating stores pay Vivino a fee on each bottle sold.

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Hardcore oenophiles have their own favorite crowdsourced site: CellarTracker. Created in 2003 as a hobby by former Microsoft employee Eric LeVine, this combination chat forum, tasting-note repository and cellar-inventory system was visited by nearly 10 million users last year alone. Those who favor CellarTracker tend to be “wine nerds,” according to Mr. LeVine. They’ve helped create a massive database of bottles—some 7 million notes on 3 million wines as of this writing. “That number will be much larger by the time your story is published,” said Mr. LeVine. Currently 586,000 registered Cellar Trackers pay a sliding fee based on the size of their cellars, starting at $20 a year, which includes automatic valuation of a collection based on auction and pricing data. Nonmembers are free to search for ratings and recommendations.

Less-obsessed drinkers tend to seek guidance closer to home. When the editors of VinePair, a magazine with a readership of 5 million-plus, polled readers, some 70% cited friends as their most trusted source of opinions about wine, according to VinePair co-founder Adam Teeter. Furthermore, VinePair readers, who fall mostly in the 21-44 age range, revealed themselves in the poll to be suspicious of wine professionals, including sommeliers and wine merchants. “They think they are just trying to sell them something,” said Mr. Teeter.

Among the wine merchants and sommeliers I interviewed, one name came up over and over again as the most trusted source: Rajat Parr, wine director of Restaurant Michael Mina in San Francisco. Active on social media, Mr. Parr also offers unimpeachable old-school credentials. He has been a sommelier and a wine director at some of the top restaurants in the country as well as a vintner with wineries in Oregon and California. He’s co-authored two wine books and starred in the documentary film “Somm.” Pascaline Lepeltier of Racines in New York—herself named 2018 Best Sommelier in France by the government-sponsored Meilleur Ouvriers de France competition—noted, “He has the knowledge of a winemaker/distributor/retailer, has traveled extensively, has the friendship to [consult] producers and has an incredible memory with a great sense of synthesis and perspective. Plus, he shares his knowledge, which is rare and fantastic.” Femi Oyediran, co-owner of Graft Wine Shop & Bar in Charleston, S.C., recalled, “I think all of us coming up were looking to see what Raj was drinking, especially in the early days of ‘wine gramming.’

Mr. Parr posts favorite bottles on Instagram and Twitter (his handle for both is @rajatparr), and collectors as well as wine professionals follow him. But he is modest about his effect. “I was an early adopter of social media, not for influence but for fun,” he said. Though he has been offered money to feature particular wines in his posts, he has always declined. “I don’t even
entertain that,” he said. For his own edification, Mr. Parr follows wine-conscious public figures on social media, including Mr. James. “I heard LeBron was drinking Giuseppe Rinaldi in a restaurant,” Mr. Parr related with obvious approval. (Rinaldi is one of the great Barolo producers.) And he acknowledged the importance of the old-school wine critics that came before: “They are the people who set the world up for us.”

Today, an oenophile can find a source to suit his or her preferences or desired degree of engagement. Those listed at right will serve anyone from a casual wine drinker to a serious collector—for the moment. Who knows where we’ll seek recommendations a decade from now? Perhaps a new critic will emerge, as Mr. Parker once did, to change the game once again. Or maybe that will be up to yet another wine-drinking basketball star.

**VIRAL WINES / Our Wine Columnist Reviews Buzzed-About Bottles**

From left:

**2017 Le Briseau Patapon Blanc $25**

Globe-trotting wine director/vintner/author/social-media influencer/documentary star Rajat Parr drinks all kinds of fabulous wines and posts about them on Instagram and Twitter (@rajatparr). This Chenin Blanc from the Loire, one of his recent favorites, is a fun, bright, minerally wine with lots of energy and verve.

![Image](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-lebron-factor-who-drives-wine-trends-today-11552053545)

**2014 Jordan Alexander Valley Sonoma Cabernet $50**

This plush and easy-drinking Cabernet Sauvignon from Sonoma appeared on LeBron James’s Instagram feed (@kingjames) last November. Of the many Cabernets that the basketball great
has posted about, this wine remains one of only a few with a price in the two-figures range.

2018 JNSQ Rosé Cru $25
A nod from Kim Kardashian West gave this rosé a boost on Instagram. But the perfume-flagon bottle and blossom stopper only underline that it is all flash and no flavor. PR materials say it was designed to appeal to “millennial women,” so I recruited one to taste it with me. She called it “basic.” I call it utterly devoid of character.

Trusted Sources for Every Sort of Wine Lover

For the Wine Nerd
CellarTracker
This website, a combination of wine reviews, chat forums and a wine-cellar management system, is a favorite among wine geeks. Those who wish to avail themselves of the management system pay a fee, but the site’s 7 million notes can be searched for free.

For the Tech-Savvy Sipper
Vivino
There are many free wine apps out there, but none match the breadth and depth of Vivino. It offers users the ability to post a review and read millions of others, and to buy the bottles featured, too.

For the Status Drinker
LeBron James
The basketball great has great taste in great wine. You may not be able to play like LeBron, but you can drink like him if you have a taste—and the budget—for cult wines like the 1997 Tenuta San Guido Sassicaia Bolgheri ($327). Or you can just live vicariously through his Instagram feed (@kingjames).

For the Wine Pro (Or Wannabe)
Rajat Parr
The globe-trotting Mr. Parr (@rajatparr) is a California-based sommelier turned vintner turned social media savant who posts extraordinary and/or rare bottles that everyone wants.

**For Everyone Else**

**Wine-Savvy Friends**

One of the best ways to find a wine you like is by asking knowledgeable friends. And that's exactly what most wine drinkers do according to a recent poll by VinePair magazine, as well as a survey of wine drinkers I spoke to for this story.

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