

# Orange man on a mission: A clear-eyed, passionate view of a vinous phenomenon

*Amber Revolution:  
How the World  
Learned to Love  
Orange Wine*  
Simon J Woolf

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It was 2011, and Simon Woolf had just launched his web-based debut in wine journalism, *The Morning Claret*, dedicated to “celebrat[ing] the lesser known, the wilfully obscure, the under-appreciated nooks and crannies of fermented grape juice.” The glass he had just been handed, as he vividly recounts in his new book, was literally obscured by the surrounding darkness of a limestone cave near Trieste. But as his eyes adjusted, he glimpsed “a luminous amber liquid, seemingly tinged with an electric pink afterglow.” The wine’s aromas, he relates, hit him like a shaft of sunlight and its flavours like the “release [of a] life force.” The root of this where-have-you-been-all-my-life revelation, he learned, was the fermenting of white grapes as if making red wine. “I returned home (London, at the time) with a mission,” Woolf writes, “[to] explain what the[se] wines were about, [and] why they looked, tasted and smelled so different.” He quickly realized, though, that this meant entering largely uncharted territory. It took six years before Woolf felt confident that he could offer readers that explanation, in the course of which he recounts the research, tastings, and discussions with winemakers, and eventually even the bit of his own winemaking that had to come first. By that time, the vinous phenomenon in question—while

arguably still underappreciated—no longer resided solely in obscure nooks and crannies of the wine world, to no one’s delight more than Woolf’s. What remained most obscure about orange wine were its ancient origins and the serendipitous circumstances surrounding its recent re-emergence, and those themes dominate seven of the 11 cleverly titled chapters that occupy two thirds of *Amber Revolution*.

The book’s title, as Woolf explains when asked, reflects considerable head-banging. Exception might be taken to the word “revolution” as a bit of hyperbole, but Woolf was dead set on it. Yet, as long as Ukraine’s political upheaval of 2004–05 was still vivid in the world’s collective memory, qualifying a revolution as “orange” was liable to land a book on wine in the wrong company. Unfortunately, no color-descriptor or indeed no one- or even two-word description really captures the concept of skin-fermented wine from white (or *gris*) grapes. And the bald simplicity of “orange”—while it proved useful in sympathetic quarters for rallying around—also enabled detractors to dismiss or spit out their disgust for the genre with a single word that seemed to connote lack of seriousness, never mind that those disparaging orange wine often had little direct experience and much misunderstanding. At one point, that could have been said of Hugh Johnson, who subsequently accepted Woolf’s invitation to a tasting and discussion described in the book. To be sure, a considerable source of misunderstanding and suspicion surrounds the association of skin-fermented white grapes with “natural wine,” radical non-interventionism, and abhorrence of sulfur. That association is on sound grounds statistically speaking, but the lucid explanations of orange-wine methodology that appear as side-bars throughout *Amber Revolution*—including one devoted exclusively to

refuting common misconceptions—help disentangle the essential from the merely coincidental, and the scientific as well as aesthetic from the ideological.

That is not at all to say that the ideological underpinnings, aesthetic ideals, or ancillary techniques that have accompanied the emergence or renaissance of orange wine are unimportant or uninteresting. In fact, these constitute a substantial share of Woolf’s chronological accounts focused first on Friuli (and adjacent Slovenia), then on Georgia, and finally touching on the international impact of orange wine, each of these sections prefaced and thereby suspensefully tied to the next by Woolf’s riveting account of some seminal turn of events in the life of Joško Gravner. The centrality of human emotion to the evolution of viticulture and winemaking, as well as to regional self-identification, is emphasized again and again, each of many significant players in the orange-wine saga being treated in considerable biographical and psychological detail.

## Behind the Great Awakening

Equally emphasized is the historical background against which winegrowing techniques, grower alliances, and winemaking movements arise. In fact, the wealth of historical detail into which Woolf delves may well be unprecedented in a wine book that doesn’t have “history” or “the story of” in its title—and by no means are the details all specific to viticulture and vinification. If you aren’t interested in reading about disasters natural and (especially) manmade—including the impacts of fascist and communist oppression, two World Wars and a Cold War—about Slovenian and Georgian nationalism or religious identity, then your eyes may begin wandering at certain points in *Amber Revolution*. But Woolf is such an adept story-teller that most readers are apt to become engrossed. Moreover, the aforementioned details are not only likely to enhance one’s eventual appreciation of the wines; they are also critical to addressing Woolf’s question, “What links the republic of Georgia with Friuli-Venezia Giulia and western Slovenia?” In light of his answer, the transmission of orange-wine tradition mediated by Gravner is revealed not just as a stroke of fortune but as a truly remarkable coincidence.



Photography courtesy of Simon Woolf

Another unusual feature of this book is its profligacy with photographs, the majority of which were taken recently by Ryan Opaz, but many of which are historical, charting not just the past hundred or so years of Friulian, Slovenian, and Georgian history but also the past several decades in the (re-)emergence of orange wine. Yet even in instances where these illustrations are downright duplicative, like Woolf’s prose they do a fine job in conveying sense of place and human character. While there is frequent mention in this book of “terroir expression,” Woolf does little to explore the site-specific dimensions of orange wine. He does, however, insightfully delve into the adaptability of specific white (or *gris*) grape varieties to skin-fermentation.

The final third of *Amber Revolution* is taken up with concise but evocative thumbnail descriptions of “recommended producers” organized by nationality, with Italy and Georgia predictably dominating. These are visually well laid-out—like the rest of the book—and capped by a thorough and well-structured index. Woolf should also be highly commended personally for the virtual absence of errata, seeing that his book initially appeared in its present form as a self-publication that was funded through Kickstarter.

Two omissions from *Amber Revolution* are especially worth noting, though not as criticisms, since Woolf

explicitly acknowledges both, citing his desire to keep a focused narrative and hold total pages to a modest limit (300, as it happens). The number of Austrian growers profiled in his book, for example, would have to have multiplied several-fold if Woolf were to have included those with only one or two orange wines in their portfolios. And the inclusion of a mere half dozen growers from France—a country where there is certainly considerable buzz surrounding orange wine—is unsurprising provided one attends to Woolf’s self-imposed limitation to profile solely growers who are “either making their entire range of white wines with maceration or at least a substantial proportion.” (Fred Nizer at Domaine de l’Ecu and Mathieu Deiss were the only additional French growers meeting that standard who occurred to this reviewer—and Woolf has since profiled the latter on his website.) Despite his caveat “that if a winery only makes one white wine, but it is a macerated marvel, that qualifies” for a profile, Woolf makes hardly any such exceptions, not even for two of the best-known, extremely promising skin-fermented whites of Austria that are one-of-a-kind for their producers: Bernard Ott’s “Qvevre” and Toni Söllner’s “Irden,” both from the small Wagram region. It should go without saying, though, that a grower’s commitment to just one such wine can not only become long-standing, but by no means precludes seriousness or even eventual fame.

After all, the fact that Clos Rougeard, Château Rayas, and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti each vinifies just a single white wine constituting a tiny share of estate production has not prevented the wines in question from become icons of their respective genres.

Despite emphasizing the enormous diversity of technique being employed to craft orange wines, Woolf also omits significant consideration of growers whose fermentative extraction from white grapes is confined to extremely brief skin contact; to lots destined for blending; or to the limited inclusion of crushed or whole berries in one’s ferment. A wealth of vinous evidence points to the profoundly delicious potential of such approaches. And they have become so widespread that it is almost misleading anymore to use the expression “experimental,” even with growers who have only recently begun practicing them. Amusingly, their employment often comes with a grower’s disclaimer to “please don’t think of this wine as ‘orange.’” But timing and a wealth of anecdotal evidence make clear that, notwithstanding precedents in the dim past, the recent emergence of wines that might with tongue-in-cheek be called “orange light” is due to the attention and gradual respect being paid full-fledged skin-fermentation of white grapes.

Both the infiltration of orange wines into portfolios still overwhelmingly dominated by red, white, or rosé, and that of white-skin fermentative extraction into the repertoire of otherwise mainstream growers, have potentially profound implications. They fit a pattern that also encompasses increasing acceptance, indeed considerable emerging appeal, of what might be called “almost-red” wines—products of black grapes that are inherently shy in pigmentation or are macerated only a little past the point of pink—a genre that shares orange wine’s historical precedent, but fell from fashion in the declining 20th century. (Perhaps there is even hope for revived interest in *vins ambrés* of the original, oxidative sort.) Wine growers are coming to recognize and relish the full bandwidth of phenolic extraction available for broadcasting entertainment and transmitting terroir. For this Great Awakening, the word “revolution” may well be no exaggeration.