

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Sanity in Wine Making

The kinds of wine I prefer offer better balance than most of the oafish things now being gilded with exalted scores.

In the current mode, huge wine is in, and that usually means formless wine that lacks the nuances that take a wine from the ordinary to the sublime. Yet many wine makers seem perfectly content to blithely offer their low-acid, high-pH, blowy wines and they do this by saying, with a straight face, that they are waiting for "physiological maturity."

That's just claptrap gobbledegook.

Most wine grapes reach a level where the fruit has plenty of flavor to make fine wine when it reaches 23°. Perhaps a point higher, but no more. Most scientists see this move by wine makers toward excessively ripe fruit as a ploy to avoid any trace of the herbal components that seem not to be favored by a few wine reviewers.

Rather than take an over-used case such as Napa Cabernets from any year you'd care to name, let's look at a place where sanity still operates now and then: Australia.

The 1998 vintage was praised to the hilt by most of the world's top wine reviewers; 1999 received cooler reviews. Yet I loved the 1999s a lot more than the majority of the 1998s I tasted.

So recently I called one of that nation's wine writing doyens and as insightful a wine columnist as there is.

Jeremy Oliver is thoughtful and a superb evaluator, so I asked him his opinion of the two vintages and how

they are being regarded in Australia.

Oliver's comments are quite revealing, especially in light of the fact that many U.S. wine evaluators have already heaped lavish praise on the red wines from Australia in 1998 and then offered only faint praise for the 1999s.

"1998 was a year of wasted opportunity," said Oliver. "Many growers tended to leave fruit out on the vine a lot longer than they probably ought to simply because they could. So we had wines that ended up being over-ripened.

"To be sure, there are some outstanding 1998s, but the year ended up inconsistent, and characterized by blocky, cooked red wines.

"1999 was a cooler year without being cool, even a normal year, and as a result the wines are finer, more elegant. There is a certain sweetness and smoothness about these wines, and an integration that you don't see across the 1998s. It has been regarded as more classical.

"The discussion reminds me of the one we had about 1990 and 1991. The 1990 harvest was a lot hotter and the wines were more powerful. The 1991s were more ethereal and restrained. Well, 1990 got all the press. But people are just waking up to it now that 1991 was a finer vintage."

That leads me back to a chat I had with Andrew Wiggan, wine maker for Peter Lehmann wines, the great Barossa Valley producer, which

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Dry Creek Trio

Inspired by the wines of the Loire Valley, David Stare began making Sauvignon Blanc in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley in 1972.

Today his Dry Creek Vineyard remains one of California's stars with this grape.

The three just released (see Page 3) include a Sauvignon Musqué, a clonal selection of Sauvignon Blanc that all except the U.S. government say is significantly different from other clones of SB.

This wine is barrel fermented and is a unique addition to the Dry Creek line.

The other two wines in the line, the regular Sonoma County and the more exotic DCV3, are superb drinking now, but both are a few years away from what I believe will be their most exotic form.

I have done many vertical tastings of this variety with Stare, and his daughter and son-in-law, Kim and Don Wallace and am always struck by how well these wines age.

Age a few yourself and see.

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Sanity

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reflects back on his visit here during last year's harvest.

To say the least, Wiggan was a bit blunt on his opinion of Napa Valley viticulture in regard to the lateness of harvest, and our reliance on harvest sugars as a measure of ripeness.

Wiggan said he used to test for sugars as well. "Some poor coot has to be out there in the sun picking, and then when we get the samples back to the winery, what are we looking for?"

He said that more than a decade ago, he realized that sugar ripeness was no accurate measure of anything. "We haven't tested sugars since 1989," he said.

The problem, he said, was so

simple he was surprised he hadn't figured it out sooner: "We realized that different vineyards do different things in different vintages. They really vary greatly from year to year," so what might be ripe under certain sugar readings could well be under-ripe another year and over-ripe still another year.

"I'm always concerned about the high end of the alcohol spectrum," said Wiggan. "We we get something in at 15 [% of alcohol], I have to look around for [some fruit at] 13 to blend in. For me, the 'sweet spot' for Shiraz is at about 14% alcohol, maybe 14.2% or even 14.5%. But with Cabernet, it's lower, between 13.5% and 13.8%"

Not every Lehmann wine hits

the nail on the head. Though I liked his 1998 Stonewell Shiraz (\$75), I have heard from others that the 1999 (not yet released) is a better wine.

Meanwhile, I keep trying the 15% wines and can't get a single (small) glass down. Too hot. Too heavy. Not a wine to go with food.

And since I consume food with almost all red wines, and have no real desire to make a plate of mature cheeses my main course any time soon, I am left with only one choice: wines with balance.

And what might those be? Try Italy for a start. And Spain, New Zealand, Australia, and Germany. And then add in Austria, South Africa.

Is there a message here?

A Softer Proposal

California's major wine trade group has asked the government to reduce the percentage of vintage wine in some vintage-dated bottles from 95% to 85%.

However, the proposal by Wine Institute is softer than one that had been discussed earlier that would have affected all wines.

The new proposal, which was filed with the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, seeks to permit a vintage-dated wine to be defined as one in which 85% of the grapes came from the named year if

that wine is "labeled with a state, multi-state, county, or multi-county appellation of origin."

That would mean that wines designated Napa Valley would continue to follow the existing rule and would have to be composed of at least 95% of its fruit from the named vintage.

However, under the proposal, wines designated Sonoma County could well come in at the proposed 85%. This would give Sonoma County wineries a bit of an edge in making fine-tuning decisions when a

vintage comes along that is not particularly good. A greater percentage of fruit from a following vintage could be blended in, improving the blend.

Interestingly, the new rule could create some creative scenarios in which a vintner could use the new rule to advantage.

For instance, assume Napa Valley is hit with horrendous rain at harvest some year (similar to 1972). Assume the following year the grapes are sensational. A winery could choose to blend in 15% of the better fruit, and change the appellation to Napa County. (Only savvy wine buyers would notice the change.)

Wine Institute said it discussed but discarded a proposal that would have permitted multi-vintage labels.

The proposal is aimed in part at making sure imported wine is held to at least 85% of the vintage.

Wine of the Week

2001 St. Pauls Lagrein, Alto Adige, Gries Vineyard, "Exclusiv" (\$22): This cool-climate Italian red wine grape here exhibits a dark blueberry and black cherry aroma, and is (as it should be) low in tannins, but has sufficient acidity to make it quite friendly with lighter meat dishes and even some heavier seafood such as salmon and tuna. Imported by Tesori, 310-455-9463.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last 10 days.

Exceptional

2003 **Dry Creek** Fumé Blanc, Dry Creek Valley, “DCV3” (\$25): Stunning aroma! Lime, pear, and jalapeño pepper, with minerality and lemon grass tastes. Succulent and still crisp, this wine is about two years away from being at its peak and will improve for years thereafter.

2003 **Dry Creek** Fumé Blanc, Sonoma County (\$13): Classic Dry Creek aromas of lemon, grapefruit, and a bit of olive; some minerality in the taste, and a classic Graves-like finish. A handsome, perfectly balanced white that works brilliantly with shellfish.

2003 **Dry Creek** Sauvignon Blanc, Dry Creek Valley, “Taylor’s Vineyard Musqué” (\$25): Attractive spiced aroma of lemon and pear with traces of basil and melon with a trace of vanilla. The texture is

richer than most Dry Creek Sauvignon Blancs. Rich and yet still crisp. See Page 1 for details on these wines.

2004 **Cederburg** Chenin Blanc, Cederburg (\$15): Tropical fruit and melon aroma with traces of banana and white pepper. Smells sweet, but the entry is dry. This fresh, intense South African white is a delight with Asian foods.

2004 **Alpha Domus** Sauvignon Blanc, Hawkes Bay (\$14): Mild grass and lime characteristics in the aroma; tart, clean, crisp white with no oak to spoil its vivacious fruit.

2002 **D’Arenberg** Grenache, McLaren Vale, “The Derelict Vineyard” (\$24): Dark cherry/cranberry aroma with hints of underbrush and clove. Fairly high tannins, but after aeration and serving with mature cheese, the wine is remarkably enticing.

2004 **Wildhurst** Sauvignon Blanc, Lake County, Reserve (\$11): Dramatic aroma of wild flowers, spice, lime and blossoms. A tad simple in the finish.

Very Highly Recommended

2003 **Tohu** Pinot Noir, Marlborough (\$25): Blueberry/cherry and an exotic spice note I couldn’t identify. Light in weight, but rich fruit flavors with a finish of basil and pine. Serve with light seafood dishes. Not for aging.

2000 **Alpha Domus** Red Table Wine, Hawkes Bay, “The Aviator” (\$36): A Cabernet blend with an intriguing aroma: blueberry, leather, and near-east spices. An hour of aeration opens the wine to show nuances of Bordeaux. Lower alcohol, higher acidity, and lower tannins.

They’re Still At It

The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) has begun a serious review of wine labels, once again responding to one of my least favorite organizations.

The review will try to determine, among other things, whether wine bottles should be required to have additional ingredient labels and whether the warning statement should be enlarged.

TTB normally wouldn’t be wasting its time, once again, with such trivial matters about which the consuming public is essentially uninterested. But the gadfly group The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) has asked yet again for government tax dollars to be

spent on this ridiculous quest that, if successful, would cost wineries a lot of money and likely will offer consumers misleading information.

Industry watchers have seen this scenario before and basically are saying, “Not again!?” to the TTB’s Advance Notice of Proposed Rule-Making, which was issued recently. The issues TTB will look into cover wine, beer and distilled spirits, and encompass “virtually anything you can imagine that would or could go on a bottle of wine,” said a lawyer who works in the wine industry.

Among the issues TTB is eyeing: —Ingredient labeling. A year ago, this was pushed by many people who believed the carbohydrates in

wine ought to be revealed. That issue seems to have shrunk quite a bit of late, but then there is the question of whether yeast ought to be listed as an ingredient (even though it is entirely gone from the product when it gets to the buyer.)

—Additives: Should isinglas

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Bargain of the Week

2003 **Silvan Ridge** Early Muscat, Rogue Valley, Semi-Sparkling (\$12): Like an Asti Spumante, but even lighter and more aimed at serving with fresh fruit salads. A remarkable dessert-style white wine that no one will pass up.

At It Again

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(fish eggs) be listed as an additive (even though it is entirely gone from wine when it gets to the consumer)?

—Should the amount of ethyl carbamate (urethane) be listed on all wines? Ethyl carbamate is a naturally occurring component of all fermented foods and beverages and has shown a potential for carcinogenicity when administered in high doses in animal tests.

—Should the alcohol warning statement be made larger, placed on the front of wine bottles, or its language strengthened? This has been one of CSPI's pet project for two decades.

—Should wine bottles have a statement (similar to what appears on wine bottles in Australia) that, "This bottle contains X number of standard drinks"? Or should there be a time/consumption chart on

the bottle showing how various sizes of people reach the legal drinking limit?

—Should there be a statement on every wine bottle summarizing the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for alcoholic beverage consumption for men and women?

As you can see, if all these proposed regulations were to be enacted, at some point there would be no place on wine bottles for the brand name.

It gets more complicated. TTB is so screwy in its label rulings that it approved a wine label recently that allows Willamette Valley Vineyards to state that two of its wines have resveratrol, a chemical identified as having a beneficial effect in reducing heart disease.

The winery said it would use the statement on two of its Pinot Noirs, the 2002 Vintage Selection

and '03 Whole Cluster Fermented.

But TTB denied the winery the right to make the claim on its 2004 wines.

Since TTB's label approvals follow no strict guidelines and appear to be totally arbitrary in nature, how is it possible for the agency to accurately assess the myriad issues listed earlier?

An insider on this issue suggests that TTB's wide-ranging look at various labeling issues is a once-and-for-all final (it fervently hopes) way to address the nitpicking CSPI and its quest to adorn every wine bottle with a skull and crossbones.

At the least, said the insider, it will be years before any of these issues are resolved, and then resolutions may come as a result of taking mountains and making tiny hills out of them. © 2005

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