

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

Volume X, Issue 45

January 26, 2006

## Disappearing Varietals

Since 1978 when the old concept of Fair Trade was determined by a court to be illegal, the larger U.S. wholesalers have grown and the smaller ones have either gone out of business or been absorbed.

That has left far fewer wholesalers than ever before, almost all of whom have much larger sales books than they ever did.

Most of them realize they now offer far too many wines to properly represent them, so they have sought to have wineries reduce the number of items they produce. And this has led to a trend among wineries over the last two decades of doing just that. Which means that even if a wine was once profitable, it was an instant candidate to be abandoned.

Some wineries did it ruthlessly, trimming varietals that weren't in the mainstream. This all but doomed Chenin Blanc, French Colombard and generics—wines with smaller margins.

It also was the death knell to other items like dessert wines, rosé, and fortified wines; some sparkling wines, and most “odd” varietals like Gamay, Charbono, and Alicante Bouschet.

Next came marginal varietals such as Riesling and Gewurztraminer. At one point in the 1980s, even a wine like Sauvignon Blanc was on the endangered species list, but the grape was more resilient than I believed it was. Today we are all benefited by the fact that it is now nearing parity with Chardonnay as a truly mainstream wine.

The average wholesaler was so

keen to cut down on the number of items it carried that pressure was put on wine companies to even reduce odd-sized packages. So even though the 500-milliliter bottle is now a legal bottle size for wine, it is no longer used by most wineries. Wholesalers frown on excessive and unnecessary SKUs. (See article to the right.)

With fewer and fewer wines of a varietal type being produced, a side effect has occurred: the major magazines, which often paid scant attention to the obscure varietals in the past, now ignore them almost entirely. And this means that even if a producer should make a sensational Charbono or a terrific Abouriou, the chances that it will get any press at all are near zero.

I am, of course, uncertain about this, but I'd wager that if a sensational Napa Gamay were ever tasted by one of the “major” reviewers, he or she would write it off as simply an oddity worth ignoring.

The same thing has occurred with the marginal varietals, which I witnessed not long ago in one of the nation's most prestigious and glossy wine rags. A supposedly sophisticated wine writer took a most disparaging tone about American Riesling, giving it the figurative back of his hand and alleging that no one in this country could do justice to the grape. Period.

This wasn't exactly a surprise in view of the fact that so much of the “wine writing” that goes on in this country is merely obsequious

(See *Disappearing* on page 2)

## The Pesky SKU

The bane of most major wholesale companies is the number of SKUs a winery requires that it carry.

SKU (pronounced *skew* in the trade) stands for “stock-keeping unit” and it is an item in a sales book. Each SKU refers to each item, even if numerous SKUs refer to the same wine.

For example, if a winery makes a 2004 Chardonnay for which there is a quantity of 187-milliliter bottles, some 375s, a lot of 750s, and a few magnums, the wholesaler typically has to list each of them, meaning it carries four separate SKUs of one wine.

In the 1980s, before there was widespread computer use in wine, wholesalers with huge amounts of SKUs had a hard time keeping track of everything, and thus pushed for a reduction in the SKU count.

Today with computer use now mandatory, a few wineries are expanding their production to add odd sizes.

## Inside

Restaurant Pricing	2
Wine of the Week	2
Tasting Notes	3
Brewing a New Image	3
Bargain of the Week	3
Classic Example of pH	4

## Disappearing

(Continued from page 1)

kowtowing to wines like Cabernet Sauvignon (a term spoken with much reverence in *those* circles).

Chenin Blanc? Derision and dismissal.

This subject became clear to me the other day when, as a judge at the recent *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition, I was one of the sacrificial lambs asked to judge the Riesling class. To me, it was a promotion from the prospect of wading through the thicket known as Chardonnay.

We had 33 wines to assess. I found 11 wines worthy of a gold medal and nine more I'd gauge were of silver caliber. (Only 8 of the 33 got golds from the panel I was on, but that's still 24%, a hell

of a lot higher percentage than the Chardonnay grouping.)

Moreover, of the two Charbonos we were asked to judge, both got gold on my score sheet. And our assessment of 78 (!) Petite Sirahs was so positive that we appealed to the folks running the show to permit us to do the same group next year.

Moreover, we found an utterly stunning Gamay. We'll have a tasting note on it next week.

Coming within days of reading the glossy magazine's disparagement of Riesling, this episode in my wine judging career (now 25 years and counting) was yet another heartwarming reminder that great wine is where you find it, and *not* only where you expect to find it.

Many of our discoveries are listed on page 3, and I once again commend your attention to them. Not all are easily found, but all are definitely worth going out of your way to acquire. I cannot emphasize enough that the prices you see for these wines do not, *in any way*, reflect the high caliber they deliver.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of this publication, I am pleased to say that this article and the connected Tasting Notes represent the reason Juliann and I started this journal in the first place, which was to keep the focus on the passion we find in wine from even humble beginnings. We appreciate all who agree with us ... and even those who don't.

## Restaurant Pricing

In addition to this commentary, I also write a syndicated column for newspapers wound the country.

Since it is for a different audience (newspaper readers of various wine knowledge), rarely does the material overlap. And most often I get better reaction from readers of this publication than I do from the one that appears in two dozen papers.

But a syndicate column I wrote a week ago got a lot of people all riled up. And that was what surprised me since I have written a

lot of articles like that one for nearly 30 years.

It is a long time pet peeve of mine, high restaurant wine pricing. I got at least two dozen letters (all e-mails, I admit, a lot easier way to vent one's opinion). Almost all of them were in total agreement, and many gave examples worse than any I could have offered.

I needn't get into the nuts and bolts of it all here. Suffice it to say that the newspaper readers, from Palo Alto to south Florida, Napa, and Pennsylvania, all said they

believed restaurants gouged them when it comes to wine pricing.

What surprised me was not the number of letters I got as much as the almost bitterly angry tone of so many of them, and the fact that I have never received as many letters for any column I have ever written, not even ones nearly identical to it.

What I also found interesting was that of the letter writers, only one said he was vocal about high wine prices to the restaurant owners.

One said he and his wife simply had their wine at home before dining out (!), another said he would not buy wine at all and thus wouldn't patronize a restaurant that prohibited patrons from bringing in their own wine. (In his state, it's legal but it's illegal in many.)

But the tone of the letters was what really surprised me. In the column, I was upset. My readers were vitriolic.

Is there a message here?

## Wine of the Week

2004 **Robert Mondavi** Johannisberg Riesling, Monterey County, "Private Selection" (\$11): Slightly herbal, floral and a bit closed; aeration makes the wine sing! Despite the antediluvian name of this varietal, this wine is a startling example of California Riesling, and a refutation of the wine magazine's sweeping edict that we are simply not capable of making anything worth sipping from this world-famed grape.

# Tasting Notes

Other than where noted, the wines below were tasted double-blind last week.

## Exceptional

2003 **Harvest Moon** Zinfandel, Russian River Valley “Pitts Family Vineyard” (\$32): Raspberry and spice aroma; superb tart entry, ideal to serve with well-seasoned foods. A 2002 is also superb with more mint, berry and spice. See Page 4 for details on ordering both wines.

2004 **Inspiration** Zinfandel, Russian River Valley (\$28): Classy raspberry, cherry and cranberry aroma and a succulent yet still crisp finish. See Page 4 for details on ordering. This and the above wines were tasted open.

2004 **Navarro** White Riesling, Anderson Valley (\$16): White peach and a trace of white pepper; lean, dry entry with mineral-y notes and flinty finish. Limited. 707-537-9463.

2004 **Maurice Car’rie** Riesling, Temecula (\$15): Outrageous aroma

of pineapple and floral notes. Sweet entry (2.2% r.s.), but great balance. Limited: 951-676-1711.

2004 **Ventana** Riesling, Arroyo Seco, Monterey (\$16): Slate-mineral nose, but lovely fruit and superb acidity to balance 1.1% r.s.

2004 **Shady Lane** Semi-Dry Riesling, Leelanau Peninsula (\$11): Faintly Germanic nose of minerals, yeast, floral notes and white pepper. Slate-y taste. A bit sweet (2.5% r.s.), but with classic balance. Limited: 231-947-8865. A new Michigan star!

2004 **McFadden** Riesling, Potter Valley (\$13): Grapefruit/lime aroma with jasmine, juniper—a most complex aroma. 1.2% r.s. balanced by superb acid. From Mendocino County.

2004 **Samson** Riesling, Columbia Valley (\$11): Very stylish floral notes and a delicate fruit

aroma of apples and citrus. Great balance for the 2% r.s. Limited: 360-966-7787.

2004 **Chateau Grand Traverse** Riesling, Old Mission Peninsula, “Whole Cluster” (\$14): A tad simple in aroma, but with air the wine opens up to show lovely floral, grapefruit and tea/mint notes. A rather dry (.8% r.s.) wine that would work handsomely with food.

2004 **Chateau Grand Traverse** Dry Riesling, Old Mission Peninsula (\$14): Fresh, blossomy aroma with a faint trace of petroleum, slate and stone. Nearly totally dry and perfect for trying with cracked crab. Limited: 231-223-4105.

2005 **Rancho Sisquoc** Riesling, Santa Barbara County, Flood Family Vineyard (\$12): Spiced/floral nose with exotic fruit and a gardenia-like note. Soft, but perfectly balanced.

## Brewing up a New Image

Imagine a TV ad in which a businessman in a Brooks Bros. suit holds court at a Michelin three-star.

He holds his glass aloft to catch a glint of the crystal chandelier’s light in his glass, then he coos about the sublime character of the liquid he is about to sip with his chateaubriand.

Instead of a vintage wine, he is speaking about a glass of Budweiser. Or perhaps Miller Genuine Draft.

This is the new face of beer, said a beer executive interviewed by CNNMoney.com, which had a story this week on a huge crossroads for the U.S. beer industry.

With wine taking over as the top alcoholic beverage for U.S. adult

consumers, and as vodka and whisky gain greater attention as well, beer seems to be losing the image battle. And thus is another image being readied for this once blue jeans, cowboy hats, and hot dogs beverage.

As the CNNMoney story said, “... just like wine makers have excelled at educating retailers and consumers about what foods go best with different wines ... the beer industry will attempt to teach retailers about how to sell beer with various food groups.”

Television code regulations have long prohibited ads in which humans are seen actually sipping an alcoholic beverage. And federal

regulations prohibit speaking about the health benefits of wine or beer.

Instead Anheuser Busch and some of its foes “are working with the Beer Institute, an industry trade group, to develop the campaign, which is expected to debut in February,” said CNNMoney. Included in the campaign is a new Web site, Herestober.com, not yet functioning.

### Bargain of the Week

2004 **Jekel** Riesling, Monterey (\$11): Slight Muscat note adds interest to floral/mint minerality. Sweeter entry, but classic acidity to keep it dry in the finish. Widely seen under \$10.

## Classic Example of pH

In the article last week on pH, I quoted from a 1984 book on wine that stated that for red wine, high pH started at 3.6.

I ran into a reader who's also a wine maker after that article came out and he agreed: pH above 3.6 *is* high, but he observed that for most wine makers these days, it's almost unthinkable to make a red wine with a pH in the 3.5 range. "The wine would be so tart, no one would drink it," he said.

Yet if the structure of the wine were different, with softer tannins, a 3.4 pH red wine wouldn't be hard to like. It's all in the way the wine is handled, I suggested, a comment to which he agreed.

But the common wisdom among wine makers today is that the pH of red wine must be at least 3.6 for the wine to be "tasty."

So it was a complete revelation

the other day when I met a young and passionate wine maker who not only understood the idea, but who lives by his beliefs.

Randy Pitts of new Harvest Moon winery in the Russian River Valley, using Zinfandel from his family's vineyard along Olivet Road, made wines in 2002 and 2003 with pH levels below 3.2!

And yes, the wines are tart, but the lower tannins make the wines remarkably tasty, especially with food that is heartily seasoned and made with acidity, such as tomato-laced dishes.

"Sure, I knew the wine was going to be tart," said Pitts, "but if I raised the pH, the flavors and the balance all would change."

Moreover, a cousin Zinfandel from nearby Inspiration Vineyards also exhibits a crisp structure from pH in the 3.5 range. Wine maker

Jon Phillips could make only a single barrel of the 2004, a spectacular effort.

The suggested retail prices for the Harvest Moon wines is \$32 each; the price for the Inspiration Zin is \$28. However, for readers of this publication, both wineries are offering a special price.

Those who call Pitts may buy a mixed case of four bottles each of the 2002 Zin, the 2003 Zin and a remarkable 2005 Late Harvest Zin for \$300. To take advantage of this opportunity, call 707-573-8711 and mention this offer.

Though only 25 cases of the dramatic 2004 Inspiration Zin were produced, the wine has just gone on sale. Readers may buy it for \$22 a bottle: 707-237-4980.

The passion of both Pitts and Phillips is thrilling, and worth supporting. ©2006

### Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

P.O. Box 5857  
Santa Rosa, CA 95402

Phone 707-571-1200  
Fax 707-528-7395

E-mail: [Info@VintageExperiences.com](mailto:Info@VintageExperiences.com)  
Website: [www.VintageExperiences.com](http://www.VintageExperiences.com)

Dan Berger, Commentator  
Juliann Savage, Editor & Publisher

Delivered weekly: In the U.S. by First Class Mail or e-mail;  
outside the U.S. by e-mail only.

Subscription details and other wine related information:  
[www.VintageExperiences.com](http://www.VintageExperiences.com)

**PLEASE NOTE: THIS COMMENTARY IS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. FOR PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE, PLEASE CONTACT US BY TELEPHONE, FAX OR E-MAIL.**