

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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### A 'New' Varietal

**W**e wine lovers need a new red wine and I may have just discovered the best alternative red wine in years.

By now, it is clear, Cabernet and Syrah have become mere parodies of the wines they can produce. Most are too alcoholic, have little or no varietal character, and demand that buyers try to tame these tannic beasts with an aging regime that is doomed from the moment the cork goes in the bottle.

With labels on wine bottles that admit that the alcohol inside is 14.5%, (but in reality many are closer to 16%) the consumer has lost any control he or she once had.

This is truer of Zinfandel than any other red variety since 15% is now the "normal" alcohol level. Among the highest-flying brands, we have recently seen 16.5% and 17% on the label.

As I have long pointed out, the higher the alcohol, the less fruit aroma one can perceive—and the more likely it is that the wine will be aggressively tannic, and won't age.

As a result, we have heard from many of our readers over the years that they are seeking wines of better balance and structure from grapes like Pinot Noir, CabFranc, Grenache, and even Malbec, notably those from Argentina.

Those wouldn't be bad choices if wine makers had the courage to make the wines so they actually tasted like the varieties they supposedly represent.

I love Cabernet Franc when it has

that red cherry, fresh blueberry, and leafy aroma for which the grape is noted. But to make the wine more commercially acceptable (otherwise known as "likely to get a score in the 90s"), too many such wines are so alcoholic and clumsy (tannic and soft) that they are all but undrinkable.

'Tis the same malady that afflicts PN's from those producers who think they can make a juicy Pinot and it will become all the rage. Of course, not all PNs are poorly made, and a look at the labels will tell you: when the see a wine listed as 14.4% alcohol, what chance is there that the wine is actually 16%? (See article on right.)

I have participated in enough blind tastings of Pinot Noirs to know that some regions tend to produce more high-alcohol PNs than others. Though Russian River Valley has some wineries with 14%+ PNs, the majority are well balanced.

So what is this "new" grape variety I have discovered that delivers more true-to-type flavors, and better structural integrity than does Cabernet?

Heresy, you may say, but I am thinking of Merlot. Sure, I know what Miles said in "*Sideways*," and I know that a lot of Merlot remains a stupid and clumsy example of red wine, some with as much alcohol as the Cabernets we know are not worth anywhere near what wineries are charging.

However, there are a few provisos here. To get a quality Merlot, made in

(See *Alternative Red* on page 2)

### Alcohol and the Law

There is a huge difference between a wine listed as having 13.9% alcohol and one listed at 14%. It may look like a simple 0.1% difference, but it is a lot more than that.

The Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) is the federal agency that regulates wine. But for practical purposes, TTB's main role is that of a tax collection agency.

As such it spends most of its time making sure it gets its tax, and thus polices the industry with much tighter tax controls than for most other issues.

When a winery says a wine is 13.9% alcohol, the federal tax is \$1.07 per gallon. The tax rises to \$1.57 over 14% alcohol. As you can see, the TTB is far more concerned that a wine properly states its alcohol.

Since TTB essentially gets no revenue from a wine saying it is 14% even though it is really 17%, wineries face little risk of punitive action and thus are all but un-policed in this area.

How much willful fibbing occurs in this area is unknown, but industry sources tell me it is rampant.

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## Alternative Red

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the style of wine I have long championed, adhere to these rules:

—Stick mainly with cooler-climate Merlots. Carneros is cool enough to make fabulous Merlot. So is Santa Ynez Valley and other regions of the Central Coast. I have also seen attractive Merlots from Monterey County, Sierra Foothills, even Santa Cruz and Livermore.

The Russian River is cool enough to do the same, and the wines can be superb, but little of the grape is planted there.

—Seek wines of balance and harmony, which means trying wines that are 13.5% alcohol. Avoid wines that display alcohols of 15% or more. Such wines usually have pH levels that are just a bit too high

## Cult Wine

The phrase “cult wine” sprang up in the 1980s, I suspect, but no one really knows where it came from. The definition of it, from various web searches, says such a product is a limited production, hard-to-find wine. By definition, this means it will be expensive.

Odd, then, that no definition I found says anything about quality.

Fact is, most so-called cult wines in California are red and most are pretty awful, since the style in which they are mainly made is bigger and chewier than would be good with food.

for the wine to display the balance that allows it to work with dinner.

Here are a number of reasons why Merlot is a sound choice:

—The No. 1 reason is that it is a grape with softer tannins than Cab and as a result the wine is a lot easier to consume at a younger age.

—As a result of its lower tannin, Merlot doesn't demand to be “rectified” the way Cabernet often is handled. Those making Cabernet know of its tannic proclivities, which can make a wine slightly bitter. To deal with that, some wine makers raise the pH or leave a bit of residual sugar (or both). Merlot is better balanced in terms of tannins, and can be made more honestly.

—All the disparagement the

wine got in the last decade left it dangling on the ropes, and in the \$20 to \$30 price range, the best bets for fine red wine are often the Merlot from a winery that also makes Cabernet.

—Decades ago, Cab and Merlot often were line-priced. Today, most wineries charge a lot more for their Cabernet, but a more enjoyable and food-friendly wine is Merlot that's priced lower than the more tannic Cabernet.

One drawback here: Merlot can offer a trace of the olive, tea, and bay leaf aroma that is typical of it when it is made with an eye toward its varietal character. To me this is a wonderful attribute, and beats that homogenous sameness.

Perhaps they aren't undrinkable to those who desire them, but they are surely made to be simply, uh, simple. I won't get into details: long-time readers of this publication know from whereof I speak.

So it was with some amusement the other day that I read a story in the latest issue of *Decanter*, the great British-based wine magazine, that was a chat with Rick Kinzbrunner, owner of acclaimed Giaconda in the lonely backwater Australian town of Beechworth.

In the article, the only reference to “cult” is in a caption when the

word is used in reference to the house's *Chardonnay*. It's made in an unusual style that takes a bit of getting used to—with its pre-oxidized, full-malolactic intensity.

Chances are no Americans will understand this wine. (See article on Page 4.)

It's odd that so little is said in the article of the Shiraz Kinzbrunner makes that truly ought to be rated as among the finest red wines on the planet, and in such small amounts that it defines the word cult.

The fact that both of these wines call for palates that understand what the wine maker is doing may well mean that his recognition outside of Australia is so scant.

But to use the term “cult” on wines that are made in the many thousands of cases is absurd.

Worse yet is the point of why our publication exists: to lend credence to the styles of wine that may not be the most in-vogue and *au courant*. But indeed are great.

## Wine of the Week

**2008 C.G. di Arie Interlude, Sierra Foothills (\$25):** When you hear that a wine is a blend of 40% Zin, 25% Syrah, 22.5% Petite Sirah, and 12.5% Primitivo, you get an immediate picture of a huge wine. This wine is anything but. Graced with loads of fruit, it is lighter and still has violets, black cherries, and a balance that is surprising for the region. Stylish and an excellent value for a wine of this much balanced flavor.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

## Exceptional

2008 **Corison** Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$70): This wine is made in the style that earned Cathy Corison the title of one of Napa's greatest wine makers. It is not for everyone. But I find sheer delight in the faint herb, tea leaf, and olive notes amid bright cherry fruit and only 13.8% alcohol. The wine's pH 3.56 balance is near perfect for aging, a throwback to the 1970s. That also makes it crisp enough to work with food. Wanna hear a laugher? Cathy is rarely mentioned as a cult wine maker.

2010 **Principessa** Gavi (\$15): Light, perfectly representative of the Gavi grape that has long been mishandled in transit. The superb house of Banfi owns this property, and the wine is lemony crisp, delicate in mid-palate flavors, and a great match for seafood.

## Expensive Syrah

One of the most disappointing categories in the wine game in the last few years is Syrah, notably at the higher end of the price range.

In my syndicated wine column last week, I took a swipe at the wine, pointing out that far too much of it has been planted in warm climates, resulting in a lot of me-too wines.

A decade ago, it was clear, Syrahs that sold for \$8 to \$10 were nearly as good as those that sold for \$25, and in many cases were actually better since they more often had lower alcohols.

My belief was somewhat validated at the recent Sonoma County Harvest Fair wine competition, where I was one of four judges to evaluate 38 Syrahs priced \$25 and more.

Our panel awarded 3 gold medals,

2009 **De Loach** Pinot Noir, Marin County, Stubbs Vineyard (\$40): A new project for De Loach with fruit of Marin County, and a great idea: hire Dan Goldfield to make the wines. This version is more delicate and approachable than two others. With some air, it shows raspberry, plum, cherry and leafy aromas, and a mid-palate complexity that won't show full depth for a couple of years.

09 **Trenza** Blanco, Edna Valley (\$20): Albariño is usually floral in a way that puts off those who prefer a bit milder fruit. Here superb wine maker Christian Roguenant blends it with 50% Grenache Blanc. The result is the best of both. Slightly floral mid-palate fruit with a mineral note. Traces of dried pear add a note of fascination.

2009 **De Loach** Pinot Noir, Marin County, Skyview Vineyard

10 silvers, and 11 bronzes, but my score-sheet had no golds and 7 silvers. And of the three golds that the other panel members awarded, one wine was so over-ripe I voted it no medal.

The words that appear most on my sheet are "hot" and "over-ripe."

Even with my highest-scoring wine, I found a drawback: a mid-palate softness that I attributed to low acidity. I later found out that the wine has 0.3 residual sugar, a level I consider inappropriate for the way the wine was structured.

By contrast, we had a direct-import Côtes du Rhône the other day at a restaurant, and it was perfectly balanced. True, it was rustic, but that element only made it all the more appealing. True, it lacked the overt

(\$40): A clearly plumier version than the Stubbs (above), with a bit more richness in the mid-palate. Also needs time.

## Very Highly Recommended

2008 **Trenza** Tinto, San Luis Obispo County (\$30): Once this red wine gets an hour of air in a glass or decanter, it begins to open up and show some of the tremendous fruit that San Luis Obispo can grow, and the main varieties here are Syrah, Grenache and Tempranillo. The alcohol (14.9%) is a bit high, tilting the wine to one of a sweetness that makes it hard to eat with traditional foods.

2009 **Principessa Perlante** Gavi (\$15): The slightly sparkling version of the above wine, it's a lovely wine, but not quite up to past vintages.

fruit of so many California wines.

But when that "fruit" is prunes and plums, is it really fruit in the way we once expected wine to deliver?

Sad to see a great grape fall. Cool climate wines usually avoid such boringness.

Obviously, for Syrah buyers, I suggest *caveat emptor*.

## Bargain of the Week

2010 **Little Black Dress**

Moscato, California (\$10): OK, it's rather sweet, but the aroma is enticing with gardenia, tangerine, and honey (!). The mid-palate is soft, but there's good acid in the finish. A nice wine with hot Thai foods.

## There Are Two Rights

Purists from the 1930s might hate most of the white wines we love today because they do not show the character that they once doted on.

Old-world Chardonnays, from what I have read, were a lot more “complex” than the wines we have today, with their pristine fruit flavors. In a way, this is what Rick Kunzbrunner is hinting at with his Giaconda Chardonnay (see page 2).

The fact is that today’s styles of white wines are made mainly to a formula that emphasis fresh fruit and to make a wine that emulates the Burgundies of the 1920s may be a ludicrous effort.

But for those Australians who understand Kinzbrunner and his aberrant style for Chardonnay, the wine is a revelation. Would it be for you? Chances are you wouldn’t get it.

Most Americans want *fruit* in their white wines; overwhelming complexity doesn’t satisfy this.

And so we have to come back to reassert that Latin old maxim *de gustibus non est disputandum*, which means “in matters of taste there is no dispute.”

Your favorite color is green, mine is red, and we’re both “right,” no matter how you define right.

Are the number scorers wrong to give a score of 98 to something judged without a single terroir or structural support base in terms of a wine’s aging potential? It may well be a fraud on the consumer, but it’s certainly valid when it comes to making a statement that “I love this.” That, in and of itself, does not negate the statement that “I love that.”

I love the first wine in our tasting notes, the ’08 Corison Cab.

I’m sure it would get no more than 80 from the number scorers. That is because they do not understand the wine.

And we close with this related quote:

## Quote/Unquote

“The 2009 Chateaufeuf du Pape Vieilles Vignes is considered by many observers in Chateaufeuf du Pape to be the wine of the vintage, and it can most certainly be counted among the finest. A blend of 80% Grenache and the rest Syrah and Mourvedre tipping the scales at 15.5% natural alcohol, the wine has an inky black/purple color as well as incredible density and richness, with notes of soy, blackberry, and blueberry liqueur, incense, acacia flowers and licorice. The layered, full-bodied mouthfeel displays no heat, but the wine has massive concentration and a silky, smooth finish. Because of the low acidity in the 2009s, and sweet tannins, this has turned out to be a glorious example of Chateaufeuf du Pape to drink over the next two decades.” 99 points: Parker’s Wine Advocate.

Does anyone reading this issue need to know the name of the house that made the wine?

One relevant fact: It was priced at \$125 per bottle—before the score came out. ©2011

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