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Marin County Wines: The Ultimate Accessories for Your Nor-Cal Local Lifestyle

filed under: Regional Spotlight, Winning Wines





I had the good fortune to enjoy a gorgeous mid-July lunch in the Russian River with DeLoach owner and bon-vivant-extraordinaire Jean-Charles Boisset, his affable and talented chef, Michel Cornu, bulldog Frenchie and a few other lucky scribes. The occasion was a tasting of DeLoach's brand new - as in first release ever, the 2009 vintage - Marin County wines. We were accompanied by winemaker Brian Maloney and consultant Dan Goldfield, Mr. Coastal Pinot himself, a real treat. It all got me wondering: what could be more chic for a Nor Cal-er keen on all things local??? Pretty sure you can see where this is going...

Click here to view my Flickr album from the day. After the jump, my fav wines and more on what I learned about Marin wines.

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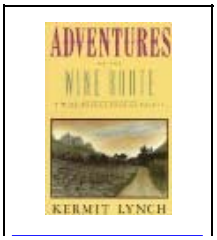
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Pictured, on top: Chef Michel Cornu, myself, J-C Boisset; below, I make friends with J-C's mega cute pooch Frenchie (how apropos).

Pinot Pioneer

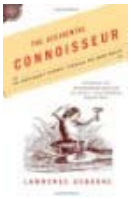
DeLoach, longtime Pinot and Chardonnay producer purchased by Boisset's family in 2003, is a Pinot Noir powerhouse. When I first got to know the brand, the Pinot talent that is Greg LaFollette (past right-hand man to Tchelistcheff at Beaulieu, later head honcho at Flowers) was helming winemaking operations. Today the young Maloney has the reigns and he seems to be flourishing. DeLoach's Sonoma PInot-Chard efforts are impressive, but that story's has been told time and again (around since 1973, Russian River pioneer, Biodynamic standout). The debut of the spot's Marin County wines prompted my first-ever foray into learning more about this region just over the bridge from SF, and it was a sweet way to get my feet wet where Marin County wines go.



Marin: Cold, Difficult

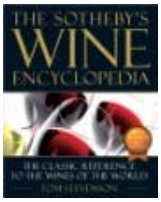
Why are Marin County wines special? For starters, they're mega-cool-climate wines, as far as California goes; Marin County is one of the

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coldest wine growing regions in Cali. Because the region is so cool, the wines aren't viable every single year, a fact that makes them still more European-sounding. Here in CA we don't readily comprehend the concept of vintage variation, because most vintages are pretty spectacular: warm summers, cool nights thanks to proximity to the Pacific, low rainfall near harvest time. Easy. Not so in Marin, where early spring frosts and high winds can destroy crops before they even have a chance to get started (a phenomenon called "shatter" destroys nascent clusters when there is too much wind during this delicate early stage of the season).

Plus, yields are "terrible," in the words of Goldfield, with some sites yielding a paltry 1/2 ton/acre. In winespeak, that's like, abysmal. And the final nail the coffin, so to speak, is that it's terrifically $$$ to develop vineyards in Marin, given sky high land prices. Completing the Marin wine picture, it's important to note that it's remote and sparsely populated in the western reaches of the county, in stark contrast to the bustling, densely populated eastern portion. Drop in to an eatery in some parts of western Marin County and you'll still get stares from the locals, along the lines of "what the heck are you doing way out here??? "

"Marin County needed Jean-Charles," said Goldfield, a Marin County wine specialist bar none. What a compliment. But a just one, given the French wine impresario's impressive turns acquiring key California properties over the years and seeking quality improvements across the board while maintaining the integrity of the brands. His family biz's latest acquisitions, Napa's Raymond Vineyards and Sonoma's Buena Vista, seem to be headed from solid directions to superb. I also noticed a keen respect for people in J-C; our table was set with a menu featuring all guests' names (I'm trying to recall if I've ever had a winery list the names of journalist guests on materials, and I'm at a loss). Beyond, he was eager to introduce us to his chef, winemaker, consultant Goldfield and others, and let them do much of the talking.

His charmingly foppish airs and eager hospitality were other highlights. That he is stewarding growth and awareness for Marin wines seems in synch with his innate curiosity for all things vinous, his seemingly boundless energy and his experience.

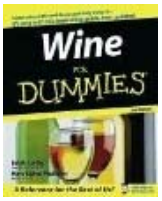
Reviews: Fairy Dust & Full Body

My favorite wine of the tasting was the 2009 DeLoach Skyview PInot Noir Marin County ($40, 235 cases made). If you want to geek out, it spent 15 months aging in 40% new French oak. It boasts a reasonable, very Euro-esque, 13.5% ABV. Boisset said the wine reminds him of renderings from southern Burgundy's Rully and Mercurey, districts known for producing leaner offerings than those to the north. Good value Burgundies with enough character to catch your eye and a strong affinity for food. I found the comparison apt.

The wine has a pretty ruby-pink hue and offers up "BRIGHT" (so say my tasting notes) red-pink cherry, bergamot, cola, rose petals and...a fairy dust sprinkling of brown spice and minerality to top it all off. I don't know quite why I wrote "fairy dust" in my notes but it just worked. The wine is super elegant if not overly complex (the vines are just 6 years old) - in synch with the southern Burgundy comparison. The palate brought tart, pert flavors of red cherry, toast and a hint of minerality. Fine grained moderate tannins and bright acidity made the whole package sing with ease of sipping, and the med+ to long finish was a terrific conclusion. I scored in 91 points and "promising." Merci.

I also enjoyed the 2009 Marin County Pinot (gave it 89/90), but want to address the 2009 DeLoach Stubbs Vineyard Chardonnay as it makes


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Movable Type 3.2

a nice counterpoint to the Pinots. I found it hedonistic, almost too over-the-top on first impression. It announces itself with a totally un-shy 14.5% ABV, a characteristic that, when matched up with its high viscosity, almost sent me to Rombauer in my mental comparison set. But on the nose it's far more restrained than that flamboyant white, issuing forth with charming moderate-plus intensity aromas of caramel corn, toast, hazelnut, white peach, poached pear, macadamia nut, meringue and margarita lime. The wine's 8 months in barrel in 40% new oak is certainly showing up here in the toast and hazelnut. But while prominent, it works.

On the palate, too, it defied all-out intensity with medium-plus acidity - a gift, certainly, from Marin's super cool climate. The palate brought the big stuff, checking in with flavors of lush golden apple, white peach, green table grapes, lemon sugared candy, hazelnut, toffee, pineapple and honeydew melon. The finish is lingering and delivers tasty notes of bananas brulee and green apple, two nicely balanced elements that epitomize the hedonistic/refreshing duality of the wine. On the whole, I'm not sure I could drink more than a glass of this in a setting due to its intensity, but I found it excellent all the same. I scored it 90 points.

Not all wines are meant to be consumed by the multi-gulpfull. I think this wine would be dynamite on a pairing menu at a Michelin-starred spot, paired, perhaps with a to-die-for lobster concoction. Then again, as I'm allergic to lobster, better not to use that word and "die" in the same sentence!

In all, the wines were impressive. The Pinots especially struck me as the perfect accessory to a local-everything picnic basket that, until now, lacked a wine even more local to SF than those you'll find in Sonoma or Napa. Plus, it's something different. And it's always chic to be novel.

Posted by Courtney on August 20, 2011 12:29 AM

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