

COMMENTARY

Acid Lovers

By Dan Berger

I CAME UP FROM THE CELLAR with a bottle of 1979 Buena Vista Special Selection Cabernet Sauvignon that had enough dust on it to have been through a Sahara sandstorm. Its lead foil capsule would have a liability attorney scowling.

I pulled the cork, gingerly poured a sip, and found it utterly sublime, not only sound and tasty, but a perfect accompaniment to our meal of various vegetables variously cooked in garlic and olive oil and such, alongside a meager but perfectly acceptable take-home lasagne.

Midway through this fine experience, one particular sip showed that the wine's fine fettle was due in large part to its excellent acidity, and that brought me back to a few years earlier, to something I read in a book by Prof. Maynard Amerine of the UC Davis school of enology and viticulture.

Amerine had written that one of the most difficult things for even professional tasters to do was to separate the tannin and the acid in a wine, and to determine just which accounted for the bulk of the astringency. He implied that both were necessary for a fine wine to age, not simply high tannin and low acid.

It was a lesson I would pass on and one that would clearly pay great dividends to me in terms of the wines I enjoy.

For, you see, this bottle of 1979 Buena Vista was better than a 1982 BV Private Reserve, better than a 1985 Silverado, better than a 1986 Sterling Reserve, and better than a 1984 Silver Oak, all of which I had had in the prior few days as I evaluated my cellar to see what's what and which is where.

So after dinner I meandered over to the old bookcase where the old books were. There among my files I found some references I had made years earlier to the '79 Buena Vista. I had noted that the wine was not luscious, not voluminous, not expansive. Indeed, it reeked of class and subtle complexities. It was thus quite far from the robust and callipygian baubles, laden with oak and smoke and chocolate, that now pass themselves off as fine wine with the nation's rich amateur wine collectors who have far too much sequin and not enough delicate nuance in their closets.

It is this thesis that has driven my life in wine collecting—that acid is the driving force behind any wine's ability to age nicely. Tannin is nice, sure, but it is not an essential. This doesn't mean the wine has to be tart and acidic and nasty when it is young, but it has to have a balance of acid in conjunction with other parts of the wine's constituents to withstand the rigors of time.

Soft, fat, lugubrious, blowy Chardonnays implode without acid. High-alcohol Zinfandels turn raisiny; Cabernets get more like bad Rioja and Port mixed. Syrah? Don't get me started.

Wine maker Mike Martini once told me that "Acid is the name of the game. And I have heard many more wine makers praise the acidity in wine as essential for the long life of a wine.

But there is a class of people out there who undermine wine makers' best efforts to make a wine that ages. These are people who believe in the theory that a wine's structure when it is young must include a fatness, a generosity of elements that make it taste great. Immediately, I suggest that such people are rank amateurs in the ways of aging wine.

Many of these people are sales managers for wineries, and they are forever putting heat on wine makers to soften their acids (as well as add more oak), so the wines will sell faster.

Thus what a wine tastes like when young seems to be more important than *any* aging considerations, even if the wine is one that is supposed to be aged for a decade or two, like expensive Cabernets. And how sad is this? When wine makers fall into the trap of "make it taste good now" versus "be true to the grape and make the grape do what's best for it," the collectors who age wine are ultimately dissed, and the wines soon fall apart well before their time. I know. I'm a victim (though not as much recently as a decade and a half ago).

Louis Martini's old Barberas were the antithesis of this drink-young philosophy. Delicate and lean when they came out, the wines had an acidic edge that made them fine with pizza. And then, as we began to see them with more and more bottle age and as we admired their charms, we saw that their acidities of youth had served them—and us—quite well. I still have Louis Martini Barbera wines from the 1960s in my cache. Last time I tasted them, they were in superb shape. It's the acid.

And that is what we are not seeing in the latest quest by some young wine makers to craft a world-class Sangiovese. (What this phrase means is a bit of a mystery since there is already world-class Sangiovese. It is called Chianti. But I digress.)

So far as I can tell, most people think a world-class California Sangiovese is a wine that has 15% alcohol and smells like chocolate sauce with smoked bacon added for complexity. And the wine has had its acid played with. That is, there ain't enough of it for the wine.

Sangiovese, like Barbera, is a grape that has in it a lot of acidity. Even when fully mature in terms of flavor, these grapes have acid levels that are high, with pH levels that are consequently low. And the resulting wines can be quite puckery. And, no, they aren't aimed at long-term keeping. In general, you drink Chianti at five years, perhaps seven, and the Riservas you keep 10, perhaps 15.

Yet there is no mystery when you consume a bottle like the 1971 Badia a Coltibuono Chianti Classico and you find that despite the brick red color and the pale nature of that color's depth, there is an utter charm about the wine, a perfume of the forest underbrush after a light rain, as if the grapes knew that if they hung around long enough in the cellar, they would turn half way toward Burgundy and bow low.

So what have we done to Sangiovese? We have sales-managed it into being a wine with less acidity than is appropriate. The same with Barbera. I saw one the other day that said it had 15% alcohol. What is this, NASCAR fuel?

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