

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Food Confusion

How a wine smells and tastes is not as cut-and-dried an issue as the number scorers imply.

One key difference is that food and how it works with various wines is rarely a topic when numbers are being envisioned to reflect the raw quality a reviewer believes a wine to display.

When a score is placed, almost cavalierly, on a wine, that score does not represent a fact; it represents a belief. That reality is almost never stated, even though it creates a destiny for that wine that may not work on the dinner table.

In fact, I think the opposite is more often true: the lower the score, the more likely the wine is to be excellent with food.

The myth of all the wine-food rules is dramatically revealed when we face foods that challenge all convention and deliver flavors, textures, or a combination of elements that are antithetical to the expected.

Try poached halibut with a typical Zinfandel. Awful. The heat of the wine wipes out the delicate flavors in the seafood; the fine-ness of an unadorned white fish calls more for a Chablis. But if seasoned with a bit of tarragon, a halibut is enlivened by the minerality of Sancerre, which brings out the complexity of the fish.

And then look at what happens when the halibut is topped with a tapenade. Zin's alcohol still invades—unless the wine is as ideal a statement as is the 2007 Frog's Leap Zinfandel (see Tasting Notes) with 13.4% alcohol(!) and a structure that makes

the fish simply an other-worldly experience.

Same halibut, minor alteration in its sauce, and a wine that works magic within the experience.

Food can change the way we perceive wine, often in radical ways. I don't usually serve white wine with steak, but a steak tartare I had a couple of weeks ago with a bone dry Riesling worked with the capers and onions in the dish (see Jim Barry Riesling in Tasting Notes).

I am rarely surprised when a wine that scores well in a blind tasting is done in by a dish. In traditional dishes that have unusual ingredients, the result can alter the choice of wine.

I had a Mulligan Stew some years ago with a young Napa Cabernet. The dish was far more complex than I had ever seen, made with loads of herbs, including cumin. A far better choice than the Cabernet would have been a rustic Rhône or even an old Pinot Noir or Burgundy.

This was back in the early 1990s. It was a time when I was beginning to see how poorly young Cabernets did with many foods.

Michael Bauer, then and still food critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, had written an article some years earlier in which he argued much the same thing. I tended to agree with him, but there were, then, still some Cabernets that, when aged, did a brilliant job of coalescing dinner table flavors.

When the wine had the balance and the dish was made with care

A True (Sad) Story

The following tale is a re-created conversation I heard about recently.

No names are used, but I have heard this tale about 15 times over the last few years, and the names of the second wine maker could be changed and the story would be almost exactly the same:

A Napa Valley wine maker was chatting with a Sonoma County wine maker whose Zinfandel had gotten high praise from a national wine magazine.

The wine had an alcohol level well above 15%. The Napa wine maker, who was one of the rare people who like wines of balance, asked the Sonoma wine maker if he liked the highly praised Zin.

"Are you kidding?" said the Sonoma wine maker. "I don't like these wines at all, and they don't age at all, either.

"But what am going to do? They sell like mad."

Who is buying this stuff? I think you know the answer.

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Confusion

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aged Cabernets went nicely with food.

But as the years have flown, so we have seen a disappearance of balance. As an avowed food lover, I fear that a bit of the fast-food mentality has entered the fine wine game, with the result that fewer and fewer wines have the balance to work with meals.

And many younger consumers today think a “dry” wine must contain a softness, and a richness, that has nothing to do with the wine on which I was reared.

I tasted an utterly fascinating Sauvignon Blanc the other day that had the smell we have long since abandoned in the varietal: a green, herbal and grass-y component that

once defined the grape in cooler climates. (See Wrath SB in Tasting Notes.)

Then there is the unconventional wine that enlivens almost all foods, such as the complex 2004 Gloria Ferrer Blancs de Blanc (See Tasting Notes) that is best served with a truly delicate dish to allow the wine to become the star. If the dish itself is so assertive, the wine cannot be seen.

Which leads to another bit of reverse magic: how to obliterate a wine. Imagine Steak Diane being prepared tableside at a small café in 1984 in a San Diego. And imagine what happened to the aroma of a mature Haut-Brion.

When the waiter hauled out his brandy bottle, splashed into the pan

sitting on his mobile stove, and ignited it, the smell of shallots, garlic, and Worcestershire sauce all aflame gave the entire room a smell that may still be there today.

And the wine became basically a wet, nearly red liquid devoid of uniqueness. So much for the delicacy of its aroma.

Something similar happened one afternoon at the unveiling of a famed Napa Cabernet. Steaks being char-grilled just outside the dining room obliterated the nuances in the wine, turning it smoky.

I love food. I love wine. But I do not like either when the two participants are brawling. And oddly enough, no rules can state a conclusion when “creative” chefs are at work.

‘Vintage of a Century’

A French wine maker appeared at a wine symposium in Seattle about a decade ago and was asked about the 1989 vintage in Bordeaux.

Many 1982 and 1983 Bordeaux wines got rave reviews, then there was happy talk about the 1985s, the 1986s, and 1988s.

The French wine maker, who spoke a rather sophisticated form of English and had a grand sense of humor (not to mention irony), gave one of the more memorable quotes I have ever heard:

“We French do not like declaring

a ‘vintage of the century’ more than three or four times a decade!”

So it is with much amusement that I hear that the vaunted 2009 red Bordeaux may well find no homes in the United States on the futures market. And it’s no wonder.

How many “vintages of the century” have we had in recent years? Even the most conservative estimate would be 10 in the last three decades. In just this decade alone, we have great reds in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2009.

So the lack of support for yet

another “great” year is simply a result of buyers’ exhaustion.

Moreover, who has the money to be buying more \$100+ wine? In the present state of the economy, I’d say it’s very few people. Indeed, in an article in *Decanter* in the last few days, a number of U.S. wine merchants say the flat economy has left the market for \$40 wines pretty much dead.

I have long argued against any wine lovers buying futures since the aftermarket for fine wine is rather competitive. The rare occasions when you can realize savings (such as the 1982s) are often offset by huge losses.

Only professionals can play this game (one friend made more on currency dealings than he did on wine!), and since scores for these new wines are based largely on barrel samples anyhow...

Anyone who plays this game gets what he deserves.

Wine of the Week

2008 **Groom** Sauvignon Blanc, Adelaide Hills (\$18): Grape-fruit and lime notes with a classic regional aroma of eucalyptus trees and faint notes of grass. Dry, delicate and perfectly balanced around 12.7% alcohol(!), this wine is a striking example of Sauvignon from one of Australia’s best white wine regions, which is yet to make an impact on most Americans. From one of the country’s best wine makers, impeccable wine making.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

Exceptional

2007 **Frog's Leap** Zinfandel, Napa Valley (\$27): Subtle aroma of violet, spice, berries, and a hint of dried herbs. Classic entry with low alcohol, great acidity, and a claret-like finish. Better in a year and will age handsomely.

2007 **J Vineyards** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley (\$35): Huge aroma of Burgundian and cherry fruit with complex underbrush and wild strawberry notes. Classic silky texture and deep, rich finish with excellent balance. More about this brand next week.

2008 **Jim Barry** Riesling, Clare Valley, "The Lodge Hill" (\$18): A bit of lime and spice with traces of blossoms and kerosene. Classic dry wine that needs food to show its depth.

2004 **Gloria Ferrer** Blanc de Blancs, Sonoma Valley (\$28): Subtle

Chardonnay and lees contact aroma with faint hints of complexity from time in the bottle. Best with subtle foods.

Very Highly Recommended

2008 **Wrath** Sauvignon Blanc, Monterey County, San Saba Vineyard (\$23): The aroma of herbs the way we saw them regularly in the 1970s makes this love-or-hate wine distinctive. But low (12.7%) alcohol and great acidity make it a lot more distinctive than many New Zealand SBs!

2007 **Wrath** Syrah, Santa Lucia Highlands, Doctors Vineyard (\$50): A smoked meat and underbrush aroma with hints of pepper, wild spices and other dark red fruit. The acid isn't as high as I prefer, but the wine benefits from aeration and works with braised beef dishes.

2008 **Whitehaven** Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough (\$23): Classic

New Zealand aroma of gooseberry and anise/pine with a dry, persistent flavor that doesn't lean on residual sugar for its long finish.

2006 **Whitehaven** Pinot Noir, Marlborough (\$25): Herbal, cherry and clove aroma with faint hints of underbrush and tar. Attractive mid-palate entry and finish, Needs an hour of air before it opens up.

2009 **Man Vintners** Sauvignon Blanc, Western Cape (\$11): Green-herbal notes and a mild melon mid-palate. Not as rich a wine as the two earlier SBs, but an excellent value from South Africa.

Note to readers: The above three Sauvignon Blancs are made in a style that accentuates the herbal elements in the grape—aromas and flavors that have not been as much in vogue in recent years as they once were. The wines are excellent, but may be seen as assertive by some wine lovers.

The Five-Cent Sale

Say a wine is supposed to sell for \$15 a bottle and you are offered two bottles of the stuff for \$15.05. Do you not smell a rat?

A \$15 bottle of wine typically has a wholesale price of \$10; standard markups are 50%, making the price of the wine \$15. And by California law, a wine shop may not charge less for the wine than it paid for it.

So if two bottles of the wine are sold for \$15.05, by law the retailer had to have paid no less than \$7.52 per bottle, and could offer it to the consumer for that exact same price or more. Anything less violates state law.

Beverages and More, the retail chain, has been accused in a class

action lawsuit of violating the law by charging more than the suggested retail price and thus, the complaint alleges, is using "fraudulent business practice."

The chain of 100 stores has used the "five cent sale" for years. Last summer, I heard of an offer of two bottles of a rosé that was almost \$20 while the sale was on. But the same wine could be bought for \$8.99 per bottle when the sale went off.

The class action suit, filed by Peter Gray Jr. of San Francisco, said the company used misleading regular prices, which he said was "deceptive, unfair and illegal."

In the filing, he said he paid for two "regular" price bottles of wine

and paid \$17.98 plus tax. He added that what he should have paid if BevMo had sold the bottles at their actual regular prices was \$12.98 plus tax.

The company has said that the claim is without merit and will fight the lawsuit in court.

Bargain of the Week

2008 **Tamas** Pinot Grigio, Monterey County (\$11): Tropical fruit aroma based on 6% Riesling, with a faint trace of residual sugar (0.7%) makes this medium-weight white a nice choice for Asian foods or to sip with cheeses. Often seen under \$10.

Confectionary Liquids

I received a sample of a 2007 Zinfandel a few days ago, and the numbers on the wine were all wrong for my palate.

This wine may get a high score from a magazine and be loved by some who seek the well-known Zin-buzz, but I almost fear pulling the cork. The alcohol was listed is 16%. I suspect it is higher.

Although that, by itself, was scary enough, what was worse was that the acid was listed at a (low for me) .53 and the pH at a (high for me) 3.81.

This doesn't sound like wine as much as it does a Confectionary Liquid. I created this term to apply to wines that have little to do with the dinner table. The term fits many Zinfandels of the moment, all wines that are soft, full, and taste sweet.

But not our top-rated wine this

week, the Frog's Leap Zinfandel.

I spoke with wine maker John Williams about this wine, and he was amused I would ask him about it since he knows that I long have liked almost all of his Zins over the last few decades, most of which have been lower in alcohol and higher in acid than most others.

He said he could easily make the wines fatter: "If all I wanted to do was sell wine, I could have made 'em a lot bigger."

Williams admitted that his Zin grapes usually come in from the field at a bit over 14%, "but after you factor in the Petite Sirah and the Carignane, which we co-ferment," the wine's final alcohol is normally under 14%.

That's the result of picking the other grapes at lower sugars, which not only holds the alcohol down, but retains crucial acidity.

The majority of the fruit is from vines that are well over 40 years of age, "a band of vineyards south of St. Helena," and up against the western hills. As such the fruit gets little late-afternoon sun so develops sugars slower than mid-valley fruit.

"I guess you could say we're losing ground to the big boys," said Williams, "but we just gotta continue to do what we have been doing for many years.

"And the real joy of these wines is to try them at 10, 15, 20 years of age. They really age nicely."

Williams said it "all goes back to farming—dry-farming." He said irrigation is a recent phenomenon and dry-farmed fruit often gives classic character.

The '07 Frog's Leap Zin is made in a claret style that makes it ideal for the dinner table.

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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
Website: www.VintageExperiences.com

Dan Berger, Commentator
Juliann Savage, Editor & Publisher

Delivered weekly via e-mail.

Subscription details and other wine related information:
www.VintageExperiences.com

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