

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week. (And it was a fun week of tasting!)

Exceptional

2008 **Claiborne & Churchill**

Dry Gewurztraminer, Monterey County, Ventana Vineyard (\$20): Dramatic aroma of lichee nut, rose petal, and jasmine. Bone dry with a classic mid-palate and a true Alsace-style finish with a brilliant aftertaste that has no bitterness! A fabulous wine and a contender for best in the state with Navarro.

2008 **Morgan** Cote du Crow's, Monterey (\$16): Classic southern Rhône aroma of earth/faint smoke and game, with traces of blueberry, pepper and herbs. Simply stunning, a blend of 55% Syrah and 45% Grenache. One of Dan Lee's best ever. Drink soon to savor the fruit!

2008 **Claiborne & Churchill**

Dry Gewurztraminer, Central Coast (\$18): Wild spice like rose petal and carnations. The entry is softer than you might think for an Alsace-style

wine, but the body and dry finish are complete and appealing. It finished first in a blind tasting by 12 Sonoma County wine makers. Drink young or age it 3-4 more years. **To be released this summer.**

2007 **Penley Estate** Cabernet Sauvignon, Coonawarra, "Phoenix" (\$20): A fittingly regional aroma with herbal tea and olive, but also a ripe cherry and earthy depth. The alcohol (15% on the label) sounds ominous, but this superb Australian house knows how to balance such weight with great acidity. A bargain.

2007 **Claiborne & Churchill**

Dry Gewurztraminer, Central Coast (\$18): This year-old version of the great '08 Gewurz, still available in a few places, is similar and already shows some of the bottle age that benefits this wine so nicely. Still needs a few more years to gain bottle bouquet.

2007 **Kenwood** Merlot, Sonoma County (\$20): Dried herbs and tea, cherry and blueberry, and a trace of olive mark this fascinating red wine. I was wary of the 14.5% (listed) alcohol, but the wine's astoundingly fine pH (3.48) balances all elements and makes it tart enough for food.

Very Highly Recommended

2008 **Forefront by Pine Ridge** Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley (\$24): Attractive red fruit and nice varietal base, with a tad more tannin than the wine needs, but nice mid-palate and finish. Good value.

2008 **Frank Family** Pinot Noir, Carneros (\$35): Floral red fruit aroma with hints of underbrush, oak, and a faint earthy quality. Ripe and plump, but with lots of air, the wine showed more complexity. A little understated; it needs another two years to develop more Pinot Noir-ness.

Is Varietal Necessary?

Whether a wine delivers a varietal aroma or not depends on a number of factors, one of which is ripeness at harvest.

Above a certain point, the higher you go on the Brix scale, the more you lose varietal scents and tastes. A Cabernet made from grapes picked at 27° Brix, in most cases, will yield a wine with almost no varietal-ness. If any such character remains in the wine, it is often a result of immature fruit combined with over-ripe sugars.

The problem here is one of being aware of what's ripe and varietal, and what's over-ripe. Lots of Cabs these days are plum-y, jammy, and raisiny and yet are still well accepted by those willing to pay for a fancy

bottle with an exalted name.

Yet a wine that I rate as having a fine varietal aroma may well be seen as *under-ripe* by those who simply do not understand what is meant by varietal character.

Test: What's the varietal character of a Russian River Chardonnay? Is it smoke, toast, yeast, or cream? No, those are aromas from malolactic and oak aging. Is it honey? No, chances are it's from some botrytis.

My varietal profile for the wine includes lime, grapefruit, or other citrus (even tangerine), along with a bit of green herbs (such as mint).

How about Dry Creek Zin? If the wine doesn't have a distinctive strawberry and raspberry aroma, and

instead has a lot of port-y qualities, then the wine isn't varietal, merely over-ripe.

So is varietal necessary? To me it is. But apparently many people care not whether a wine smells and tastes like the grape named on the label.

And for this I am saddened.

Bargain of the Week

2009 **Gran Verano** Sauvignon Blanc, Central Valley (Chile) (\$22/3-liter box): Light herbal aroma with hints of hay and citrus; soft entry, nicely dry in the finish. Trace phenolic in the aftertaste, but a great bargain, equal to \$5.50 a bottle.

Perception in Context

I get occasional letters that challenge one or more of my ideas. I like such challenges.

That's because those who send criticism know only a portion of why I have certain opinions (though I'm flexible when facing new evidence).

As a result, most of my personal beliefs on wine can be challenged, and ought to be, so a dialog can be created in which ideas are discussed.

I'm happy to debate such issues. After we share ideas, it's easier to make decisions.

Occasionally, however, I'll get a challenge to one of my articles that is a little naïve, notably when I state a position that can only come from my having been around this game so long that I have literally 100s of examples to "prove" my assertions.

This has less to do with specific wines and more to do with wine philosophies, such as whether Chardonnay benefits from age. (Some do improve; others do not, and the way to determine this often

is related to the acid and pH in the wine. But occasionally not.)

Wine is curious in that it is only partially predictable by its statistics. Take aging of red wines, as a subject.

I consider myself good at saying if a wine will age well, or if a wine needs time to develop. Yet we had a strange experience the other day that was totally serendipitous.

At a discount grocery outlet, we saw an Australian Cabernet that was from 2004 (a cool vintage) and from Coonawarra, a region that is already somewhat on the cool-ish side.

Since the wine was only \$2.99(!), we tried a bottle. It was odd with an aroma that smelled vaguely of vegetal scents.

We were prepared to dump it into the sink, but on my third sip I got a fascinating taste of something that was, uh, interesting. It still was strange, but not without charm.

So we re-corked it and left it on the kitchen counter. The next day, the wine had lost most of its "green"

funk. In its place was a truffle-earthly note that was utterly intriguing. So I splashed some into a huge glass and gave it more air.

The wine didn't transform from an ugly duckling into a swan, but it was far more fascinating and tasty than it had been.

Was I sure this would occur when I first pulled the cork? No, not at all. But what was certain was that there was something in the wine that said, "Don't dump me yet." What was it? Dunno.

All I know is that I was prepared to see what developed. It might have gotten worse. Instead it improved.

Summing up: Occasionally when I rate a wine very highly its ranking comes from a gut reaction; another day I might not find the wine as good.

I usually err on the side of some caution. But going out on the limb is fun, especially on those occasions when a \$3 bottle turns into a charmer.

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