

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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## Was it a Vintage Year?

Time was, we could pretty much determine the quality of a vintage in California by the structure of the wines.

The way wine is being made these days, you almost have to assess the quality of each producer's wine on a year by year basis.

Clearly, the old saying that every year in California was a "vintage year" was silly. Although far greater vintage variations existed in Bordeaux than here, California did produce different styles of wines depending on what Mother Nature did to the vines in a growing season.

Moreover, what we once thought of as a great vintage as well as a poor vintage changed over time, as the wines aged and proved themselves better or worse than we first thought.

A case in point were the great years of 1968 and 1970. Many people recall with fondness the best wines of that period, notably the Georges De Latour Private Reserves of BV. Over time, I tasted those wines often, and in the mid-1990s began to see some bottles (those that were not perfectly stored at very cool temperatures) take a slight nose dive.

Sure, the best bottles were very good, but by 1995 or so, the best BV Private Reserve of the era was the unheralded 1969. From a much colder vintage, the wine was simply a bit tighter, more closed up, when it was being compared with the brash opulence of its immediate forbear and its immediate successor.

Similarly, 1974 was rated a great

year and 1975 was rated "backward," until a decade later when the '75s began to come into their own.

Then we have the curious tale of 1989, when rain hit the vineyards early and caused so much damage that merchants turned their backs on most of the wines.

What was curious about this "vintage from hell" was that the rain harmed much of the early ripening grapes, mainly Chardonnay, but the hardier, later-harvested Cabernets and a few other varieties survived quite well.

Yet the stigma of the bad rap the vintage got from magazine stories that included some rather sloppy reporting remained and left many wine makers with headaches trying to sell what were, all things equal, pretty darned good red wines.

Move forward to 1998 and 2000. Some wine critics proclaimed that the wines lacked intensity, and thus were somehow deficient. The result was a blanket condemnation that had wine merchants across the country turning their backs on almost every wine that was made either of those two years.

Was the condemnation fair? Well, that sort of depends on whose wine you're talking about. Some wines did show a little less intensity, but what they offered in exchange was a more velvet, graceful fruit level that meant the wines had more early accessibility.

Isn't that a bonus? Shouldn't that appeal to restaurateurs who normally offer only rock-hard reds that are too

(See *Vintages* on page 2)

## Who Rates Vintages?

Rating vintages is a mystical process in which the arbiter averages a lot of things and comes up with a vague guess.

Often it's wrong.

And the more recent the vintage, the more guesswork is involved.

I can't forget the tasting of Inglenook Cabernets I attended in the 1980s. Among the wines was a bottle of the 1955 Cask and another, the 1954 Cask, from a year considered cool, wet and "difficult."

Since 1955 was rated one of the greatest vintages of the era, that wine was still superb. But the vibrancy, freshness, and complexity of the '54 was a stunning surprise.

Tom Ferrell, then wine maker at Inglenook, said he wasn't shocked, noting it just took a lot of time (30 years!) for the 1954 to come around.

Some vintages may get panned, but if the wines are carefully made, they may well develop with time in bottle.

As for vintage ratings? Take them with a pound of salt.

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## Vintages

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young to drink early? You'd think so.

But instead the blanket dismissal of the wines was such a distinct condemnation that it was as if the wines were not being judged by a set of scores as much as by thumbs, and in this case they were turned most vigorously downward.

So how is 2004 for Cabernet? Not bad, from what I've tasted, but here we have to factor into the equation things that we never had to worry about in the past.

The growing season was not a bad one, though some uneven berry set in the spring made for an uneven crop load. Some second crop clusters had to be avoided by the pickers, or sorted out.

A warm to hot growing season was also relatively low in humidity, which could have caused some grape dehydration. Those who survived best either had drip irrigation (to keep photosynthesis going) or overhead sprinklers. Some wineries have recently added in misters to mist water into vineyards for just such occasions.

As for the wines, most of the 2004s I have had display a decent level of fruit concentration, what wine makers call ripe tannins, and a bit less of the over-ripe flavor profiles I've seen in some years.

But those who want to age their Cabernets for more than a few years should do some homework.

If alcohol levels are above 15% (some I have seen are), and the pH

levels in these wines are above 3.7, I wouldn't age them very long. In fact, best bet is to drink them within three to five years, before they begin to collapse.

Last week's highly rated Trinchero Cabernet from Chicken Ranch Vineyard in Rutherford is a rare treat since its alcohol (13.5% on the label) shows up in the texture as a true evocation of what "claret" once was thought to be.

Also, one of our Exceptional-rated wines this week is a Heitz wine that the winery is still selling from the good 1998 vintage, a year in which many producers made a delightful early-maturing red wine.

Still a flavorful and tasty wine, it is a good value at \$70.

So much for the rap on the '98s.

## Retarding Wine Education

There are many reasons that the current crop of new (mainly younger) wine consumers do not like mature red wines, but the main one seems to be that they simply have never been exposed to them.

It's fine for a wine columnist (me included) to suggest that some red wines will age beautifully, but if the majority of consumers has no experience with such things, most will fall back on what they know, and that is to drink 'em young.

Nothing wrong with that, of course, but it's sad when those of

us who love older wines find little we can buy to cellar even for a couple of years because of the rapid deterioration of what we're being told is the way wine ought to be.

No one in particular is to blame for this state of affairs, but one "culprit," if that's the proper word, is the consumer. Or rather, the vast number of consumers today.

Two and three decades ago, wine was an optional (and often rather obscure) beverage choice. Gin, vodka and especially mixed drinks were far more popular, and

as a result most wine lists had a lot of older red wines. And thus did the (few) red wine drinkers of the day come to appreciate mature wines.

But as the number of consumers increased (and as the population ballooned), red wines didn't remain on wine lists very long. Today we are seeing 2003s and 2004s, for the most part, and some of the 2002s that remain on some lists were made in the famous "fruit forward" (i.e., non-age-worthy) style, so not all of them are better for the extra time in the bottle.

It's for that reason that wines as classy as the Heitz Cabernet (Tasting Notes) is such a find, a slightly mature wine with fine depth and complexity.

Clearly, in areas where it's illegal to bring your own wine into a café, few diners can experience mature wines when dining out. And this has the unfortunate effect of retarding mature-wine education.

## Wine of the Week

**2006 Ponzi Pinot Gris, Willamette Valley (\$17):** Those who decry Pinot Gris as wimpy may think otherwise about this utterly fascinating approach. Made slightly sweet, this wine's aroma of banana and pear are given more weight without a loss of fruit. Almost Riesling-like in aroma, the wine is perfectly suited for Thai and other Asian foods, as is the winery's 2006 Pinot Blanc (\$17),

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted within the last week.

## Exceptional

1998 **Heitz** Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, Trailside Vineyard (\$70): Already fairly mature, with racy herb, forest floor and “open” flavors of dried blackberries and a hint of tobacco. Fascinating wine and a good value in a classic, nearly mature red wine. Still has years ahead of it, but perfectly enjoyable.

2004 **Kendall-Jackson** Highland Estates Syrah, Santa Barbara County, Alisos Hills (\$35): Black and blueberry fruit, hints of clove and cool-climate pepper in the finish. Powerful fruit flavors despite 13.5% alcohol and a dramatic aftertaste. Somewhat limited, but worth a search. (The winery will ship; 800-769-3649.)

NV **Lustau** Dry Amontillado Sherry, Jerez, “Los Arcos” (\$15): Charming toasted pecan/hazelnut aroma with hints of floral notes.

Sweeter entry than I expected, but the finish is drier and truly complex. Serve with chilled avocado soup or gazpacho, or with toasted almonds and a dry cheese like manchego. A stellar wine that should sell for a lot more.

2004 **Simi** Cabernet Sauvignon, Alexander Valley (\$25): Dried herbs and a trace of licorice; black fruit and distinctive spinach notes make for a most complex “smaller” wine. But with aeration, it really shines. A sleeper; should age a few years too.

## Very Highly Recommended

2004 **Simi** Zinfandel, Sonoma County (\$15): Light raspberry and strawberry aroma; pale color and a light-medium entry, but spot-on Zin flavors and superb handling of tannins. Try with pizza!

2003 **Grgich Hills** Merlot, Napa Valley (\$38): Black fruit, green tea and an attractive, juicy

entry. Faint hint of smoke. Rich mid-palate; good acidity (3.56 pH) to keep it nicely balanced with roasted meats. Decant two hours.

2004 **Snows Lake One** (Cabernet Sauvignon), Lake County (\$38): Trace of dried herbs alongside red and black cherry fruit. A bit of a “grip” from tannins. Full-favored and balanced. Best with steak. From a high-altitude vineyard that promises to be a star. 2004 **Snows Lake Two** (with 25% Merlot) (\$38) is a tad lighter and less interesting.

2004 **Wakefield** Shiraz, Clare Valley (\$15): A delightful example of cold-climate Shiraz, with a green and herbal center to its aroma, light black fruit taste, charmingly elegant tannins, and great acidity to allow it to pair with a huge array of foods. Not for everyone.

## Buying Older Vintages

I routinely see huge lists of wine collections for sale, usually in whole and often in part. Most have a lot of very old wines (a recent list had a lot of 1970s Bordeaux).

The problem with such offerings is two-fold: for one, the majority of people who understand, appreciate, and are candidates to buy such wines are older people who already have cellars full of the same sort of stuff. And wealthy younger buyers may not know that a bottle of 1966 Lafite is really worth \$150 (the price I saw it listed for on one list).

I learned my lesson some years ago (about 1998), when I tested the auction market with two wines that I sold on an internet web site.

One of the bottles was a 1990 Maya from Dalla Valle, the other a 1976 Mondavi Reserve Cabernet, one of the best wines of the vintage.

The former sold for \$125; the latter sold for about \$50. Which proved to me that a great older wine isn't in as much demand as a young, iconic wine.

Of course, provenance in older wines is crucial if you're the buyer, and for that reason I would be wary of buying any wines whose storage conditions were suspect.

On that point, about 18 months ago on an early March visit to New York, with snow on the ground and temperatures in the 20s, I went to visit a supposedly prestigious wine

shop on the lower end of the island.

I walked in and was hit with a blast of heat. All the wines were exposed. I later learned that the shop kept the temperature at 80 degrees because, said a clerk, “some shoppers get cold.”

Oh.

## Bargain of the Week

2006 **Domaine de Nizas** Rosé, Vin de Pays d'Oc (\$10): Floral with a hint of spice; totally dry entry with excellent strawberry and watermelon flavors. Not as flowery as some, so it may be considered a pale red. Delightful all-purpose wine.

## Wine Bottle Weight

With all the concern over the environment, I'm shocked that little has been said about the weight of wine bottles.

This may sound like a silly issue, but consider the following facts:

A pallet of wine takes up the same amount of square footage regardless of weight. With cases now weighing about 55 pounds compared with 35 pounds 20 years ago, a pallet now weighs more than 1,000 pounds more than it did 20 years ago.

Trucks hold many pallets, so they are going to require a lot more fuel to get their cargo to market.

And for what? I see no benefit whatever for the consumer, only drawbacks.

Heavier wine boxes are harder to carry and certainly are implicated in back problems for restaurant and retail personnel.

Moreover, ultra-heavy bottles can be troublesome to pour, especially for those small of frame.

I recently spoke about heavy bottles to a diminutive waitress at a classy restaurant. She frowned and said she dreaded it when a patron ordered one of the heavy bottles.

"I can pour it on my side of the table, but what do I do when it comes to the glasses on the other side of the banquette?" she said. "I can't reach across the table with the heavier bottles." She said she has had days when her wrists hurt so much she had to take pain killers just to get through a shift.

Moreover, some ultra-heavy bottles don't fit in standard wine racks.

Now I am hearing of a glass shortage in Europe. The web site of *Decanter Magazine* said the shortage was due to many factors

including "consolidation that has seen five companies merge to become two, the oil crisis making the production process more expensive, and strikes and accidents affecting the two biggest" glass firms.

And does the consumer benefit from the heavier bottle? No, in fact quite the opposite. Heavy bottles cost more, a cost that is simply passed along to the consumer.

I tasted some wines the other day from a new producer whose first wines were in average bottles (about 3 pounds each). Now the wines are in four-pound bottles, and the prices are \$8 to \$12 higher than they were a year ago.

So what is the point?

### Reminder

We will not publish Aug. 2.

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