



Sunny Wines, Cloudy Wines and City Wines

I am a strong advocate of calibrating the palate in order to gain a sense of relative quality and value of not only one's own wines but also the progress of our emerging Eastern North American wine regions. In Pennsylvania, with its diversity of climates and if you wish, terroir, the comparisons can range all around the globe. In the warmer and wetter southeast quadrant it is easy to see similarities to Bordeaux and Tuscany. In the Endless Mountains and even higher elevations in the Lehigh Valley, the aromatic white wines are reminiscent of Burgundy, the Rhein and Danube. The point is, there are benchmarks, most often found in Europe where it happens to also rain during the growing season, to compare our wines. In a recent conversation, a friend referred to these wines as "city wines." While it is certainly a vague generalization about the broad spectrums of vinous flavors and preferences, it is also apt in its description of urban palates which are generally drier than their rural counterparts. This delineation makes no judgment about the relative quality or merit of the wines consumed near asphalt or soil, it's just the way things have sorted out over time. No matter what kind of wine you make or drink, it is good to have a sense of what the best practitioners are doing in your field, whether it's planted to Concord, Chambourcin, Vidal, Chardonnay or Cabernet Franc.

I attended the Wine Spectator Grand Tour wine tasting event in New York City recently. I wasn't sure if it was a bad omen that the site of the event was exactly where a failed car bomb attempt occurred just a few days earlier. An emeritus economics professor and wine nerd friend of mine who, upon pondering his pun prefers to remain nameless, stated haphazardly that the events around the Marriott Marquis hotel went from "car bombs to fruit bombs." About 200 wineries from around the world came to pour their wines and not surprisingly, many notable names were present. For me, it was an ideal opportunity to calibrate my palate to what others consider to be the benchmarks in our profession. Among the 200 were four of the five Bordeaux first growths, as well as many great second and third growths. Distinctly and sadly missing were right bank wines. There were Napa cabs, greats from Barolo and Tuscany and many other regions. It was my goal to taste wines that would compare to what we are growing in Pennsylvania and try to get a general impression of how our wines compare to theirs. Based on recent tasting of some of our best and now theirs, I would say we are doing quite well in our better vintages.

I was glad to have the opportunity to compare and contrast directly, in a single event, if not a bit of an uncontrolled environment, wines from vastly different terroir. The easy and stark comparison is the difference between, for example, the left bank first growths and the Napa Cabernet crowd. I can only describe it as the difference between wines that display a lot of sun versus those that were grown in less sunny conditions. The Napa Cabs were big, fat, sweet, ripe, high alcohol and overtly fruity, a bit like soda pop. The French wines showed considerably more restraint, complexity, balance, and if you will, elegance and refinement. It is very easy to see

why the Napa wines are so likeable. They are easy on the palate and friendly, approachable wines that say “hi” to you before the alcohol knocks you over. To say that one is better than the other is foolhardy of course. It all boils down to a personal preference of wine style and the argument over who makes the “better” wine is exasperating. Other sun wines included those from Washington State, Argentina, Australia and Chile and it is easy to taste the common thread among them. Other cloudy wines come from regions like Piedmont and Tuscany.

This issue of sun and clouds is a profound one in viticulture and wine and not well understood as far as I can tell. I often wonder about the relative value and influence of quantities and quality of sunshine (direct or diffuse light) and temperature (maximum and diurnal) on fruit chemistry, quality and maturity. The clouds also imply more rain, and too much water at the wrong time of the growing season can do irreparable damage to wine quality. Clearly, sun and clouds yield strikingly different wines and that is the strongest impression made on me based on what I tasted. Of course there are hybrid versions of the sunny and cloudy wines, those areas like Tuscany that seem to linger comfortably in the middle. In any given vintage the sun or clouds can pronounce their presence in the wines.

In the context of terroir it makes sense to follow the advice of no less an authority than Christian Moueix of Chateau Petrus who suggests that the cloudy folks try not to box out of their weight class, that the sunny wines will always overwhelm the cloudy wines in a one on one punch-fest. Instead, let us incorporate the sophisticated nuances of the best varieties suited to our terroir and make wines that reflect our soil and climate. It’s just not as easy for us as it is for the sunny guys.

In the past decade vintage variation has been dramatic in highlighting the challenges in vineyards and cellars in the Eastern U.S. where warm/dry (’05, ’07, ’08) makes really nice wines and cool/wet (’03, ’04, ’09) make, well, not such great wines. The secret that the French, Germans and Italians have figured out is how to make very good wines in very mediocre vintages. The complete wash-out, bust sort of vintage doesn’t happen over there anymore because they use knowledge and technology to mitigate any curve balls that Mother Nature throws at them. Yes, the classic years separate themselves out from the crowd but they are still more the exception than the rule. There are certain keys to making great wine on a consistent basis and it isn’t rocket science and, in fact, given acceptable conditions, the same knowledge and technology is available to the wine grower in Pennsylvania and well as the Left Bank, Barolo and the Mosel. The power of viticulture to determine the outcome of wine quality cannot be underestimated. Having a great vineyard site helps, but it is not the only ingredient to a great wine. In the recent Wine Spectator article about Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, I was struck by a seemingly casual comment by Aubert de Villaine, who said that DRC really doesn’t do anything different from other burgundian estates, it is its attention to detail that sets it apart. Bernard Noblet says he tries to “let nature speak in his wines”. Pinot Noir on a great terroir is an unbeatable combination and they understand how to make it work. There are many lessons here for us. Burgundy, by the way, is a cloudy place.

Twenty-five of the 27 wines I tasted were red wines. In cloudy places red wines are so fickle and challenging to get right. For Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic, Cabernet Sauvignon is our holy grail of winemaking achievement. While it can easily be argued that a great late harvest

wine like d'Yquem or a trockenbeerenauslese is as difficult to make but for us, consistent quality in red wine production should be the qualitative test.

The two Rieslings I tasted from Austria and Germany showed me that our best cool climate producers, extending up to the Finger Lakes and Niagara Peninsula are also well on their way to success. I would argue that cloudy places that excel in aromatic white wines should not waste their time chasing after red wines. Many growers have heard this opinion from me and ignored it.

I put together some notes from various trusted sources including growers, writers, and viticulture researchers that direct the ambitious wine producer down the path to a great bottle of wine. From what I have tasted in the past couple of years, especially from the notable 2007 vintage, we are on the right path. I urge all serious wine growers to taste benchmark wines, local, regional, domestic and international. It's fun and educational.

Some Ideas about how to Make Great Red Wine from Robert Parker, Jean-Luc Thunevin and others:

Why is modern-day wine making better (from Great Wine Estates):

- Significant changes in the vineyard
 - Viticulture and enology contributions by Emile Peynaud and Pascal Ribeaucourt in Bordeaux
 - Later harvest dates
 - Riper fruit w/ lower acidity and slightly elevated alcohol
 - Better disease control for rainy years
 - More attention to health of the vine
 - Yield limitation, from older 60-100 hl/ha to 25-50
 - Canopy management – leaf removal, shoot positioning
 - New clones and rootstocks
 - Smaller berries
 - Gentle handling in the field
 - Lower vigor with smaller berries produce crops of higher fruit quality
- Progressive changes in the wine cellar and fermentation
 - Temperature controlled stainless steel and wood fermenters
 - Harvest at full phenolic maturity with higher sugars
 - Selection/sorting (table de tri)
 - Cold soak
 - Cuvaison extended from 10-15 days to 21-30 allowing for better tannin structure
 - Healthier and controlled fermentation environment
 - Reverse osmosis and entrophy to remove water replaces saignee
- Changes in the wine's élevage and bottling
 - Bottle after shorter period of élevage to capture freshness in the wine
 - Cellar sanitation is much improved
 - ML in barrel
 - Selection process – free run only, introduction of second and third labels

- Less racking, rack under gas, aging on lees
- Microbullage
- Little or no fining and/or filtration
- Recent factors contributing to quality
 - Increased knowledge of viticulture, vinification and weather has improved wine quality
 - Improved health of the vineyards yields higher quality fruit
 - Movement towards more natural wine making has led to less traumatic bruising of fruit and wine
 - Preservation of the fruit, vintage and terroir characteristics has reached the pinnacle because of gentle handling techniques
 - Bottling process is aimed at putting the essence of the vineyard into the bottle in a less oxidized and evolved condition.

From Guide to Wines 7th Edition

- Vineyard and winery consultants like Abreu and Newton, Rolland, Turley, etc.
- Soft touch approach in vineyard and cellar
- What constitutes a great wine?
 - Ability to please both the palate and the intellect
 - Ability to hold the taster's interest
 - Ability of a wine to offer intense aromas and flavors without heaviness
 - Ability of a wine to taste better with each sip
 - Ability of a wine to improve with age
 - Ability of a wine to offer singular personality
- Best producers believe that:
 - 90% of the quality of a wine emerges from a vineyard's terroir and site
 - Vineyards have to be meticulously managed and respected
 - No great wines can be produced from less than fully ripened fruit
 - Grapes have to be handled gently
 - Every act in the vineyard and winery has to be aimed at producing the unmanipulated, uncompromising essence of the a vineyard, a varietal, or a vintage
 - Methods include:
 - Low yields
 - Harvest only physiologically mature fruit
 - Driven to preserve the identity of the vineyard and fruit
 - Minimal intervention in the cellar, avoiding fining and filtration
- Making sense of terroir
 - Rootstock impact on yields
 - Yeasts – commercial or wild
 - Yields and vine age impact on fruit quality (< 2t/a or 35-40 hl/ha)
 - Harvest philosophy – picking fully ripe grapes
 - Vinification equipment and techniques
 - Elevage
 - Fining and filtration
 - Bottling date

- Cellar temperature and sanitary conditions

Jean-Luc Thunevin (taken from New France) at Chateau Valandraud: sacrifice everything to please the vine.

1. Small yields. INAO allows 60 hl/ha. 30 is the most. An essential rule.
2. You work organically. You use the physical work in the vineyard to solve problems, not chemicals.
3. You use leaf plucking.
4. You harvest absolutely ripe grapes, even with the risk of losing everything that entails. By hand and sorting each bunch and each berry.
5. You carry out serious vinification, defined as wild yeast only, using good wooden vats in a clean cellar and good new oak casks. Good wine is not frightened of new oak.

I would also add that the great wine makers of many regions from Spain to Piedmont and Tuscany, Australia to South Africa and the U.S. have traveled to Bordeaux and Burgundy for inspiration that have led to the new and improved (although some would debate this) style and quality of wines in these regions.

Jim Law (2010) – comments after visit to en primeur in Bordeaux: fill in mid-palate depth with Merlot to give more strength and depth. Lengthen and give elegance to finish with Cabernet Sauvignon. Key is blending with ripe fruit.

Joe Fiola (2010) - vine and vineyard quality and sustainability are all about internal and external soil moisture and drainage features of the site. Well to excessively-well drained soils are necessary. Also move cold air away from vines. Rutger – add steep slope to site to enhance all aspects of air/water drainage.

Tony Wolf (2010) – select sites with convex features, not concave.

Kees van Leeuwen (2008) – moderate soil moisture, timing of availability is important, shoots must stop growing before veraison, combined with low soil nitrogen status to regulate vine size.

Wine Spectator (2010) – in the case of DRC vineyard and cellar practices are not unusual for any fine Burgundy estate. It is the attention to every detail in the vineyard, sorting, cellar etc. that sets them apart and achieves consistent greatness, and great vineyards. Bernard Noblet: “respect the nature of the wine.”

Jeff Newton – vine density and spacing as it influences yield per vine is very important. Also, fruit wire height (20-24”), proper canopy management practices and in dry regions, irrigation scheduling are critical to quality.

Mark Chien – Site selection is paramount, excess water and nutrients are the enemy of fine wines. The other is sort the grapes, often (in the field, at least before the destemmer, perhaps after the destemmer and according to vintage and fruit condition), critically and consistently.

Wine Spectator Grand Tour Wine Tasting
Marriott Marquis Hotel, New York City
May 4, 2010

Wines tasted:

Bordeaux

- 2005 Chateau Haut Brion
- 2001 Chateau Margaux
- 2003 Chateau Mouton Rothschild
- 2004 Chateau Lafite-Rothschild
- 1999 Chateau La Mission Haut Brion
- 2001 Chateau Palmer
- 2004 Chateau Cos d'Estournel
- 2006 Chateau Pontet Canet
- 2006 Chateau Pichon Longueville-Baron
- 2006 Chateau La Grange
- 2005 Chateau Lynch-Bages

Italy

- 2005 La Spinetta Campe
- 2005 Roberto Voerzio Cerrequio
- 2005 Sandrone Le Vigne
- 2007 Tenuta dell'Ornellaia

Spain

- Numanthia (Toro)
- Emilio Moro (Ribera del Duero)

California

- 2006 Robert Mondavi Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon
- 2006 Beaulieu Vineyards Georges de Latour Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon

Washington State

- 2006 Col Solare (Red Mountain) Chateau St Michelle + Antinori

South America

- 2007 Lapostolle Cuvee Alexandre Cabernet Sauvignon

Pinot Noir

- 2007 Domaine Drouhin Laurene (Oregon)
- 2006 Bouchard et Fils Le Corton

White wines

- 2007 Loimer Riesling Terrassen (Austria)
- 2007 Weingut St Urbans-hof Ockfener Bockstein (Saar) Riesling

Note: you can see a full list of the wineries represented at the Grand Tour at <http://www.winespectator.com/micro/show?id=41513>. Also, my tasting notes are available upon request.

If you are in the city I would recommend lunch at La Grenouille on 52nd Street. This is classical French at its absolute finest. It was a warm day and glasses of Sancerre and Chablis from fine producers were as refreshing as a swim in a cool stream - they reminded me of exactly why I love white wines. They awaken the spirit. <http://www.la-grenouille.com/> You can read Sam Sifton's NY Times review at <http://events.nytimes.com/2009/12/23/dining/reviews/23rest.html>

There is a new wine bar called Clo is located in the Time Warner Building on Columbus Circle (next to Per Se) and has 90+ wines by the glass in a super high tech format. If you want to taste the world any day of the week, this is the place to do it. <http://www.clowines.com/>

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