

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Tasty Early? Short Life

There is a truism about any wines that are normally thought of as aging wines.

But it's a truism that gets far too little attention and it starts with a statement with which most wine lovers will agree:

All wines that are going to be aged for almost any length of time will, at some point, be radically different from when they were young.

In the real world, it means that any wine eventually reaches a point where it is undrinkable. Even a wine that scores 100 points when it is young will at some point be terrible.

How soon any wine reaches that point where no one, not even the most forgiving among us, would drink it varies based on many factors.

In my experience, Cabernets that are made to be aged can live about 25 years; most are at peak enjoyment at about 10 to 15 years. This assumes that the consumer understands that all aged wines will be a lot less fruity than they were on release.

When a wine is young it may well display elements that are charming, but those elements may be totally gone in just a few years. Whatever complexity a wine has when young usually is radically altered by time, and what may be lost (say, for instance, ripe fruit) may well turn into a cooked form of that fruit.

The question is: Will the average consumer (especially a consumer who has never had much if any older wine) really understand this transformation?

As important: Will he or she like

what the wine turns into with age?

There is an old phrase that hints at this: "I'd rather drink a wine on the way up than on the way down." It's apt since a lot of red wine, after aging, can be pretty darned disappointing if the initial taste (or review) relied on an element or two that was enticing but completely fleeting. This happens often with rosés.

Now we get to a most disturbing paradox, based on the two following truisms:

1. *A wine must have good acid as well as a balanced pH for it to age well and eventually display its charms as an aged wine. This means it will be a bit on the tart side when young.*

2. *Few people like austere, really tart wines—which is how young wines often show.*

Take these two statements as a set and the result leads to this deductive inference:

3. *Any wine that tastes great when young will, chances are, not age very well, or will change so radically that years later it will be hardly recognizable as the same wine.*

Now, I am not prepared to stand behind this conclusion foursquare, but I lean heavily toward believing it. And that is because I have 35 years of vintage experiences (pun intended) to back it up, and can give literally hundreds of examples.

For those who do not believe this, I can also give a few examples of why it doesn't work this way always. Such are the mysteries of wine!

Case examples are everywhere,

(See *Early or Late* on page 2)

Reds as they Age

A group of 18 members of a small Sonoma County wine society, who gather monthly to do blind tastings, did one this past Monday of recent high-end Napa Cabernets.

The top two wines were both from 2004 (Hartwell and Goldschmidt Plus); third was '05 Black Coyote, fourth was Phelps Backus, and fifth was '05 Beringer Private Reserve.

But overall the single greatest comment I heard was about the similarity of the wines—and the fact that many of the tasters did not think much of the wines' ability to age any further.

Despite a wall of tannins in many of the wines (including '06 Dominus and the Phelps Backus) the wines all showed a hardness and many tasters were unthrilled.

But were the wines simply in a depression from which they would none-day emerge?

"Not a chance," said one of the tasters, a former wine maker. "There's a lot of really over-ripe flavors and not enough fruit.

"I hope the people who bought these things are very forgiving."

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Early or Late

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and occasionally in places you can't even imagine.

Take, for instance, the bottle of 1979 Paul Masson Pinot Blanc I opened about a year ago, at age 31. In my wildest imagination I never dreamed the wine would be drinkable let alone sublime. And sure, the wine was a bit tired, but it was interesting and complex.

In general, as I have said often in the past, some of the most sublime wines of any in the world are Hunter Valley Semillons with the proper cellaring, and few if any of them are very interesting when they are young. If a Semillon *is* interesting when young, chances are it won't age well!

In a way, the same goes for any

top-growth Bordeaux. What it gives in maturity is rarely hinted at when it is still in the barrel (before it is wine, really).

And then there is the uneven nature of wine as it ages. We have often alluded here to the depression—almost a cave—into which Pinot Noir goes a few years after bottling, only to emerge years later to deliver this startling rebirth, a certain sort of transmutation that may or may not have been in evidence years earlier.

Jancis Robinson's fine book "Vintage Time Charts" published two decades ago indicated that wines all age on a continuous curve, first improving, hitting a peak, and then declining. At the time, the curves were based on acid and pH

levels that were aimed at cellar times a lot longer than they are today, with alcohols and pH levels at near all-time highs and acid not considered a benefit.

The average American wine consumer now prefers wines that are, for all intents and purposes, sweet. Which also accounts for the rash of wines many companies are now selling that say Sweet Red Wine on their labels.

Sweet red wines taste great to people right now. Such wines are not candidates to age.

And by a strange coincidence, neither are most of the \$150 oafs that pass themselves off as Cabernet, even though they do not smell or taste like Cabernet at all.

The game has changed.

Central Coast Wine Competition

Last week I mentioned my growing fascination with the white wines of the Central Coast, which was evident at a wine competition at which I judged last Wednesday.

Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties have long had a lot of excellent white grapes, but for decades the best of them languished with wine making that wasn't very sophisticated and poor equipment. As a result, many wines lacked the bright flavors they could have had.

Today both issues seem to have been solved. Part of it is based on better viticulture plus the courage of

winery owners and wine makers who now seem perfectly content to rely on the fruit they have, and use exciting new grape varieties.

One could build a pretty strong case that red wine has seen its day, and that red is, in the 21st century, being by-passed by great whites.

And the majority of these do not rely on oak flavors for their charm.

The best example of this is in Chardonnay, a grape that stellar wine makers Jim Clendenin, Ken Volk, and Ken Brown pioneered here using oak intelligently to give Chardonnay complexity and its first acclaim.

Today's younger wine makers

have added to an arsenal of weapons aimed at expanding the grape, using little if any malolactic and a lot less oak, relying more on fruit.

I also saw some startling examples of dry wines from grapes like Sylvaner, Grüner Veltliner, Albariño and the Rhône varieties, each of which shows a personality that I never imagined I would see from these grapes.

The best such wines may not be as full-bodied as they might have been. Instead they offer a vibrancy and crispness that is truly captivating.

The only sadness here is that the Riesling class I judged was not only small in number, but many of the wines didn't show the overall pizzazz I know can be created here.

Back in the late 1970s and through the mid-'80s, some of the state's best Rieslings came from Santa Barbara.

Alas, most of those vineyards have been converted over to other grapes.

I encourage growers to re-think the plantings they now have and to consider putting Riesling into the soil.

Wine of the Week

2010 Corte Gardoni Custoza (\$13): The fresh, light aroma is vaguely reminiscent of grapefruit with a hint of tea. This light Veronese white wine has loads of flavor in the mid-palate despite classic dryness. I once drank Bianco di Custoza (a regional designation) a lot, but hadn't seen one in a while. Kermit Lynch imports this excellent version. Completely unpretentious, and a joy served well chilled on a blazing hot day.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted double-blind last Wednesday at the Central Coast Wine Competition.

Exceptional

2010 **Hearst Ranch**

Chardonnay, Santa Lucia Highlands, "Glacier Ridge" (\$25): Citrus and faint hints of mint and oak-spice, plus a delicate mineral note and an exotic finish. One of the most complex Chards I have tasted in years. A bit creamier than it needs to be, but well crafted by wine maker Adam LaZarre for this relatively new venture.

2008 **Baileyana** Chardonnay, Edna Valley, "La Pristina" (\$30): The aroma here is classic citrus+minerals, and the entry is tart (3.13 pH). The finish is a bit rich since alcohol is 14.4%. Serve with rich foods or sip by itself. A great wine by Christian Roguenant.

2009 **Costa de Oro** Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County (\$22): Lemon verbena and faint tropical notes in the nose, and a rich entry that leads

to a classic dry finish based on a modest 13.0% alcohol. Full ML, but little to no butter. From a newer Santa Maria winery worth watching.

2008 **R.N. Estate** Pinot Noir, Santa Rita Hills, Fiddlestick Vineyard (\$49): Stylish near-Burgundian style of wine that is very impressive and still a baby. Needs at least another three years. From French-born Roger Nicolas. This wine is available only to member of the company's wine club. For details contact Nicolas at 805-610-9802.

2009 **Per Cazo** Tres Blanc, Paso Robles (\$27): The 45% of Grenache Blanc gives a subtle spice element, the 45% Rousanne offers peach/fig, and 10% Viognier gives it a spice and stone fruit note. Great balance. Best with Asian foods.

2009 **Calcareous** Viognier/Marsanne, Paso Robles (\$28): Tropical fruit (from Viognier),

peach (from Marsanne) and a delicate spice makes for a terrific wine with Asian foods. Great balance (.72 acidity).

2009 **Costa de Oro** Pinot Noir, Santa Barbara County (\$29): Pale in color and aroma, with tea and red cherry aromas, a faint rustic forest-floor element, and a lovely finish.

2009 **Hearst Ranch** Three Sisters Cuvée, Paso Robles (\$18): White peach and a hint of minerals in the nose give this wine a Rhône-ish feel and the balance is excellent.

2010 **Robert Hall** Chardonnay, Paso Robles (\$18): Faint wild spice and juniper aroma with a lean and bright entry and a soft finish (based on relatively low acidity). But the flavors and balance are impressive, and the wine is good to try with spiced foods. A surprisingly crisp wine considering where it was grown; the cool 2010 vintage helped.

Aging or Drinking Now

The decision on whether to consume a wine now or wait for it to age often is a result of upbringing.

The British have a propensity for mature characteristics in their wines, red, white, sparkling, or dessert. I have often dined with British wine collectors who hauled out wines that most Americans would say are "dead pigeons," or more politely, "a bit tired."

And the Brits just cooed about how great they were!

This has happened, to a lesser degree among some Australian wine lovers, and even less so on the East Coast.

California wine buyers typically are "drink now" people, though a lot

of fancy wine cooler cabinets, selling for many thousands of dollars, are hot tickets among many newcomers to wine.

Do they know what they are doing? I suspect not. I can imagine the scene in 20 years when one of today's 20-somethings opens a \$160 Cabernet bought in 2011 and finds it to be faintly oxidized, flabby, and just plain undrinkable.

If such a wine were to be opened at, say, an important birthday, the host is sure to defend such a dog with, "Well, it's held up pretty well, all things equal."

But if the owner of such a wine opens the wine without the need to defend such a clunker, his or her

reaction likely will be one of shock.

How can such a thing happen? he or she would say.

Simple: The old rule still applies. If a wine is in balance it may age; if not it simply won't.

Best strategy to cure this: Live a couple of decades in Britain and get to know an old wine collector.

Bargain of the Week

NV **Barefoot** Pinot Noir, California (\$7): Not very Piont-like in aroma, but this clean, light red wine is a good match for light red meats, and even some seafood dishes. Just think of it as a 12.5% alcohol red and it's a good value.

Cabernet Sauvignon as a Blender

Syrah sales have hit a brick wall. Outside of a few cult wines that make millionaires' hearts flutter, the same is true for a lot of Cabernet.

As a result, we have seen a lot of proprietary red wines that are blends of Cabernet and Syrah.

For the most part, I can't think of a duller red wine. And the reason is interesting:

Cab is a grape that can make a fine base for a blended red wine as long as the other varieties are from the same family. But as a blender with other grapes, it simply doesn't make much sense—if it has varietal character.

Varietally, Cabernet is herbal and can be rustic, coarse, and a tad awkward when young. It is at its best when it's either varietal or part of a blend that can be aged a little, to let the complexities of the grape dominate.

Blends, notably the lower-priced wines, most often are made to be

consumed young, and here is where Cabernet rarely delivers much.

Imagine it blended with Zin. When the two wines are young, the aromatics of the two grapes can be at odds with one another (herb-scented strawberry jam anyone?).

Or imagine it with Petite Sirah: the resulting tannins make a wine that calls for fatty foods.

But among the worst blends can be Cab/Syrah blends where the Syrah is simply big and formless, and the Cabernet fraction is slightly overripe. The varieties fight each other for attention. Usually the Syrah wins.

I believe the best blended red wines use little if any Cabernet.

Just imagine the following: Carignane for a rustic, hearty aroma and a lighter mid-palate, Petite Sirah for weight and color, Zin for spice and berry notes, and Barbera for earthiness and acidity.

And what do we have? We have some of the best wines of the

1970s, wines that once were called Burgundy in the United States.

I still have a few bottles left from that period. Most of them are a bit tired these days, but with their sound acids, good balance, and lower alcohols (about 12%!), they were among the most interesting red wines ever made in California.

A key is that few if any had Cabernet in them, and most had no wood flavors at all. They were aged in upright redwood tanks, and served a purpose that seems to have been forgotten: a simple red wine that is truly dry working with the days victuals.

The more we see Cabernet used as a blender, the less the wine appeals as a dinner companion.

I haven't seen many of the Cab/Syrah blends with bottle age, so can't say if these wines actually improve.

But with alcohols well into the 14%+ range and soft acids, I doubt it's a category to watch. ©2011

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