

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Bordeaux: Who Cares?

Some months ago, I saw an ad on the Internet for a number of Cru Bourgeois Bordeaux from 2007. The web site said it was selling them for what it termed good prices.

More curious than interested, I went onto the site and found that the wines in question were from houses I had never heard of before. My thought was that people on the East Coast, where Bordeaux is better known and understood, may want these wines.

Until I saw the prices: \$55 to \$75 a bottle. (Some may still want them!)

And that made me chuckle. It was ludicrous that some no-name wines would commend such prices—and these were *discounted* prices!

This story builds from there.

—A few weeks later, I asked a savvy California wine merchant with a solid core of wines from around the world which Bordeaux were selling. “Not one, nada,” he replied.

—Last month, a columnist for a major wine magazine (he resides in Bordeaux) asked me if red Bordeaux was selling here. I made more phone calls and learned that the category is dead in the water. The columnist said he wouldn't have asked except that he can't find much interest here any more for them. He said he would be writing an article on this.

—I did an Internet search for red Bordeaux this week and found that *en primeur* U.S. sales here were flat to non-existent, unlike decades ago when just about every major wine merchant would publish a “racing form”-like sheet with pre-arrival prices.

—I called my friend the California

wine merchant back and asked if he was selling high-scoring Bordeaux. “Parker and [*Wine*] *Spectator* scores are just about meaningless for Bordeaux any more with my buyers,” he said unflatteringly. “Top Growths are over the top, and there's really no difference between an 87 and a 92.”

—*Decanter Magazine*, in its July 2011 supplement called *The Bordeaux 2011 Issue*, has a lead article, “Is the U.S. turning its back on Bordeaux?” The bottom line: yes.

Has this anything to do with the quality of the wines? Maybe not. For one thing, Bordeaux' top image wines aren't much like the best of the region decades ago, which is due in part to the homogenization of style. (See article on the right.)

But there are other factors at play here, one of which is alleged vintage quality.

This was explained in a wine column in the *Telegraph* in London by Charles Metcalfe last week:

“Only 11 years into the 21st century, and we've already had four ‘vintages of the century’ from the Bordeaux sales machine—2000, 2005, 2009 and 2010. And that's not counting 2003, where Robert Parker, guru to the American wine-drinking public, did the work for them.”

Referring to the article at the right again, it comes down to style. For hundreds of years, Bordeaux suffered through some poor vintages due to bad weather and other conditions over which it had little control.

From the early 1960s, however,

(See *Who Cares?* on page 2)

Sameness

One way to make a flop film is to replicate what someone else has already done. A re-invention is easily seen as uninteresting.

People want difference to keep them in the game, and with wine the tools that allow for low-priced wine to taste quite similar to high-priced wine *to most buyers* has, over time, made for slower sales for the latter.

Add to that the fact that a lot of red wine buyers want sweeter wines, the fact that the recession of 2008-2010 caused a permanent change in wine-buying patterns, and that huge surpluses of wines plus greater access to imports all have changed the market for high-end wines forever.

But by far the greatest reason for this is how the demand for the best wine changed the pricing structure for *all* lower-priced wines.

It wasn't really very logical, but this change, which came about as a natural consequence of greater scores in the high 90s, is explained in an article on Page 3.

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Who Cares?

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when stainless steel fermenters were brought to Bordeaux for the first time, additional tools have come into play that allow for the alteration of Bordeaux style to all but eliminate wretched vintages.

Such a change in style wouldn't have been feasible without a set of new parameters of what great Bordeaux was all about. There are among us today those who consider the most recent (post-'82) style of Bordeaux to be an abomination.

I wouldn't go that far, but there seems not to be as great a disparity between today's top wines and the lowest-ranked. And that style, which is manufacturable, is weighty and somewhat lugubrious.

Just look at the "vintage of the

century" claims. In the early 1990s I attended a wine symposium where the speakers included a French wine maker with a sense of humor. He was asked about statements that a recent Bordeaux vintage was "one of the best of all time."

He smiled and said, "We French are always pleased to have a great vintage to speak about, but even we realize that it's best not to declare more than a few 'vintages of the century' every decade."

London writer Metcalfe wrote that praise for the 2010 vintage has kicked prices up 10%-20% over the acclaimed 2009s—"despite warnings from the wine trade in Europe and the U.S. that these price increases could deter potential buyers."

He said a best-case scenario for

sales of Bordeaux would be to market the wines to Chinese millionaires, of which there are many. (See Page 3.)

"The 2010 Bordeaux wines are austere, powerful wines, built for long-term keeping," which differs from 2009, [which gave us] rich, charming, generous [wines that are] probably drinkable with pleasure within [a few] years."

But does anyone here care about Bordeaux at such prices?

Sample: 2010 Chateau Batailley, Pauillac, \$490 per case, delivery in two years; Berry Bros. & Rudd.

Oh, I almost forgot: you have to get that wine from London to your home on your own; it isn't delivered.

No wonder the game is over.

Bargains Under \$10

All wine can be broken down into various classes, from iconic and great all the way down to ordinary, blah, and truly bad.

Perception being in the eye of the beholder, it's best if you evaluate wine from a standpoint of knowing neither the label or price. Prejudice is a powerful factor.

But then, once having assessed something on its raw quality, it is a good idea to factor in the price and the potential audience. Which is why two meetings I had last week with two of the brightest wine makers in the commodity end of the market were so much fun, and why our

reference to overpriced wines in this issue are so apt.

That's because the wines being made by Georgetta Dane of The Wine Group (Big House and related brands) and Jennifer Wall of E&J Gallo's Barefoot line are exemplary.

The Wine Group's recent exploration of blended reds and white (some under the Big House brand) are wines that have broad appeal because (a) some are available in Octagon-shaped boxes, and (b) they are blends that include some of the aromatic grapes that lend themselves so well to a broad-market audience.

A new Naked Chardonnay (*sans*

oak) is a great addition to the under-\$10 a bottle lineup.

Wall, the brilliant and long-time wine maker for Barefoot, was with the company some years ago when the owner of the brand sold it to Gallo.

At the time, the non-vintage line was at 600,000 cases and growing.

Under a strict regime to upgrade the quality of the wines, Gallo and Wall have succeeded, perhaps beyond their wildest imaginations.

Barefoot, with a price tag of about \$7 a bottle, now sells about 10 million cases of wine, and included are so many items it's hard to keep track of them.

The keys to these wines are low price, great value, and truly honest and distinctive varietal characteristics with moderate alcohols.

The reason is clear: profits on under-\$10 wines are modest, so why pay \$1.57 a gallon (the federal tax on over-14% alcohol wines) when \$1.06 (for under 14% alcohol) not only saves money, but makes for better wine?

Wine of the Week

2010 Niner Sangiovese Rosato, Paso Robles (\$14): The aroma of this terrific summer-sipping wine is like ripe strawberry and cherry, and the mid-palate is dry—not at all clumsy. The secret is to let the grape variety be the centerpiece, which makes this wine taste like an ultra-light red wine! The winery is located on Highway 46 west of Paso Robles. For details on the wine, call the winery at 805-239-2233.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted double-blind this morning.

Exceptional

2010 **Pierce Ranch** Albariño, San Antonio Valley (\$16): A simply startling white wine from a grape with a huge future in California. The aroma is floral and spicy, with tropical notes and juniper, and the mid-palate is dry and the finish dramatically lean and delicate. Best white at the Central Coast Wine Competition and a do-not-miss experience. For details, call 831-372-8900.

2010 **Tangent** Sauvignon Blanc, Edna Valley (\$13): A distinctive style for this popular grape, with a hint of mint along with traces of gooseberry, pine, herbs, tea and a complete food-oriented finish. From a superb line of Tangent whites that are all screwcapped for freshness.

2010 **Vina Robles** White4, Paso Robles (\$16): The Viognier (29%)

in this wine gives it a wild floral note, the Verdelho (28%) adds a minerality and stone fruit, and the Sauvignon Blanc (27%) adds a little herbal note. Dry, still succulent, and a great accompaniment to seafood stews.

2009 **William James** Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County (\$22): Rich aroma of ripe fruit, but with a citrus edge and a load of personality. The oak is restrained, and the balance is impeccable. For details call the winery at 805-478-9412.

2008 **Lucas and Llewellen** Pinot Noir, Santa Barbara County, Goodchild Vineyard (\$25): Leafy, tea, spice, and dried herbs add interest to the cherry/plum fruit. Not particularly heavy, and needs a bit of air to open up.

2010 **Zocker** Gruner Veltliner, Edna Valley (\$20): Dramatic aroma

of leafy, minerally spice, citrus, white pepper, and a perfect structure, both succulent and dry. From wine maker Christian Roguenant, and a brilliant idea!

Central Coast Competition

I participated in two wine competitions this week, and one was the above-named event in Paso Robles.

A more complete report follows, but for now a brief note: California's Central Coast is making some phenomenal strides in white wines, some of which are listed here. All the accompanying wines earned gold medals, as did our Wine of the Week and our Bargain of the week.

In particular, my panel was very impressed by the direction in which Chardonnay has gone. More soon.

Category Pricing: An Elastic Band

One major problem for consumers of both red Bordeaux as well as all Cabernet over the last two decades relates to how an elastic band works.

Imagine that the pricing for such wines is structured along a small elastic band, with the highest priced wines at one end, the lowest at the other.

In the early 1990s, when all First Growth Bordeaux were about \$75 a bottle or so, most California Cabs were about \$35 a bottle. As Bordeaux demand rose from a new consumer (remember the dot-com boom?), First Growths began to rise to more than \$100 a bottle, then going even higher. Today a bottle of a new-release First Growth is well over \$500 a bottle.

Imagine that elastic band. One end rises by \$60 a bottle in one year, so that

end of the band is pulled. And if the lower-priced wines on the band all stayed where they were, there would be a vacuum at the old First Growth price point.

So all Second Growths raised their prices. And the Thirds followed suit, etc., until the stretching of the elastic band reaches the \$20 price sector.

In reaction, most higher-end Cabs rose as well. First Caymus hit \$70 a bottle (from \$35!), then a lot of others did likewise.

The result was: we were left with was a category of wines (Cabernet) that soon was far overpriced for the quality. And increases from there were based on scores that were even further out of line for the quality.

And the reason for the First

Growths' price hike?

First it was wealthy Japanese buyers who were willing to pay high prices for image wines (some of which got high scores), and then it was Chinese millionaires doing the same.

Clearly there is little connection to quality. Scores, prices, and wine quality are only tangentially related.

Bargain of the Week

2010 **Rancho Sisquoc** Sylvaner, Santa Barbara County, Flood Vineyard (\$10): Superb aroma of citrus, tea and minerals, and a classic dry mid-palate. Still succulent in the finish, but a startlingly fine wine for the price.

Tasting Room Silliness

Phil Ward, a wine educator, writer and subscriber wrote to relate a bizarre story about a recent visit to a Pennsylvania winery.

“I went to the tasting bar and asked if I could taste their entire range of wines. The attendant said there was a nominal fee of \$5 or \$10.” No big deal, he said, so was poured the first wine.

And then he realized something was missing. “I didn’t see a spit bucket on the bar and requested one. The attendant’s response was, ‘We do not allow spitting.’”

“I asked again; I thought I hadn’t heard him correctly. He repeated the statement. We went back and forth about the need to spit as I am wine professional.

“I had seen someone who appeared to be an owner/manager in another room, apparently in a meeting. So I asked the attendant to speak to someone about my request.

“He returned with the response: ‘We don’t permit spitting as it

might denigrate our wines in front of other potential customers.’ I was dumbfounded.”

My colleague was all set to leave but decided to broach the subject one more time. He approached the manager and had what he termed “a heated conversation” about the policy.

“I mentioned the idea to him of jeopardizing his license as well as possible insurance issues if a customer should have an accident after leaving the winery” and assert that he had been induced to drink more than was appropriate.

“He wouldn’t back down. But when I said I was wine writer, *then* he said he could offer me a private room.” He declined and left with the comment: “You missed your opportunity to be in the article.”

Then there was my first exposure to seeing a “winery” tasting room. It was back in the late 1960s when I went to one of the

those old Brookside tasting rooms in southern California.

The places (there were many of them) all looked like working wineries, with rusted presses and other vinous gadgetry strewn about.

At the time, I was consuming half-gallon jugs of Gallo Hearty Burgundy and wanted to expand my options.

On my first visit to a Brookside tasting room, I was shocked when offered a tiny plastic cup that held about a third of an ounce.

I complained to the server that I couldn’t smell the wine. She just shrugged.

What I later learned was that Brookside didn’t want people smelling their wines!

After one taste, I realized how bad it was.

Then I looked around and realized that the building I was standing in had nothing to do with the making of wine.

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