

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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### Painting by Numbers

**F**ine wine has long been said to be an art form. And from at least the end of World War II, it has been.

How much of this is related to the grape and how much to the wine maker is a philosophical discussion that conjures up angels on pinheads, one that has long been waged among people with a lot of time on their hands.

Historically it has long been known that the best wines can only be a product of great soils, weather that's accommodating, and the artful hand of a human who knows exactly what canvas and colors to use, and where to place the strokes.

Decades ago, if you started with truly mediocre grapes (from too much tonnage, poor weather, lousy soils, bad harvest, etc.) you would make a wine that was undrinkable to all but heathens.

Technological improvements, which started coming into wine about 50-75 years ago, allowed mediocre fruit to make sound if unexciting wine.

Artistry that makes great wine synthesizes the best farming and wine making crafts, resulting in a product elevated from the ordinary.

Technical improvements over the last 100 years have positively impacted white wines most. The advent of stainless steel tanks and temperature-controls to permit white wines to be fermented at cooler temperatures were early (mid-20th century) advances.

Red wines also improved through other winery advances—better uses of filtration, better methods of color and flavor extraction, and aging.

Starting about 25 years ago, the paradigm began to shift for all red

wines, and some of it was a demand for riper flavors.

In a post-Phylloxera world, this was achieved with new and more efficient trellising systems (such as vertical, in which leaves were asked to be sugar-generating engines), as well as the famous “hang time” solution.

Since grapes left on the vine longer than usual gain more ripeness, it was a perfect idea for those driven by the near-endless quest to wrench an extra point or two from the wine scorers.

Wine artistry once included blends, barrel aging, and other subtle in-house tools that allowed wine makers to emulate Monet. Use a dappled, complex and impressionist approach, and a wine could deliver nuance, richness, and class on a wildly colored canvas. You often could not appreciate it up close, but stand back and watch the magic unfold.

What changed the template was the quest for high scores. Similarity was now a good thing.

As a result, the best wines no longer needed to be a reflection of their soils and climates. Indeed, any form of manipulation that eked out an extra two points was seen as a tactic worth considering. After all, all top wines had the same density and weight; light red wines were on the outs; distinctiveness was seen as an aberration.

Instead of using color like Monet, wine makers could now avoid what once was mandatory. The best wines had to reflect a new paradigm.

Cabernet? It had to be deep, rich, dark. Varietal character? Oh, no, can't have that! It's “herbal” and “green.” Some call it “weedy.” A kiss of death.

*(See **Painting** on page 2)*

### Viticultural Advances

Grape growers will tell you that the improved quality of wines today over decades ago is really a story of improved farming.

Wine makers will say that, yeah, you need great grapes, but without modern winery tools, even great grapes can be made into ordinary wine.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle. Yet to make truly great wine, even wine makers admit that, like pitching in baseball, it's more about the grapes than it is about wine making.

But with most red grapes, getting ultra-ripe fruit is risky. The closer a grape is to a raisin, the less likely its varietal, regional, or any other unique element will have an impact on the final product.

Someone once asked me what was the worst Cabernet from Napa. My reply:

The winery that takes the greatest grapes and makes an ordinary wine from them is the winery that makes the worst wine.

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## Painting

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And the same happened with all other red varietals.

To achieve this, many techniques began to be used. Wine making wasn't an art any more, but more like a paint-by-numbers kit. When a wine had a "deficiency," you fixed it.

The use of micro-oxygenation, Mega Purple, reverse osmosis, Flash Détente, Spinning Cone, or any other tactic was OK as long as the wine fit into a "dark/dense" paradigm.

Many of these wines, regardless of what grape was used, were so tricked up that they could well have been called "Dark Soft Wine." All the numbers on the "paint-by-numbers" canvas now were the same: dark. Light colors never got used.

Instead of Monet, you got Mark Rothko—canvases all of one color.

## Decanting—Again

Sporadically over the last couple of years, we have (unscientifically) tested whether decanting does any good for a good wine.

In some cases, we've opened a wine and sipped immediately, then decanted it to see how it was with air. In a few cases, we opened one bottle and tried it, then opened another a few days later, decanted it for an hour, and then tried it again.

In almost all cases, we found, all wines are better with aeration. This applies to whites and rosés as well as reds, for many different reasons.

The most recent test involved an

Sales people love this. They say it's easier to sell reds if they're all homogenous. That's a lot better than having to explain why this wine differs from that wine.

This only works because most American wine buyers don't want to be confused by the facts. So a Malbec tastes exactly like Pinot Noir. What's wrong with that if the wine is tasty? Besides, it got a 90. Isn't that all anyone wants from a \$12 wine?

And a \$150 Cabernet? It better be black or we wasted our money.

Look at one of the fastest-growing categories today: sweet red. Does it really matter that sweet Cab and sweet Zin taste nothing like the varietals on their labels? In fact, if they're varietally correct, they might not sell at all.

Am I a cynic? Not really. Look at

as-yet unreleased Grenache (see Tasting Notes) that I had first tasted in May and found to be backward.

We tried it in early June without decanting. Again, it was awkward. Yesterday we tried our last bottle. After decanting for two hours, it was handsome and well-designed both for food and for sipping with cheese and crackers.

One reason for this is that most wines we taste are rather young and in need of some time to knit their flavors. But it also has to do with the way wine is made.

Whites are being made fresher

our Tasting Notes. As an eternal optimist, I continue to find wines of interest for Page 3.

But it's becoming harder than ever to find Exceptional wines.

And when I do, some wines are hard to get, others are made from obscure grapes, and still others are so cheap they won't be bought by those who equate price with quality—always a recipe for boringness.

Some suggestions:

—Try cheaper wines; they can be startlingly fine.

—Look at close-out bins; they can have some treasures.

—Broaden your palate; accept unusual flavors.

—Order from web sites; costs of shipping are coming down.

than ever. Wine makers generally anticipate rough handling in the market as well as inexact storage, so they protect the wine with levels of sulfur dioxide that may be a bit more than the wine would need if it were perfectly handled.

If that same wine is screwcapped, the SO<sub>2</sub> level can be lower, but often such wines are in clear glass bottles, which present their own problems.

Reds that wine makers hope will be aged in a cellar occasionally get a slightly bit more SO<sub>2</sub> than is best for the wine if it ends up getting opened earlier than anticipated.

One thing decanting can also do is give buyers an indication how long a wine will last in the cellar.

If you decant a red wine and leave it unrefrigerated (but covered) for 24 hours, noticeable oxidation indicates that the wine may not be long-lived in the cellar.

The red wines with the greatest cellar potential are those that are still good days after opening, even if not refrigerated. Yes, days!

## Wine of the Week

**2011 M. Chapiro** Côtes-du-Rhône Rosé, "Belleruche" (\$14): A faintly earthy, yet still strawberry-fruity aroma is enhanced by a rose petal and subtle spice element. The wine's entry is dry, but the finish isn't austere. The overall impression is that of a pale sparkling cuvée without any bubbles. The balance is enhanced by only 13.0% alcohol, making it rich enough for light red meats, still light enough to pair with light seafood. Delightful.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

## Exceptional

2011 **Y Rousseau** Old Vines Colombard, Russian River Valley (\$18): This dramatic wine is the best Colombard ever made in the United States and maybe anywhere. Lifting melon/leafy/citrus aroma and a minerality simply impossible to describe. Crisper than previous vintages (low pH of 3.21!), and a dry finish that demands food. One of the most exciting wines you'll ever taste. Should sell for \$30. Multiple-bottle purchases suggested.

2010 **Mission Estate** Syrah, Hawke's Bay (\$18): True varietal character of pepper, violet, and a subtle spice element in a moderate-alcohol, medium-bodied wine from New Zealand's north island, which is fast becoming a star region for red wines. This wine ought to be \$30 or more, but occasionally is discounted to \$15 or even less!

2009 **Fenestra** Grenache, Livermore Valley (\$25): When decanted, this stylish red offers a perfect varietal nose of red cherry, loganberry, traces of pepper and spice, and a silky aftertaste with no tannic bite. It will be released in 2-3 weeks. Made primarily to be sold to members of the Fenestra Wine Club (who pay only \$22). To order call 925-447-5246.

2010 **Freeman** Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, "Ryo-fu" (\$40): This cool-climate, cool-year wine has a distinctive Burgundian note along with the citrus/lemon curd aroma of other cool-region Chardonnays. If served chilled, the wine will be a bit mute. Great acid and structure. Served with cream-based foods and not too cold.

## Very Highly Recommended

2009 **MacMurray** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$27): Not a very

adventurous wine, but lovely aromas of leaves, tea and clove and a lower alcohol (13.5%), to pair with lighter meat dishes and some seafood. And well-priced.

2009 **Tierra Divina** Malbec, Mendoza, Val de Uco (\$17): At first the aroma of this faintly rustic red is slightly muted and the finish awkward. But aeration shows the slightly cooler region from which it comes. Rather deep and rich, with great food compatibility.

2010 **Pali** Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast (\$20): Light citrus and some depth from time in the bottle. A slight amount of oak helps flesh out the mid-palate, and the finish is crisp enough for food.

2011 **Cupcake** Riesling, Mosel Valley (\$14): Fresh, liting aroma, medium-sweet, and slightly spritzy. A fine if simple summertime sipper.

## Masking Varietal Character

We know that some grape varieties have a distinctive varietal character.

Sometimes we can't describe that aroma, but as U.S. Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart said in 1964 on hard-core porn, it's hard to define, "but I know it when I see it."

As some grapes gain excessive ripeness on the vine, their aromas gravitate more and more toward raisins. And when picked too early, that same grape could be so herbal that it is distinctive, but unattractive.

In the last decade we've seen many Malbecs from Argentina that are interesting, but too ripe to be anything but another version of a dark red wine.

But a Malbec we tasted recently

from Washington (2008 Portteus, Rattlesnake Hills; sold out) displayed a character you almost never see, with a bit of that rustic and wild spice that often gets masked.

The same goes for numerous Syrahs from New Zealand's north island (see second wine listed above). The majority of California Syrahs have so much weight and density that their varietal precision is masked.

This occurs because of later harvesting of fruit (ostensibly to guarantee no herbal notes remain in the wine), which leads to both high alcohol as well as a slightly raisin-y aroma.

This raisining is accentuated with

even a little bottle age (partly as a result of higher pH levels, which are intended to make the wine more approachable when young) as well as more oxygen than a balanced red wine needs.

Result: we are all being short-changed in the varietal arena.

## Bargain of the Week

2010 **Reds**, California (\$10): This Lodi-sourced red wine has a solid core of fruit from Zin and other grapes, isn't complicated, and has excellent structure to work with a wide variety of foods. From former Laurel Glen owner Patrick Campbell. Often discounted.

# The Blahg

Blogs rarely are journalistic.

And what Steve Heimoff, a normally respectful blogger, wrote a few weeks ago wasn't only incorrect, but was an outrageous indictment of all wine competitions.

The headline on his clearly un-researched diatribe was, "Big wine competitions have lots of problems." Sure, some do. Many are poorly run and violate sensory evaluation rules that were set down decades ago by wine educators: Too many wines in a day; too many wines of a type judged by one panel; ill-qualified judges; disorganized wine sorting, etc.

What irked me most about the post were his comments that wine judges get drunk; that subtle wines have no chance to win medals, that in general "big competitions aren't a very good way to evaluate wines in a way that benefits the public."

As if scoring a wine only after seeing the label is a better way?!

He also implied that wine judges don't spend enough time on each wine, and basically do it "slam-bang."

And he praised individual

reviewers, which is what he is. (Oh.)

His comments do not apply to our Riverside International (RIWC), which I've run for each of its 31 years. Heimoff implied that most competitions ask judges to taste 200-250 wines a day. RIWC asks judges to taste about 90. And a remark (which he made twice!) about judges getting drunk was truly odious.

It was also disrespectful that he'd mention my name early in the post (one of only two directors listed) and then go on to slam all events, as if RIWC was as guilty as, he assumes, are all other wine competitions.

I believe RIWC is among the best judgments in the world because of the changes we've made over the decades that follow mathematical as well as sound sensory principles.

I invited Heimoff to judge RIWC a few years back, to be part of an all-professional panel that includes some of the finest wine makers in America. He declined, saying he would judge only if paid more than what we offer.

(In his blog he wrote, "...Dan can't afford to pay me what I think

my services are worth.")

Had he judged at Riverside or had seen, close up, how we do things, or called before writing (he has my number), his remarks might not have slammed all events as he did. As it was, the post was a fact-free as well as warrant-less hatchet job.

Before writing this article, I called Heimoff and asked him if he had any additional comments to make about that blog post before I replied. Or if he would temper his remarks. He knew from my tone of voice that I wasn't happy.

He said he had nothing to add, even after I noted that his comments about "typical" wine competitions do not apply to RIWC.

I suggested that Heimoff call any or all of our judges and ask them their opinions about RIWC, and whether it conforms to his depiction. I even offered to pay for all the calls.

He didn't seem particularly inclined.

I wouldn't go so far as to call the post self-serving. It is, however, not well-researched.

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## Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

P.O. Box 5857  
Santa Rosa, CA 95402

Phone 707-571-1200  
Fax 707-595-5333

E-mail: [Info@VintageExperiences.com](mailto:Info@VintageExperiences.com)  
Website: [www.VintageExperiences.com](http://www.VintageExperiences.com)

Dan Berger, Commentator  
Juliann Savage, Editor & Publisher

Delivered weekly via e-mail.

Subscription details and other wine related information:  
[www.VintageExperiences.com](http://www.VintageExperiences.com)

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