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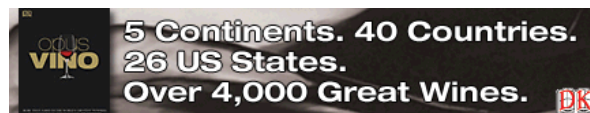
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WRO Wine Blog

December 21, 2010

Wine of the Year: 2009 Chateau Palmer Margaux

I must confess, I decided the 2010 Wine Talk Wine of the Year the moment I tasted it. It was late March and I was visiting Chateau Palmer in Margaux during the Bordeaux Primeurs. Barrel samples from the much-anticipated 2009 vintage were being evaluated throughout the region, and there was an air of excitement at every stop.



I was trying my best to ignore the inevitable hype. But I succumbed there on the sedate grounds of one of the greatest chateaux of Bordeaux. The 2009 Chateau Palmer Margaux was the finest Palmer I had ever tasted. The fruit was opulent. The structure was rich in tannin and powerful; the balance exquisite. I had the perfect Palmer in my glass.

This was no small concession from me, for I have followed this outstanding Bordeaux Third Growth for nearly four decades. The first Palmer I purchased was from the superb 1966 vintage. Over the years, Chateau Palmer has consistently outperformed its pedigree. There is little doubt that if the 1855 Bordeaux classification were redrawn, Palmer would move up, possibly to First Growth.

The 2009 Palmer will not be inexpensive when it is released for sale in the United States in approximately 15 months. The 2008 Chateau Palmer retails for about \$150, but prices have soared on the quality of the '09 vintage. I expect the 2009 Palmer to come in at slightly under \$200 a bottle, although the exchange rate could soften that price if the euro weakens over the next year or so.



Collectors are fond of Palmer because it improves with age for up to two decades or more. Cellared properly it can be a 50-year wine, a factor that enhances its attractiveness at auction.

Chateau Palmer was not without stiff competition. Any number of other 2009 Bordeaux could give it a run, as well as a number of other exceptional wines released over the course of 2010.

The best of the other contenders include the 2007 Phelps Insignia (\$200), the 2008 Joseph Drouhin Chablis Grand Cru 'Les Clos' (\$80), Marchesi di Gresy Barbaresco Camp Gros Martinenga (\$85), Patz & Hall 2007 Hyde Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$60) and 2006 Twomey Merlot, Napa Valley (\$50).

Producer of the Year

Joseph Drouhin, the Burgundy negociant, has taken a strong position in the Chablis district, investing heavily in Premier and Grand Cru vineyards and a winemaking facility.

The upshot is that while Drouhin remains best known for its wines from the Cotes de Nuits and Cotes de Beaune, it is quietly making a name for itself in Chablis. The 2008 vintage was spectacular in Chablis; and Drouhin rode the wave with a superb range of wines from Villages to Grand Cru, crowned of course by the stunning 2008 Les Clos.

Other contenders include **Twomey Vineyards**, with perhaps the most elegant Pinot Noirs and ageworthy Merlots in all of the United States; **Nickel & Nickel** for its superb range of single-vineyard wines from the

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LOCAL WINE EVENTS

Napa Valley and parts of Sonoma County; **Joseph Phelps Vineyards** for its sensational 2007 Insignia and Backus Cabernet Sauvignon; and **Gloria Ferrer** of Sonoma County for upping its game in the world of sparkling wine.

Posted by Robert Whitley at 11:20 AM

December 15, 2010

Holiday Libations

Robert Whitley's Creators Syndicate column for this week.

It seems like a day doesn't go by without another breathless press release proclaiming (plug in your wine of choice) the perfect wine for the holidays. One day it's Argentine Malbec, another day it's Chilean Carmenera. Or it's the occasional Sicilian Nero d'Avola, with maybe a Merlot from Lodi, Calif., to cover the domestic front.

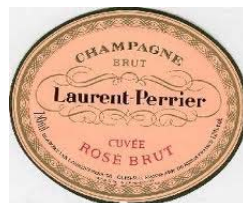
Tis the season of blah, blah, blah. I'm sure it's all good wine if it's what you like. Personally, I drink Albarino and Gruner Veltliner year-round, no matter the occasion or the outside temp.



Still, there are wines that I most savor around the holidays, especially when there's a crackling fire and the living room is packed with friends.

On such occasions, it's always good to have a bottle of Champagne chilled. Only thing better is two bottles of Champagne chilled. That's my house rule throughout the month of December. I must not be alone, for it's a fact that nearly half of all Champagne sold in the United States is consumed between Thanksgiving and New Year's.

This would be a very expensive habit if I served vintage Champagne or the ultra-luxury tetes de cuvee Champagnes, but I reserve those wines for special occasions (anniversaries, birthdays and the like) or lavish dinners. My everyday Champagnes are the non-vintage brut Champagnes from the major Champagne houses — for those are the easiest to source and usually offer the best pricing.

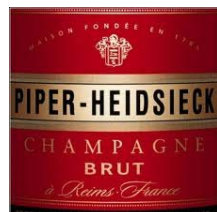


Non-vintage bruts are blends of several vintages, using at least a splash of the reserves from exceptional years. My personal favorites when I can find them are Pol Roger, Charles Heidsieck Reserve, Bollinger, Laurent Perrier Rose, Deutz and Roederer. I'm also fond of Pommery and Nicolas Feuillatte. And in recent years, Mumm Cordon Rouge and Piper-Heidsieck have found their footing and would be high on anyone's holiday list, especially for those

looking for a great NV bottle at a reasonable price. You will find all of these wines at retail for between \$30 and \$50.

While Champagne is ideal for raising a glass to toast the season, it's also a great match for the salty snacks that abound over the holidays.

When I have guests for dinner at this time of year, I almost always serve cheese or dessert. That's when I break into my Port stocks.



There are no hard and fast rules for serving Port, but I do have my preferences. I usually serve vintage Port with cheese and tawny Port with sweets. And the older the vintage Port, the more likely I am to choose cheese that is pungent and aromatic. I have long been a fan of Fonseca Vintage Port because of its spiciness, but I'm equally comfortable with Taylor Fladgate, Quinta do Vesuvio or Dow's.

If I'm drinking a younger vintage Port or a Late Bottled Vintage, known as LBV, I try to match those with blue cheeses, which seem to tame the tannins of the younger wines. Some may argue that Vintage Port is a better match for chocolates. I don't necessarily disagree, but I simply prefer them with cheese. A bottle of more recent Vintage Port should cost somewhere between \$50 and \$100, with older vintages costing much more, depending upon the age and reputation of the vintage. You can find good LBV Ports for \$25 or less.

When chocolate or any other sweet is served, I like to match the sweetness of a tawny Port with the dessert. The wine will always suffer if it is less sweet than the dessert being served. Tawny Ports exhibit pronounced



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caramel and brown spice flavors, and significantly less fruit than you will find in Vintage or LBV Port.

The older the tawny, the more spice and caramel it will show — making 20-year and 30-year-old tawnies ideal for dishes, such as creme brulee or any dessert with caramelized sugars. My two favorite 20-year-old tawnies are Graham's and Smith Woodhouse. Those will likely cost you in excess of \$50. Sandeman's tawny is a bit less expensive and generally more widely available.

The beauty of both tawny and vintage Ports is that they can be enjoyed even without food. They make exceptional after-dinner sippers, though I would emphasize the word "sip" for Ports since they are in the range of 20 percent alcohol, which is significantly higher than the percentage of alcohol by volume of a table wine.

I should note that younger tawny is considerably less expensive than older tawny, and stylistically quite different. A 10-year-old tawny, for example, will exhibit more fruit character and candied fruit than a 20-year-old, with less of the brown spice element.



Posted by Robert Whitley at 11:13 AM

December 13, 2010

McCarthy Gives Italy a Sweep in 2010

Producer of the Year: Vietti

Vietti is my wine producer of the year. For many years, this winery has been a leader in Piedmont's Langhe region, for both its Barolo wines and its Barberas. It seemed fitting to name Vietti my producer of the year in 2010, with the passing this year of Alfredo Currado, the wine genius responsible for establishing Vietti as a great winery. Alfredo died on April 30th at the age of 78, after battling Parkinson's disease for 12 years.

A trained oenologist, Currado took over as winemaker in 1960 after the death of his father-in-law, Mario Vietti. He immediately began innovations. In 1961 Vietti was the first winery in the region to make a single-vineyard Barolo, from the Rocche vineyard in Currado's home village, Castiglione Falletto. Currado also made a single-vineyard Barbaresco Masseria that year. Currado's reasoning was that there are some vineyards so special that they should not be blended with the grapes from other vineyards—an idea well-established in Burgundy, but novel in traditional Piedmont at that time. Rocche remained Currado's favorite Barolo vineyard his entire life.



In 1967, Alfredo Currado revived the white variety Arneis from obscurity and near-extinction (a few farmers were blending it with other varieties). Now, of course, many producers in Piedmont are making an Arneis wine.

For me, one of Alfredo Currado's most brilliant moves was establishing his home vineyard, Scarrone, as a source of great Barbera. Up until the mid-70s, Nebbiolo (the wine grape of Barolo) had been growing in Scarrone. Currado decided that the quicker-ripening Barbera would be more successful in Scarrone than the late-ripening Nebbiolo, and ripped up the vineyards to plant Barbera. His neighbors thought Currado was crazy. Who would rip out Nebbiolo to plant Barbera, thought to be a far less-noble variety—which sold as a wine for one-fourth or one-fifth that of Barolo? Time proved Currado to be right; his Barbera Scarrone has become one of the great wines from this variety, especially Vietti's "Vigna Vecchia" bottling, made from the oldest vines in Scarrone.



Today, Alfredo's 41-year-old son, Luca Currado, continues making some of the best Barolos and Barberas around. Vietti has other wines, including a very good Barbaresco and Dolcetto, but Barolo and Barbera are its stars. For me, Vietti's two great Barolos are its single-vineyard Rocche and the Villero Riserva, produced in superior vintages. Vietti's 2006 Barolo Rocche is the current vintage; it's a powerful long-lived

wine that needs another eight to ten years to mature. The 2006 Vietti Villero Riserva has not yet been released; only small quantities of the Villero are made.

Well, the first thing I advise is to stay away from the bargain bin. Those wines may be great for holiday parties; as a symbol of your undying affection, not so much.

The second thing I tell everyone is to look beyond wine. You may ultimately settle upon a special or rare bottle of wine that befits the occasion, but true wine treasures only come at a price, often a steep price.

I usually begin my holiday shopping in the housewares department of my favorite department store. My first stop is usually at the display for wine decanters. I've never in my life met a single wine lover who had too many wine decanters.

There are practical reasons for owning a decanter. The most obvious is to aerate a young red wine and soften its tannins before serving. Older wines benefit as well, since decanting helps remove deposits of sediment that could spoil the presentation. Multiple decanters are convenient for anyone who hosts a dinner party and plans to serve more than one bottle of wine.

Over the years I've acquired decanters in all manner of shapes and sizes. Decanters can be very expensive, or not. Cut crystal decanters from Baccarat or Waterford may be gifts that will last a lifetime, but simple everyday glass decanters are most practical for those who serve wine on a nightly basis. I sometimes even decant white wines, a practice that enhances aroma.

How much should you pay for a decanter? I've spent hundreds of dollars on a single decanter, but a couple of years ago, I also found a utilitarian Riedel decanter on sale for less than \$20. That's why cruising the housewares department first is always a good idea; you never know what specials you will find on sale.



Nearby, you likely will spy an assortment of stemware. When buying wine glasses for myself, I generally opt for simplicity and clean lines. You can spend wads of cash on delicate hand-blown crystal stems — as I have — or you can opt for more modest stems that can do the same job and look nice, too.

The advantage of modesty is that it cuts the expense, which is good because wine glasses sometimes break. I've lost my share over the years, and I have perhaps a half dozen incomplete "sets" of higher-end wine stems that are virtually useless for a dinner party of more than four.

Riedel has a couple of entry-level designs, which have served me well; they have turned out to be dishwasher safe, too.

While sipping in style, you can also save money if you look for off-the-beaten-path wine glass manufacturers, such as any number of brands from Czechoslovakia.

A wine aerator is another hot commodity for the wine enthusiast. They do work and take up less space than a decanter. I generally only use an aerator on young reds, though, because softening tannin is their primary function. You should be able to find a good aerator for between \$30 and \$40.

Finally, if I think a bottle of wine is really the only way to go, I shop with an eye open for the unusual wine. That would mean wines that are generally acquired for special occasions, or wines that arrive in an attractive package in keeping with the festive nature of the season.

If you are of a mind to splurge, luxury Champagne is the ultimate gift, for it is universally recognized as a gesture of great esteem. Dom Perignon's vintage brut in the trademark green box is both elegant and eye-catching. Perignon's brut and Nicolas Feuillatte's Palmes d'Or vintage brut (in a black velvet bag) are gifting options that will no doubt generate long-lasting fond memories. Both will retail for about \$150.

Port is another gift that is always welcome because it's not something a wine lover enjoys necessarily on an everyday basis. Tawny Ports (20 years old and up) are classic wines, especially from the top houses, such as Grahams, Dow's or Smith-Woodhouse. And Vintage Port from any declared vintage is inevitably a winner. The 2003 Vintage Ports are only now beginning to open up and show their greatness. Taylor-Fladgate and Fonseca are my go-to vintage Ports, though I am sometimes driven by price, and those would be among the most expensive.

You should expect to pay between \$50 and \$100 for a top-notch Port, depending upon age or vintage or producer, or some combination of those three elements.



Of course, sometimes the wine enthusiast in your life may be fond of a specific wine type, such as Bordeaux, Burgundy, Barolo or A-list California Cabernet Sauvignon. Whatever that preference may be, there is no need to shy away just because you lack familiarity with the wines that fit the bill.



Despite the explosion of online wine retail websites, there is still a place for the brick-and-mortar wine shop, where the staff is wine savvy and eager to help. If you are truly stumped and believe you must choose a special bottle that will absolutely be well received, do yourself a favor and visit an old-fashioned wine merchant.

They are a breed apart and could well become a valuable resource for wine insights for years

to come.

To find out more about Robert Whitley and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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Posted by Robert Whitley at 9:42 AM

December 6, 2010

The Chianti Classico Identity Crisis

Unless you are a wine journalist or someone in the Italian wine trade, you probably don't know (and may not care) that the Chianti Classico consorzio recently caved to pressure to exclude Super Tuscans from its annual tastings of soon-to-be-released vintages.

My only interest in the issue is the denial of access to wines from the region at a time when wine journalists are there in force to gather information on the latest Tuscan wines. In Montalcino and Montepulciano, similar tastings are organized for the Brunello and the Vino Nobile.

I have been to what is called the Benvenuto Brunello on a few occasions and found it useful, but would be inclined to make it a regular part of my schedule, and include stops in Montepulciano and the Chianti region, if I could make maximum use of my time and expense to taste all of the wines of those districts in one visit.



The reason I can't is because of the politics of wine in Tuscany, and the fear that openness will bring change and that change will be bad for Tuscan wine.

At the heart of the issue is the renewed debate over purity, and whether or not Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot should be allowed in the DOC and DOCG wines of the region. Opponents believe those grapes obscure the aromas, flavor characteristics and weight of the region's money grape -- Sangiovese.



There is no doubt that too much Merlot and especially Cabernet will alter the trajectory of the wines from the region. But it's also true that Merlot in particular, which ripens much earlier than Sangiovese, has enabled Chianti producers to make very good commercial wines in difficult years.

Without it, the late-ripening Sangiovese would have made light, acidic, uninteresting red wine in years when the weather presented challenges. So to me it seems that the changes to permit Merlot and Cabernet have overall been a net positive for the wines of Tuscany, and especially Chianti Classico.

The traditionalists seem to fear the possibility that the success of Super Tuscans in the world market will drive DOC and DOCG producers to skew their blends more in the direction of the Super Tuscan model, perhaps losing the distinct Sangiovese character of the traditional Tuscan wines.

And that may well happen. I say let the market determine the future of Tuscan wine. Artificial barriers, such as excluding Super Tuscan wines from the Chianti Classico tastings, are merely theatre. Chianti Classico and Brunello, if well made, will hold their own in the market place of wine.

That the proponents of traditional wines see the need to protect their identity seems to be a sign of weakness, rather than a position of strength - or common sense.

Posted by Robert Whitley at 5:26 PM

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