

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

Volume XVIII, Issue 6

March 27, 2014

# Purists V. Powerists

I'm offended.

This month marks the 35th anniversary of the national syndication of my wine column.

And for more than 38 years I have written lovingly about wines of balance and food compatibility, of varietal and regional characteristics, and of the intrinsic value of wines made from the numerous obscure grape varieties grown around the world.

It was I who coined the term (now widely used) "orphan wines" to refer to wines from less-than-well-known grape varieties. It was I who gave the Petite Sirah society, called P.S. I Love You, its acronym and name.

I wrote heartwarming stories in the early 1980s about those who made Charbono and the society supporting it.

I was an early U.S. supporter of Riesling as one of the greatest wines in the world, and especially mature dry Rieslings.

I have long written of the greatness of Semillon and especially what it did with time in the cellar. I have long been thrilled with the remarkable benefits of Grenache, and not only for blends, but as a stand-alone wine.

It was I who came up with a new analysis of Pinot Gris when it is grown in cooler climes, and how the wine it makes can be tasty young, yet can transform into a second life with proper bottle age.

I have championed cold climate reds and defended the distinctiveness they offer, even if they were not massive fruit bombs. Most recently it was I among *very few* American wine writers who have seen the absolute grandeur in the red wins of New Zealand, still yet to be a

category anyone cares about but me.

So how come Robert Parker goes after Eric Asimov of *The New York Times* and Jon Bonné of the *San Francisco Chronicle* when these two august wine writers stage a tasting of exactly what wine purists love and what wine powerists hate? I deserve some of his wrath, too!

I am a purist. So are Asimov and Bonné. In fact, from the e-mails we get to this publication, there appears to be a groundswell of purists who would like to be acknowledged.

Heretofore they have been the unheard silent majority(?). They basically do not care what Robert Parker or any other self-described Powerist says about wine with the use of numbers.

Though the numbers placed on wines seem to be facts, they really are opinions based on faulty criteria (sight of label, knowledge of price).

Asimov and Bonné coordinated a public tasting of various wines from other-than-famed grape varieties.

Despite the fact that this tasting was never intended to display these wines for any particular greatness, Parker wrote some unflattering things about the event, casting enough aspersions to get fair-minded people irate.

Even though he didn't attend the tasting(!), Parker said he was surprised that it would be hosted by two men who are "alleged to be professional wine writers." Cheap shot.

Then when Tyler Coleman, a widely respected wine blogger under the name Dr. Vino, reported on the tasting, and quoted from Parker's web site, he received a nasty letter from lawyers for

(See *Purists* on page 2)

## What is a Powerist?

I define a Powerist as a wine lover who thinks that big is better than subtle, that Cabernet is better than Merlot, that any wine lover would be thrilled with a bottle of Marcassin Chardonnay, and a Sauvignon from the Loire Valley is nice, but can never really be great.

Wine purists cherish all wines and appreciate regional, varietal, and vintage differences; they do not compare different things to one another.

In particular they see as absurd any attempt to compare an Auslese with an Hermitage.

And yet most Powerists seem to delight in that very thing. To a Powerist, it's all about winning, so a wine getting a score of 96 is *that much* better than a wine getting a 95. And that anyone who thinks otherwise is a dolt.

And where do the Powerists' scores come from? Not from blind tastings, but from seeing the labels, knowing the price and only then making a judgment.

For more on "that much," see the article on Page 4.

## Inside this issue

'Mature' Cabs	2
Wine of the Week	2
Tasting Notes	3
Inman	3
Bargain of the Week	3
'Missed by That Much'	4

## Powerists

(Continued from page 1)

Parker telling him to remove certain quotes from his site. Or be sued.

In days, all this hit the fan of the internet. That brought out rebutters, some of whom must see Parker as a buffoon. One likened him to a late-life Orson Welles.

In the *Montreal Gazette*, writer Bill Zacharkiw wrote, “Parker’s continued ranting against writers who don’t agree with his agenda smacks of a desperate man who is unwilling to accept that other voices are gaining influence.”

This isn’t new. Parker has often taken offense to my views on wine, and he takes it mighty personally.

Twenty-five years ago, Parker wrote in his newsletter about a barrel tasting of red Bordeaux (which *specific* barrels he did not say!), and then his doing numerical ratings on the wines.

I wrote an article in the *California Grapevine* about his article in which I called such cellar excursions for what they were: silly exercises that meant

utterly nothing to wine buyers.

Remember, those wines were evaluated years before further blending, cellar treatment, bottling, shipping, and other indignities—none of which are beneficial to an accurate evaluation of wine that’s numerically being compared with other wines.

That article wasn’t widely seen; the *Grapevine* has never had a huge circulation, even though it is infinitely more valuable as a wine guide than anything Parker has ever done. (It features tastings by an astute panel that are done double-blind.)

After Parker read my comments, he sent me a three-page, single-spaced letter in which he essentially called me an amateur.

Well, I took that as a compliment since the strict definition of *amateur* is (according to one on-line dictionary) “a person who engages in a study, sport, or other activity for pleasure rather than for financial benefit or professional reasons.”

Over the last three decades, that

has defined my career in wine. I ultimately make little on my wine writing, and have relied on other ways to remain financially afloat.

The same, I suggest, cannot be said for Mr. Parker.

In his *Montreal Gazette* article, Zacharkiw wrote, “For decades, the evolution of California wine has been held hostage by the disproportionate influence of Parker and... *The Wine Spectator*.”

A bit later, he added, “Parker recently stated... that ‘taste is on my side and history will prove I am right.’” Funny, that’s not my take.

Look back on those 98-, 99-, and 100-point red wines. How are they doing, now that they have a bit of age on them? Are they better for that age? Any of them? Or worse?

Look back also on the comments made about such wines then. All were made *before* the wines were released. Has there been *any* updating of those scores or their reviews? No.

*Quod erat demonstratum.*

Thus was I shaken. If 14 is now considered “mature” for a Napa Cab, then the entire idea of aging wines has changed.

This isn’t a shock, of course, since I’ve recently tasted some of the top-scoring wines of the late 1990s and found most to be port-y, raisin-y, and lacking much of the charm of the old Cabs we have in our cellar.

One difference is air. The later you harvest fruit, which has occurred throughout California in the last 20 years, the more desiccated fruit you get. This leads to early oxidation that cuts a wine’s aging cycle even further.

In most cases, the ’78s, ’81s and ’84s we’ve had smelled and tasted a lot younger than wines of later vintages in which late harvesting and low-acid, higher-pH wine making has made wines that simply are not made to age beyond 12 to 15 years.

## Mature Cabernet

My three sons were born in 1978, 1981, and 1984. At each birthday celebration, we open a bottle of an older Cabernet from their birth year.

Every bottle has displayed the faint tarragon/thyme herbal aroma of the variety, lovely fruit (faded cherries), and little oak; what little oak was once there now is seen as complexity.

A primary aroma is faded cherries and dusty, cedar-y plum; almost never has a wine been over-ripe.

Even when a wine has faded a bit and is no longer in prime condition, enjoyability remains since the grape has in it the staying power to exceed Father Time’s ravaging influences.

So I was struck the other day by an advertisement for a dinner in the Napa Valley with “older” Cabernets.

For \$99 per person, said the ad, diners will have a chance to try a dozen Napa Valley Cabs that are said to be as old as 14 years!

## Wine of the Week

2011 **Rancho Zabaco** Zinfandel, Sonoma County, “Heritage Vines” (\$18): The huge strawberry/raspberry jam aroma is fascinating, a truly California fruit statement; the handling of oak is moderate and the acid is adequate, leaving us with a barbecued-meat-oriented red that is succulent and reasonably well balanced. For best enjoyment, chill this red wine slightly to help balance its slightly soft mid-palate and finish. Often seen discounted.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the 24 hours.

## Exceptional

2011 **Inman Family** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Thorn Ridge (\$68): The hugely complex aroma has pepper, sandalwood, fruit of violets, cherries and clove, and the mid-palate is crisp and lean, best in 3-9 more years. Simply an astounding experience.

2013 **Inman Family** Rosé of Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, "Endless Crush" (\$25): Remarkable aroma of cherries, rose petals, hints of tea and Pinot fruit, totally dry, only 12.5% alcohol and stunning depth. May actually age. One of the greatest rosés I have ever tasted.

2012 **Inman Family** Chardonnay, Russian River Valley (\$35): Slate/minerals, a wild spice note from Vosges oak barrels (only 40% of the wine saw oak.), full ML, but there's absolutely no indication in the bright, lively fruit aroma. This is

a not-to-be-believed aroma and tart taste (11.6% alcohol!), and as stylish a Chardonnay as you will ever taste. Will benefit from a few more years of age!

2012 **Inman Family** Brut Rosé, Russian River Valley (\$56): Hard to describe this great *method champenoise* bubbly, with its dramatic Pinot-ish aroma and aftertaste. One of the best bubblyies you can

2012 **Inman Family** Pinot Gris, Russian River Valley (\$35): Picked early (21° Brix) and fermented cool, this striking wine has a load of the wild spiced terpenes that mark the best Gewurztraminers, has 8 grams of acidity, and a crisp/lean character that you almost never see in PG. A dramatic rendition of a grape that rarely reaches these heights.

2011 **Inman Family** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, "OGV" (\$68): This Burgundian (Côtes de

Nuits) styled wine has traces of cinnamon, nutmeg and other near-east spice notes and excellent dark strawberry and cherry fruit. Superb acidity gives the wine some charm, but it will be better in 2-4 years.

2010 **Inman Family** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, "OGV" (\$68): Only a small amount of this more Côtes de Beaune-styled PN remain. The aroma is a tad more complex than the earlier wine with a bit more richness (perhaps from the added year in bottle), and the wine's potential is excellent.

2013 **Cosa Obra** Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma County, Hummingbird Hill Vineyard (\$30): The aroma shows gorgeous cool-climate fruit of fig, pear, and spice notes. Aging in barrels is relatively deft and the nicest feature of the wine is a low pH (3.09) and a succulence from 14.2% alcohol.

## Inman

Last summer we published Tasting Notes on some impressive Inman Family wines. At the time I tried a 2011 Pinot Noir that was so impressive it was hard to say nothing.

But our self-imposed rule of never writing about as-yet unbottled wines left us hoping the wine would come out after bottling at least as good as when I tasted the tank sample.

Well, it's better, if that's possible.

That wine is top-rated this week. With it are more of Kathleen Inman's remarkable wines. Many seem a bit pricey. They are not, not for the quality they deliver.

Inman Family is located in the Russian River Valley not far from De Loach, and Kathleen is a purist wine maker with a passion for structure,

elegance, and absolute balance.

Her wines are startlingly pure, and usually with a personality that cannot be conveyed in words. Acids are typically higher than you'll find in many commercial, soft-leaning wines.

Most wines are made from grapes based on her tasting them, not on Brix. In the Chardonnay above, grapes were harvested at a bit over 19° Brix! The juice underwent a full malolactic fermentation. The wine, with 7.2 grams of acidity and only 11.4% alcohol (!), is made to age for years.

In another case, her acclaimed rosé was made from scratch by harvesting Pinot Noir early and allowing the wine to have only 12.5% alcohol.

The top-rated Pinot Noir, above, is from the cool Sebastopol Hills area on

the cold Sonoma Coast/Russian River border. Its aroma is more reflective of New Zealand than of Burgundy.

The wines above represent a wine stylist's best-case scenario: a personal statement that works to deliver a distinctiveness worth trying. To order: [www.inmanfamilywines.com](http://www.inmanfamilywines.com).

### Bargain of the Week

2012 **Tercos** Torrontes, Salta (\$13): This Muscat-related white wine has a floral/tropical aroma and a passion fruit, almost SB-style mid-palate, and a dry finish, yet still retains its Asian food compatibility through intriguing richness in the finish.

## ‘That Much’

In the old 1960s television series *Get Smart*, created by comedian Mel Brooks, actor Don Adams played the fictional detective Maxwell Smart.

In that role, he often used a line about missing something “by *that much*,” holding his thumb and digit about an inch apart.

In wine terms, this happens a lot with me. I often evaluate wines that are so close to making it into our Tasting Notes that it’s difficult to justify leaving them out. Yet I will often do just that, or downgrade the wine to a lower category.

In some cases, it’s a matter of what potentially was there, and which the winery missed “by *that much*,” usually in an effort to make the wine more commercial.

A case example: I smelled a Chardonnay the other day that clearly had come from a great vineyard. The fruit underneath other elements was terrific.

But challenging that fruit were the other elements—a malolactic, margarine aroma and an oak layer that compromised the wine’s great

potential. Moreover, the wine’s lack of acidity killed its compatibility for going with food.

The result: I didn’t mention it.

This can happen with some exalted Cabernets, where I can easily tell that the fruit was—at one point in time—really superb. But I also can tell when that time was: two weeks before grapes were harvested!

Another example of missing it by *that much* came yesterday. I tasted a bottle of 2011 Las Rocas, a Spanish Garnacha from Calatayud. The aroma, entry, and taste were fine for a \$14 bottle of wine. But what was clear to me was what the wine *didn’t* say.

A decade or more ago, Las Rocas was a prototypical example of old Grenache vines and was a sensational value.

Back then, with its rustic, earthy, and peppery aroma it was one of the best Grenache-based red wines you could buy at any price. Today it is but a shadow of itself.

As nice a wine as it is, the flavors are far more homogenous and its

structure far more “easy to drink.” It’s a nice, modern rendition of a red wine and says nothing about its soil or the grape. It’s somewhat soulless.

So although there is nothing “wrong” with the wine, I was saddened by the fact that 40,000 cases of it have come into the United States and from all appearances a decision was made to make a wine that was a lot less distinctive than it could have been.

I know this 3,500-foot altitude vineyard from its past wines, and know it has the potential to make a more interesting statement. But any such wine wouldn’t justify importing 40,000 cases.

What would be exciting, however, is if the company making the wine did, say, 1,000 cases of a Reserve version. No, not with more oak, but from an area of the vineyard in which the peppery, earthy notes could be recaptured.

Then the wine would be a reflection of how great it used to be—and can be again

©2014

### 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)

**PLEASE NOTE: THIS COMMENTARY IS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. FOR PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE, PLEASE CONTACT US BY TELEPHONE, FAX OR E-MAIL.**