

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

Volume XIX, Issue 11

April 23, 2015

Great Alternatives

After 20 or so years of writing about wine, in the mid-1990s, I realized we were all chasing a most elusive ghost: wine greatness.

As such it was easy to become a cynic—and numbers told the tale.

In the course of a decade, a number-scoring wine critic will review tens of thousands of wines, and will argue that any wine scoring 93 points or more is a great wine. (Any number you choose will work here.) It is obvious that this scenario has embedded within it two immutable facts:

1. The overwhelming majority of wines that critics write about are rated “great” in one way or another: truly great, near-great, great as a reflection of past history of the winery or region, and any other justifications that the critic can come up with. Just think of the many thousands of wines that yearly get scores of 93 and above.

2. The overwhelming majority of great wines (93+) are made from great grapes, i.e., grapes that are rated as the *ne plus ultra* of the wine world. Of the many hundreds of wine grapes that make table wines in this world, perhaps a dozen are rated as great.

Who does this rating of varieties? Why, the very people who will tell you (by dint of the relative rarity of “great” ratings) that Riesling is less great than is Cabernet, that Sauvignon Blanc is less great than is red Burgundy, that Pinot Blanc is less great than is Chardonnay.

Thus the wine industry in general has placed its weight behind “top” varieties and as has shied away from grapes that otherwise might be rated as great if only the powerful critics and wine bloggers actually knew something about them.

(As a side note, isn't it absurd to call such critics “experts,” when in fact all they know much about is Chardonnay, Cabernet, Pinot Noir, and a tiny handful of other grapes? A wine expert knows a lot about a lot of wines.)

All of which makes Eric Laumann and others of his ilk heroes in the finest tradition of wine making. That's because he emphasizes, in his small Cambiata Winery, some grapes that wouldn't be identified as great by almost all of the major critics. Most of Cambiata's “other” wines score in the 80s, because they are from grapes yet to be blessed as great.

However, when you first try Laumann's Tannat and Dornfelder, one thing stands out: the wines are truly great and impeccably made. And they are from grapes grown by people passionate to maximize what nature can do with such plant material.

That Laumann would put his passion into such grapes brings to mind that innovative mad genius of Bonny Doon, Randall Grahm, and some of his off-the-wall ideas that always seem to work, and certainly provide for an intriguing taste treat.

It's no shock, then, to learn that Laumann worked for years alongside Grahm at Bonny Doon. Today his instinctive view of each wine he makes leads to his proud assertion that he still does all his own barrel topping and most other cellar work because meticulousness is next to godliness in this world of micro-wine making.

All Cambiata wines (see Tasting Notes) are limited and distinctive, but not aberrational. There's a core of

Find Out What's In It

Some weeks ago, an article here said that consumers were being led down a primrose path with expensive red wine blends that gave no data: What are they?

Labels talk in generalities and consumers are supposed to guess what style of wine is in the bottle. And for prices I see as absurd.

What we wrote suggested we demand such information.

I got a call from a wine maker who was upset I had revealed a dirty little secret. In a very polite way, he said that his red blend changes every year, and to change his back label each vintage is a pain.

I said, “So you want people to buy a \$30 red blend based on no information at all?” He said he hasn't had any complaints thus far.

So I reiterate: If a wine label says nothing about what's in a blend, maybe it's time to boycott the producer. To me, generic wines should sell for prices that historically are lower to reflect the lower caliber of the wine.

If the blend is really a high-quality one, why are wine makers not telling us why we should pay \$30 for them?

Inside this issue

B	2
Wine of the Week	2
Tasting Notes	3
Winesium	3
Bargain of the Week	3
T	4

(See *Great Alternatives* on page 2)

Great Alternatives

(Continued from page 1)

classic-ness in each wine. But without any explanation, a few of the wines may raise eyebrows, even with those who know the grapes he supports.

Take, for instance, his Tannat, the red grape of Madiran. It usually makes one of the most tannic reds in the world and isn't easy to deal with. So Eric had to call an audible as he was preparing to bottle his latest Tannat.

"I had all the bottling equipment out and the wine was already in a bottling tank," he said, when he noted that the tannins hadn't resolved the way he wanted. So he put the wine back in barrels (an arduous process) for another six months.

In recent years, his Tannat has been so well-regarded by those who know how hard it is to make that he's gotten calls from around the world from those asking what he does.

Large wine companies try to be as prudent as possible when it comes to SKUs and profitability. A handful allow their wine makers to try a few

off-the-wall varieties, which end up in tasting rooms. But experimenting with grapes from obscure varieties is usually a fiscal risk, so such work is usually left to nutcase artisans.

"At Bonny Doon, making wine from less-than-popular grapes was therapeutic," said Laumann, "it gets you out of the box. Besides, who's gonna pay me to make wines like this? The best way to do it is to have your own winery."

He credits the inspirational Graham with giving him the courage to strike out on his own and see if his curiosity and creativity could justify such a venture. Clearly it does.

Laumann's first winery job was in 1983 at Hacienda with Steve MacRostie. He also worked at the large Monterey Wine Co., using many modern wine making tools. He opened Cambiata in 2002.

As a former custom-crush wine maker, he saw a lot of juice that showed it could be more interesting if it had a better vision, both in the

vineyard as well as in the winery.

Eric, a surfing enthusiast, also makes a Lodi Zinfandel under the Rail 2 Rail brand. The name comes from a tricky surfing maneuver.

For those who get bored with the mundane, the Eric Laumanns of this world can provide wine lovers a delightful alternative to the daily diet of ordinariness we usually are fed.

I got this notion early in our first meeting.

Just after we got the pleasantries out of the way this week, Eric mentioned that among the more exciting wines he had tasted in the last few months was an old bottle of a Chenin Blanc that he was sure would be dead. It was anything but.

And he also praised Riesling, Grenache, and a number of other grapes that are not as mainstream as he (and I) prefer.

Most of the Cambiata wines in our Tasting Notes are limited in availability and worth buying directly from the winery: cambiatawinery.com.

Chardonnay Style Changes

Eric Laumann told me this week that he had put only 15% of his 2013 Cambiata Chardonnay through the acid-lowering, aroma-changing tactic of malolactic fermentation.

In the latter 1990s and early 2000s, ML in Chardonnay was always 100%. "We did full malolactic," I often heard.

The reason, I surmised, was that "lush" Chardonnays were then in vogue. Lush was the term you saw most often from the number scorers.

Yet to me, lush is a buzzword for "too low in acidity," and equates to, "Do not try serving this wine with food." (Or, "Serve ice cold.")

The full-malolactic treatment for so many Chardonnays in the past led to an era where most Chardonnays were dull, uninteresting—and expensive. That's because most such wines were aged in new French oak, which cost a lot.

One reason many wine makers didn't want to do a partial ML was that

to do so risks the ML completing after bottling, a minor disaster.

But that's a risk only if a wine's pH is high; wines with lower pHs usually are stable, so partial MLs can work well. The risk of in-bottle ML in a low-pH wine is low.

About 2010, a cool vintage, higher acids and lower pHs became common and consumers found they liked the more food-oriented styles they saw.

So many wine makers decided to retrench. In the last three years we have seen malolactic ferments to be partial down to zero. And we've seen less reliance on new barrels; more lees stirring, and a decline in overall weight.

Some wines, like Eric's 2013, have 14.5% alcohol (or more), which adds some texture, but acid levels that are higher than in a decade.

The Cambiata Chardonnay has nearly 7 grams of acid per liter, accounting for its excellent structure.

Wine of the Week

2012 Saxon-Brown Semillon, Sonoma County, Fighting Brothers Cuvée (\$24): This odd wine is appealing despite (or because of!) 6 grams of residual sugar! I'm used to drier Semillons, but this wine is appealing because it has a great varietal aroma of tea/hay and lots of lees contact to work well with hot Indian curry dishes, such as Tikka Masala and Tandoori Chicken. Not the usual simple white, showing Jeff Gaffner's courage to release a slightly sweet wine.

Tasting Notes

Except where noted,
the wines below were tasted
open over the last four days.

Exceptional

2013 **Reustle Prayer Rock** Syrah, Umpqua Valley, “Gloria’s” (\$42): Black pepper, plum, violets, a hint of dark chocolate, lower alcohol (13.4%) and a perfect cool-climate Syrah aroma and taste profile. Keep the \$200 Rhônes, give me this superb wine. Always a winner. All of Steve Reustle’s wines are terrific.

2012 **Cambiata Dornfelder**, Santa Lucia Highlands, McIntyre Vineyard (\$35): Dark to the point of blackness, but the aroma and weight are stylish! The aroma is blackberry/blueberry and the mid-palate is nicely balanced with weight and acidity, and not as much tannin as the color and nose indicate. A fascinating red wine, even though the color is daunting—“Don’t get it on the tablecloth,” said Eric. Only 99 cases produced.

2012 **Cambiata Tannat**, Monterey County, Rocosa Loma Vine-

yard (\$35): A more rustic, saddle-leather sort of aroma with traces of herbs and a density you rarely see except in Petite Sirah. Even though it’s tannic, it’s still perfectly balanced with great fruit.

2014 **Cambiata Albariño**, Monterey County (\$24): Aromatic varieties like Pinot Gris, Riesling, and this Spanish grape often display a delicate spice note (terpene) and a tropical fruit intensity. This wine has it all in spades with hints of passion fruit, peach, nectarines, and a simply superb balance

2011 **Corison** Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$81): Rated Exceptional here a year ago, this wine from a cool vintage displays a classic ’80s Napa aroma (herbs, dark cherries) and a rustic taste similar to Bordeaux. Tasted double-blind.

2012 **Churchill Cellars** Pinot Noir, Sonoma County, Burke Family

Vineyard (\$49): Faintly rustic nose with black cherry and mid-palate weight. Plum-y finish; a bit riper than I usually like, but a lot of depth. Better in 2-4 more years. Excellent wine from Anthony Austin.

2013 **Cambiata Chardonnay**, Arroyo Seco (\$22): From vines as close to Santa Lucia Highlands as you can get and still not be in the appellation. The wine reminds me of a cross of Chablis and Puligny, with lees contact and only 15% ML leading to a crisp entry, textured mid-palate and crisp-angular finish. Pair with trout. What a treat!

Very Highly Recommended

2013 **Rail 2 Rail Zinfandel**, Lodi (\$18): Raspberry and spice notes mark the aroma of this slightly softer, slightly oaky red that Eric Laumann makes. A great pizza wine. A delightful and reasonably priced quaffing red.

Winesium

Downtown Santa Rosa is the planned location for a major wine museum complex that is now in the early planning stages.

Called Winesium, the facility will be on the ground floor of a major multi-story redevelopment that’s just diagonally across from the city’s Courthouse Square.

The multi-faceted space will be in a building that tentatively has already leased space to a financial institution and a number of major local businesses.

Winesium details are not yet finalized, said board president Lindsay Austin, but included in the 14,000-square-foot space will be a tasting area for food/wine pairings,

a classroom, a theatre, and a book and gift store. It will focus on all California wineries, not just the local scene.

Other plans for the facility are still in discussion, with funding now a primary topic since the developers have put a deadline on matching funding.

Austin said that rather than target large institutions like banks and accounting firms for large financial donations, Winesium is seeking a broad base of support from many wineries in the north coast counties as well as from wine industry businesses.

Among the early board members are key representatives of local

restaurants, the Santa Rosa Junior College culinary arts program, a number of accounting and law firms, and the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*.

The Winesium facility is scheduled to open to the public in about 15 months. For details, see www.winesium.org.

Bargain of the Week

2013 **Tormentoso** Pinotage, Coastal, “Bush Vine” (\$13): An hour in a decanter opens the fruit in this South African Beaujolais-like red. The Pinot Noir in the vine’s heritage leaves the wine with a varietal stamp, and the flavors are superb, if a bit simple.

Wine's Changing Faces

The way we taste wine can change radically based on what we serve it with, and/or how old it is.

It's why putting numbers on young wine is so silly. Not only do the numbers stay the same over time (even decades!), but wines change and so do the foods they go with.

Think of a 100-point Cabernet. We know it'll be big, oaky, high in alcohol, soft, generous, and easy to like when young. It's quaffable.

Now imagine this wine with rare sliced roast beef with horseradish. The wine becomes nasty. The beef is so delicate a Beaune or light-styled Pinot Noir would be better. Or worse, try it with seafood. Ugh.

The same wine three years after release is still OK with a steak, but the tannins have begun to decline, so the wine now works OK with beef dishes that are a bit lighter (stews?).

Same wine at age 12: Tannin is no longer a concern, so steak is a less likely match. Best to try it with mild cheeses. And at age 25, when most such wines are pretty tired, try stronger cheeses to deal with the oxidative effect of the time it's spent in bottle.

Deal with it like a dry Port.

Indeed, this strategy works well for many red wines. Though most wines in this world never get much age—not the way we once aged them. Even Pinot Noir, despite it being a lot lighter than Cabernet, is best with foods that match its weight.

By contrast, few Pinots will be great with steak, but as the wines age, they become more rustic and we get to see more of the dried and fresh herbs, tea, olive, and earthy scents that work nicely with lamb or game.

Moreover, no matter how high the score, a red wine typically doesn't work well with Mexican dishes, even fajitas because the food's spices (chili peppers, achiote paste) would kill the delicate nature of the wine.

For Dornfelder (such as the one we list in our Tasting Notes), its overt fruit and substantial tannins call for roast meats—and fat is a good thing, to help cut through the tannin. In that sense it has the structure of many Petite Sirahs.

I'm a big fan of Chianti when paired with red sauced pasta dishes and lots of garlic and oregano. That's

because the tomato in the sauce is usually somewhat acidic, and today's Merlots and Cabs often lack the acid to match that of the sauce.

I proved this two decades ago. A group of diners all sat down with two wines on the table: A young Cabernet and a 5-year-old Chianti. With the appetizer, the Cabernet was the clear choice. But once a plate of fettuccine with home-made tomato ragu was served, the Chianti became the go-to wine, especially with fresh Reggiano!

A year ago at a local café, we had a fascinating roast beet salad with a light vinaigrette that was fabulous with a light Pinot Noir. The other day, the "same" dish with a sweeter dressing was a disaster with basically the same Pinot Noir.

When one point means so much in the scoring of a wine tasted without food, imagine how that score fades into insignificance when it is paired with the wrong food.

Food can have a huge impact on how we perceive a wine—making scores utterly immaterial.

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