

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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### My Version of The Truth

When I was a reporter for *The Associated Press* in the 1970s, the office was frequently mailed a regular supply of movie preview invitations that were staged at motion picture studios.

Don't get the idea these were glamorous affairs. Usually the studio entrance was on a tiny side street; the guards barely looked up, glancing only to see that we had the glossy invitation. The "theater" was usually a screening room with 50 or so theater-type seats. Mostly they were Tuesday evening affairs. There was no popcorn.

Screenings were for Hollywood's press corps, most of whom didn't review film; some might mention a film in a feature story in an obscure tabloid from which they earned a scant living. (Though most such jobs paid nothing.)

The AP-LA office got so many invites that most were never used. At the few screenings I attended, I rarely saw anyone from a studio. But once in a while, a film exec would show up, sitting in the last row so as to greet us as we left.

"What'd ya think?" was the usual query. I knew some of these people, and was always wary about what to say.

I mentioned this one day to Bob Thomas, a colleague with a long history in the Hollywood press corps. He had an elegant solution: "Just say, 'Well, you've done it again.'"

This tale occurred to me last week when I read a wine article from the fine wine writer Michael Steinberger. He wrote that he didn't like the Marcassin wines of wine maker Helen Turley.

After a tasting of her wines some

years ago, he wrote, he chatted with Helen's husband, John Wetlaufer, a self-proclaimed expert on the wines of California and Burgundy.

"When he asked what I thought of the [Marcassin] wines," Steinberger wrote, "I decided to fib rather than insult him: I said they were impressive. The terseness with which I responded probably gave me away, but so be it."

Now, given my past history with disingenuous remarks to film industry people about their dull films, it dawned on me that the phrase, "You've done it again" might apply here.

But I long ago thought this was a cop-out. So decades ago I devised a strategy that could lead to a better story than if I had fibbed and said niceties that went nowhere. When a wine isn't made in a style I like, my first reply is simple: "I don't understand it."

(Translation: "I can't understand why anyone would buy it.")

Perhaps that's a bit blunt. But I cannot understand warm-climate Chardonnays that are pushed through full malolactic fermentations and then aged in new oak. What's the goal? To make a wine with the texture of buttermilk that's also sweet?

I also can't understand 16% alcohol and gobs of sugar in red wine.

The second response to "What'd ya think?" is one I now have down to a science. Quite literally.

Over the decades, I've spent much time talking with wine makers skilled in the art of wine analysis. And I have tasted with them while looking at tech sheets. And I've analyzed wine from

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### My First 'Consult'

The first suggestion I ever made to a winery was in 1981.

Dick Arrowood at Chateau St. Jean had harvest some 1980 Riesling very early that year. When the wine was through fermenting, it was about .5% residual sugar and quite tart.

During a visit in 1981, I tried a tank sample. It was terrific.

Arrowood said he thought it too tart and he intended to add sweet reserve (juice) to make it about 2% r.s. I urged him to leave it alone, and release two Rieslings—a dry and a sweet.

Some weeks later, I got a typed note from Arrowood. In it he agreed that the "Early Harvest" Riesling was so good he was going to take my advice and leave the wine alone.

He admitted that taking my advice was a risk, and he warned me, "If it doesn't sell, you just bought 675 cases of Riesling."

The dry wine was a huge hit.

But Chateau St. Jean didn't do another Early Harvest Riesling.

So obviously I couldn't call Dick up and say:

"Well, you've done it again."

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## Truth

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various regions and vintages, and read technical journals.

And though I don't understand all wines the same way, I have a good sense of the style that might be used to make a wine that better reflects the grapes' quality and the terroir from which the wine came.

Some 80% of all the wines I try are poor examples of what they're supposed to be and as such I can't recommend them. Such a high percentage of off-center wines (as I view them) surely must be based on pressures of the marketplace, the demands of marketing departments, and other exigencies of wine sales.

So when I try a wine with a wine maker and am asked for a face-to-face reply, I usually say exactly what I

think would improve the product, to be a better reflection of the grapes, soil, and other factors. And I give *specific* reasons why I think my suggestions are valid.

Maybe this sounds presumptuous. I don't think so. That's because I taste more wines than most wine makers, a *lot* more than most winery owners, and in a huge range of styles.

How often are my suggestions right? I'll never know because I get various responses from those who receive my advice. Some think I'm an ass. Others assume I can't know what pressures they face in making a "mainstream" (i.e., middle-of-the-road) wine that was made in a way just to get at least 92 points.

Many must assume that if they took my advice, the wine they'd

make would surely not sell. But would it sell better than the once that I see as off-center?

Keep in mind: my ideas are based on science; they're not wild guesses. But I also realize that my ideas may be seen as worth what I charge (nothing). Because my suggestions are offered without fee, I suspect few people are willing to take my advice—even though they're usually willing to bow to high-paid consultants, even if their ideas are idiotic.

Though my approach offers a lot more information than wine makers and owners expected when they agreed to meet with me, at least I can say that my replies, as radical as they are, represent a better approach than simply saying:

"Well, you've done it again."

## WesMar

We all now know that Russian River Valley is home to some of the finest Pinot Noirs in California, but it wasn't always so well-known.

Indeed, it may be traced to the early 1980s when Gary Farrell, Burt Williams and Ed Selyem, Iron Horse, Davis Bynum and a handful of other pioneers began to turn out some of the state's best Pinots.

The style of wine that became the de facto standard for the region was the one that Williams Selyem established at what they first called Hacienda del Rio. It featured up-front fruit of red berries, silky

tannins, and a weight that leaned more in the direction of rosé than toward dark color and Port flavors.

Many other Pinot specialists have come into the game since those first early days and a few have made richer, darker, deeper wines that are favored by those who like their Pinots to be Syrah.

Williams and Selyem sold their iconic property to John and Kathe Dyson in 1998 and retired.

However, Ed's daughter Denise, who worked closely with her father, has resumed making great PN in a style that her father established and

that she has long preferred.

Denise and her husband, Kirk Wesley, opened WesMar (named after themselves; her middle name is Mary), and the 2008 wines are fine examples of the style that first gained Burt and Ed fame.

Denise and Kirk make the wines without Ed's direct involvement, though he does taste regularly with the two.

The brand focuses on vineyard designates, and puts out a Russian River blend that's equally fascinating.

A key is early harvesting of fruit and then a careful berry selection. For example, when a 2008 wine they had made showed some of the smoke taint for which the vintage along the Mendocino County line was known, the wine was sold in bulk rather than being bottled.

The WesMar wines are limited in availability. More details at the winery web site, wesmarwinery.com, or via phone, 707-829-8824.

## Wine of the Week

**2010 Martin Codax Albariño, Rias Baixas (\$15):** The aroma of this nicely made Spanish white wine is slightly spicy, like a very modest Gewurztraminer, with tangerine and other floral citrus notes. The entry is flowery and succulent, yet the finish is crisp, and full-flavored, but with a lot more of a zesty and complex nature than even the best Pinot Gris. Best served with food. Imported by E&J Gallo.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last 10 days.

## Exceptional

2007 **Bonny Doon** Syrah, Santa Maria Valley, Bien Nacido Vineyard (\$40): An astounding aroma of black pepper, cranberry and sour cherry with near-perfect mid-palate richness. Only 13.5% alcohol so it has a food compatibility like few other Syrahs. This cool-climate wine from a great vineyard is simply sensational.

2009 **Eberle** Barbera, Paso Robles (\$26): Terrific aroma of red fruit with a hint of citrus and earth, a classic Italianate version of a wine that, when made by most California wineries, is too fat and clumsy. This one is crisp and delicious, made to go with tomato-sauced dishes. Only 13.0% alcohol. A brilliant example of Barbera unadorned by oak.

2008 **WesMar** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Oehlman Vineyard (\$37): Lovely perfume-y

aroma of bright strawberry and red cherry fruit with hints of dark berry and a subtle clove. No overt oak and a terrific acid balance. Best with food. Should age nicely for 3-5 more years.

2006 **Longboard** Syrah, Sonoma Coast, Rogers Creek Vineyard, "Maverick" (\$40): Ripe plum/pepper aroma with dark fruit in the mid-palate and a very dry finish. Needs a couple of years to open up, and best with food.

## Very Highly Recommended

2009 **Saintsbury** Pinot Noir, Carneros, "Garnet" (\$20): Nice rustic/earthy but lighter style of Pinot Noir that benefits from some aeration. A reliable, lower-priced version of Pinot from a longtime maker of the wine.

2009 **Thomas Fogarty** Gewurztraminer, Monterey County (\$18): Ripe rose and gardenia aroma

with only .3% residual sugar, a dry and complex wine to pair with Asian foods.

2009 **Dashe** Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley (\$24): Attractive balanced fruit of raspberry and subtle spice, with a liting fruity mid-palate with good acidity. An affable quaffing wine for pizza and pasta.

2009 **Voss** Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$18): For those who prefer a milder and less-grassy style of wine, this attractive but quite crisp and delicate wine from Rutherford offers nice fruit, and less than 12% alcohol! Needs time.

## Highly Recommended

2010 **Amici** Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley (\$18): Another wine from Rutherford, but with 14.2% alcohol. Nice fruit, but decidedly richer on the palate, with lovely melon notes.

## Writing Tasting Notes

Just because a lot of the wine I try isn't worth recommending doesn't mean we can't learn from them.

All wines, no matter how bad, help improve the breed. With the bad ones, all we need do is see if we can fix those errors in succeeding vintages.

As for writing about such wines, our readers likely don't like wasting time reading "avoid this" on 50 wines.

The hardest thing I do each week is the Tasting Notes section. Some weeks I'll taste 40-50 wines before I can find 7 or 8 I'm willing to say are Exceptional.

Assume I try 50 wines. I should find 10 to write about. How many of

the other 40 are recommendable? Say it's four. I could save them for the following week's issue, but I usually exclude them. Why is this?

It could be for a bit too much alcohol, perhaps a hard tannin layer plus a judgment that I don't see the wine coming together with bottle age. It could also be a belief that a wine is somehow lacking

In such cases, the wine could be rated Highly Recommended, but as per our policy for the last 15 years here, the price of a wine also is a factor. A wine with much to suggest it, but which may be too expensive, often is simply dropped out.

I had an excellent Carmenere from Chile the other day. I thought should

be about \$15. It has a suggested retail price of almost \$40. I never wrote about it.

Yet there are \$50 to \$100 wines that ring my bells in ways that I am so shocked I can't help myself, and I end up writing about them. If I ever lose my enthusiasm for such wines, I'm planning on a new career.

## Bargain of the Week

2010 **Bogle** Sauvignon Blanc, California (\$9): Stylish herbal/grassy style of SB with hay, lemon and a bit of stone fruit. Medium-weight flavors and an attractive 12.9% alcohol make for a wine best with food.

## A Silly Controversy

The name Marcassin rings bells with many lovers of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The wines are highly prized in some U.S. quarters; Robert Parker gives them scores at the upper end of his scoring scale.

I've had scant exposure to them and after one mass tasting, I left knowing I had wasted a lot of money. Indeed, I've never had a Marcassin wine I thought was great. Few have been even drinkable. But I'm sure that's just me.

The main problem here may be one of understanding what a wine is supposed to be. And I simply cannot understand the Marcassin style.

The paradigms of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are from Burgundy. If Burgundy hadn't started making the wines from its soils and climates the way they do, perhaps the question of which is best would have never arisen.

Over the last 25 years or so, California has leaped into the fray to make both wines from vineyards planted in richer soils and with a far

different climate than in Burgundy.

The result: The wines aren't in any way comparable. And thus those who don't understand Burgundy seem to prefer California's riper versions. And those who do get what Burgundy is about think the California versions are terrible.

Without a paradigm for a grape, it's clear that those most familiar with a style would prefer that style, and others would like a style more suited to what they knew. Sweet red wine is loved in Montenegro, for instance.

Louis P. Martini once said, "We like best that to which we have become accustomed."

Yet the argument made in the July 25 issue of Marcassin's sales brochure, in which it was alleged that Burgundies are made from under-ripe grapes, is ridiculous.

Look at the naïve nature of the comments. The issue really is all about semantics. I was reared with great Burgundy. It is not under-ripe. It is ripe *within the context of what*

*Burgundy typically does*, and means that the wines need time in bottle to show their true greatness.

What the Marcassin theology is all about is calling "ripe" what arguably is over-ripe. As such, the wines it makes are full-bodied and unctuous.

The Marcassin sales brochure even admits that its wines don't need to be aged (or shouldn't be?). The newsletter says, "There is no reason... to delay gratification."

Here's a tautology: California makes the best California wines. And Burgundy makes the best Burgundy.

To me, Marcassin is a duck with twin beaks. It wants to be one thing, and it wants to be another.

And to compare one wine to the other is an absurdist argument akin to deciding if you really can get 1,000 angels on the head of a pin.

The only thing you have to then discover is: how large is the pinhead?

If you read Marcassin's ego-driven drivel and theological diatribe, I think you'll get the idea.

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