

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

Volume XIII, Issue 44

January 8, 2009

The Curse of the Soil

All wines fall into at least one marketing niche, and a few wines actually pop up in more than one niche.

This is a non-scientific field rife with pitfalls, and it calls for analysis using examples that make some sense to set the record straight.

Some wineries and wine brands get into a beneficial niche in which the price of the wines seems too high for the quality you get. But the price remains high and a lot of people pay the price anyhow.

A classic case example of this would be any newbie Napa Valley winery that desires to charge a lot of money for their Merlot or Cabernet just because of where they are located. Is the wine any good? Does it have near-perfect flavors or flaws that make it simply odd? Will the wine age well or at all?

The answer to all questions is, "Does the buyer care?" The gloss of Napa is all that's desired by those who are willing to pay big bucks.

I have found that far too often, the high price has nothing to do with the alleged quality. As a highly paid (ha!) professional cynic, I can make this assertion with little fear of contradiction.

(On those very rare occasions when someone has questioned this thesis, I've offered to stage a blind tasting to prove my point. Even rarer, when some fool took me up on my offer, he was embarrassed to find out that I was right. This has happened just once.)

Usually getting niched in with the pricey wines is a result of starting out with a high price for no apparent reason. High prices are appropriate for wines that are well established and have been in the business for a long time.

But charging a lot just because of your location seems as if the winery owner is asking consumers to fund his lifestyle. No one forced him to pay \$200,000 for an acre that will not pay for itself in his lifetime.

Oddly enough, past performance usually takes a back seat to price as a reflection of quality. If a wine is \$86 a bottle, it's assumed to be an excellent wine. And almost by definition, it cannot get a low score.

With new wineries, some get put in a high-priced niche as a result of some oddball or bizarre circumstance that usually starts with a wine getting a high score from some high-falluting rag based solely on one person's taste of the wine in a non-blind, look-at-the-price-tag setting that doesn't include victuals.

And then there are disconcerting wine niches that are based on where the wine comes from.

The blessing is the image of the soil with classic varieties, i.e., Napa Cabernet, Oregon and Central Otago Pinot, some areas in Bordeaux and Burgundy, Champagne, and Barolo. The list does get pretty slim after all those listed.

And then we come to the odd case of the converse—wines placed into a
*(See **Curse** on page 2)*

George Rose

Photography wonks know that George Rose is blessed with an acute sense of style. But they may not be aware that George is also a keenly opinionated wine lover.

For the last several years, Rose was the brilliant head of public relations for Kendall-Jackson. I've known George since we were both at *The Los Angeles Times*. His transition from shutterbug to wine PR was no shock to me.



George Rose (l) and Dan

George is bright, insightful, and a man who doesn't mince words. He's also a superb writer.

Starting soon, *Vintage Experiences* will begin running a few of George's commentaries on various aspects of the wine industry.

Inside this issue

Restaurant Woes	2
Wine of the Week	2
Tasting Notes	3
The 'Right' Wine	3
Bargain of the Week	3

Curse

(Continued from page 1)

lower niche because of the historic circumstance of being in the “wrong” place at the right time.

Monterey County comes to mind.

We all know of recent greatness by a number of Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs from Santa Lucia Highlands.

But what of other Monterey County areas that have been tarred with the brush of mediocrity dating back to the 1970s?

I recently met with wine maker Reggie Hammond and Randy Pura, one of the owners of Ventana Vineyards and found that much has changed for the flat lands of the county, but well under a radar that sees only the past, not the present,

which is bright and truly exciting.

Founder Doug Meador and his wife, LuAnn, had long made many top wines from their Arroyo Seco ranch, so when they sold Ventana and its acreage to a group headed by Pura, I didn’t expect changes. But Hammond has tweaked a number of the wines to make them a bit more reflective of their soil.

This is a good thing. Yet to some, it isn’t worth the time to detail what is afoot. Here’s why:

When you live by scores and not by words, you are forced to fall back on last year’s scores for your evaluation on this year’s wines. But clearly things are changing at many Monterey County wineries, with Ventana at the forefront.

No longer do we hear about red

wines having “the veggies,” and indeed, some wines actually are far more interesting because of the regional character of the wines.

As our Tasting Notes reflect, Ventana is making a lot of very stylish wine, which prompted the quiet Pura to simply said, “We think we over-deliver.”

Or to put it another way, long ago Ventana was put into a niche that was demeaning, and related as much to the public’s notion that Monterey was not a place for wine excellence. It wasn’t reality.

But all things change, even if the glossies don’t see the changes.

And thus are many of Ventana’s wines worth a lot more than their prices indicate. Conventional “wisdom” notwithstanding.

Restaurants in the Doldrums

An observation on the state of the restaurant business: It’s bad.

Newspapers are filled with stories of layoffs, empty seats, and customers staying away in droves.

San Francisco’s famed Michael Mina restaurant said last month it would trim staff and close one extra day a week. Nationally, places that once stayed open until late now are dark earlier and there are rumors of imminent closings everywhere.

Not all of the news is bad, of course, and special promotions and week-night cost-cutting dinner

pricing has had a positive impact.

Two days ago, Patina Restaurant Group announced it would offer diners 25% off all wines through March 31 at some of its locations.

In general, what we’re seeing is a reflection of the weakened U.S. economy, and the fact that dining out is one of the few luxuries that consumers can avoid without pain.

We’ve also noticed that some of the better grocery stores (Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s, among others) are busier than they usually are, and that certain pre-prepared

entrées as well as par-cooked items are running out faster than usual.

So the story last week of the San Francisco restaurant with the audacity to charge \$65 corkage for a patron to open his own magnum seems ridiculous. We have already gotten letters from readers saying they are so upset they will not dine at that place.

Where bringing in your own wine isn’t legally banned, most places would benefit from lowering or eliminating corkage charges, even if only on week nights.

In all areas of the country, those restaurants that have high-priced wine lists should consider special week-night promotions where all bottles are sold at half price or less.

Some restaurants, though, are doing well. Bacar in San Francisco tested a “half-price on all wine” on Monday nights, but that promotion ended. Instead, Bacar raised its corkage charge from \$20 to \$30!

Wine of the Week

2007 **Dan Aykroyd** Chardonnay, Sonoma County (\$20) and 2006 **Dan Aykroyd** Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma County (\$20): Two delightful wines made to specs desired by the comedian/actor, with lower alcohol and great balance. The former is light and balanced, the latter even better with distinctive cool-climate herb/mineral aromas and huge character in the mouth. Often discounted, these two new wines are both splendid. Produced by DeLoach.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last month.

Exceptional

2006 **Ventana** Rubystone, Arroyo Seco (\$18): A red Rhône blend with 62% Grenache, and the aroma shows it with red currant and pepper with traces of herbs. A simply delicious wine that wouldn't be overpriced at twice the price.

2007 **Ventana** Sauvignon Blanc, Arroyo Seco (\$16): A distinctive regional (cool-climate) mineral/spice and citrus aroma and a near-perfect structure for food. Not to be equated with either North Coast or New Zealand.

2006 **Kuyen**, Valle del Maipo (\$30): A Syrah/Cabernet blend from Chile, with pepper/herbs and spice, and manageable tannins. Air helps soften the tannins. Imported by Global Vineyard, 510-527-5878.

2004 **Taltarni** Shiraz, Pyrenees, Victoria (\$20): A rich, dense, cool-

climate Aussie wine with black fruit, plums, and traces of pepper and violet. Best decanted, when it opens up after an hour or two, when a faint mint aroma appears. Imported by Clos du Val Wine Co.

2006 **Eberle** Sangiovese, Paso Robles (\$22): Paler in color than many, but with relatively dense fruit of violet/currant, a hint of earth, and great acidity for pairing with tomato-based pastas.

2007 **Ventana** Gewurztraminer, Arroyo Seco (\$16): Quite ripe aroma of carnations and rose petals; 20 grams/liter of r.s., so it's slightly on the sweet side and thus matches well with spicy Thai food.

2007 **Ventana** Riesling, Arroyo Seco (\$16): A classic Germanic petrol aroma with hints of dried apple/pear. Almost as sweet as the Gewurz, but with excellent acid, so

the wine will age nicely for a few years.

2006 **Eberle** Zinfandel, Paso Robles (\$24): Stylish raspberry jam fruit with hints of fresh plums and spice. Excellent balance.

Very Highly Recommended

2006 **Eberle** Côtes-du-Rhône, Paso Robles (\$20): Gutsy, slightly rustic blend of Syrah, Mourverde, and Grenache with an aroma of plums, violets, and red berry fruit. Needs a lot of air, which opens the aroma and softens the tannins.

2006 **Mettler** Cabernet Sauvignon, Lodi (\$25): Stylish, deeply flavored and rich-fruit wine with hints of cola, chocolate and a solid core of varietal character. Not an aging wine, but lovely Cabernet flavors for near-term drinking from one of Lodi's top producers.

Which is the Right Wine?

What is the right drink for the inauguration?

If you really think this is a subject with which I'm comfortable, you may not have been reading this wine commentary for very long.

But that was the subject of a press release I saw on the PR Newswire the other day, and it reminded me of an episode in my formative years as a wine writer.

Decades ago, a week before Mother's Day, an editor asked why I wasn't writing about what wine to serve on that particular day.

I was amused. Why would a set of certain wines be better for that particular day? Not even the age-old idea of Champagne on New Year's

Eve seems particularly mandatory.

Sure, it's a nice tradition, but why we do these things is a bit fuzzy to me.

This New Year's Eve, we had no bubbly; we drank a great Pinot Noir.

And on Thanksgiving we had a wide array of wines including an aged Italian white wine and a young red wine of no particular heritage.

The dumbest wine column came in late 1976 after Jimmy Carter, a former peanut farmer, had won the presidential election. A well-known wine columnist actually wrote a column on what wine goes with peanuts. I am not making this up.

As we approach the inaugural, I suspect there will be some people taken with the idea that there is a

right wine with which to celebrate.

The PR press release suggested three different mixed drinks, each using the company's vodka. What wasn't explained was why this is better than coffee or absinthe.

As for us, we're having wine that night to match the food.

Bargain of the Week

2006 **Tercos** Malbec, Mendoza (\$12): Nice Argentine dark red with red fruit, leafy notes, pepper, and a hit of tannin that subsides with air. A second wine from Ricardo Santos, and a great value. Imported by Global Vineyard.

Copia R.I.P.

It was called, Copia and was subtitled the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts. And it appears to be completely moribund if not actually emulating Monty Python's parrot.

One thing is certain: The concept may never have had a real chance, and the fact that it is now all but gone probably is for the best.

Days after the place shut its doors about three weeks ago, in debt up to its crystal stemware, a cogent op-ed newspaper column by a longtime wine industry observer said it best: "Copia should just go away."

The remark was part of a bright, insightful commentary by George Rose, one of the nation's top photo-journalists as well as a superb public relations professional for decades. (Also see P.1 article)

I'd always been an admiring skeptic of Copia, which was foisted

on us by Robert Mondavi and his "Mission" in the early 1990s. But the concept was a bit high-flown for the United States.

Soon after Mondavi sponsored the place in east Napa, we witnessed a curious idea: A visit cost \$12 per person to see the innards.

Early exhibits were interesting, but those touring wine country often complained of the \$8 charge to taste wine at local wineries, so the \$24 per couple spent to see display cases of wine art was really pushing the envelope.

I'm sure Mondavi believed in the Mission—which was to equate wine with opera, poetry, and art. He hoped to integrate the history and culture of wine into American society.

It was a nice idea, but in a nation that still views wine as a drug...?

This was no wine/food society that offers local chapter events, like

the American Institute for Wine and Food (a Mondavi and Julia Child effort that is still sort of alive).

And it did remind me a lot of another similar concept, Vinopolis, the London building dedicated to + the art of wine, which friends of mine say is foundering badly.

Vinopolis costs \$45 to enter (for one person!) and includes a wine tasting. But, said one on-line blogger about an experience at Vinopolis, "The heavy corporate sponsorship we'd seen [earlier] continued through the tour and I got... the feeling that much of the wine selection was dictated by cold hard cash."

I wish Copia had worked. I wish the public had gotten enthused with the history of wine, the impact it has had on culture, religion, and the arts.

More realistically, I'd say it ain't gonna happen. ©2009

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

P.O. Box 5857
Santa Rosa, CA 95402

Phone 707-571-1200
Fax 707-528-7395

E-mail: Info@VintageExperiences.com
Website: 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

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