Balzac
COMMUNICATIONS & MARKETING

MEDIA BACKGROUNDERS

In alphabetical order by writer last name

MICHAEL DUNNE

About Michael

Michael is a long-time wine critic and competition judge. He is a contributing columnist to the Food & Wine section of *The Sacramento Bee* and www.sacwineregion.com. He also writes a blog titled *A Year in Wine* (http://ayearinwine.blogspot.com), where he shares his discoveries as he judges at wine competitions and visits wine regions, with occasional commentary about issues touching the wine scene. He and his wife Martha also run WineGigs.com, a vehicle for organizing wine tastings, conducting wine tours, and consulting on matters of wine and food.

Recent Articles

Mike Dunne's Wine of the Week: 2008 Fair Play Lemley Ranch Vineyard Charbono

By Mike Dunne
Wednesday, Sep. 15, 2010

Obscurity Cellars 2008 Fair Play Lemley Ranch Vineyard Charbono ($24)

Obscurity Cellars in the Fair Play district of El Dorady County is the orphanage of California wineries. Here, owner and winemaker John Smith gathers all the lost and lonely children abandoned by the state's mainstream vintners. He supports them with tender loving care, then sends them out into a world chary at first but soon won over by their spunk and charm.

As the name suggests, Obscurity Cellars specializes in "neglected, misunderstood and off-the-beathen-path" grape varieties. Many of the grapes planted in his vineyard have

long histories in California - alicante bouschet, carignane, charbono - but they're out of fashion in a market dominated by cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and merlot.

Many of today's obscure grape varieties, frankly, didn't consistently yield particularly impressive wines, but Smith believes that's because they weren't planted in the right place, or earlier vintners lost patience with them before discovering how to reveal their charms.

Smith is patient, and he loves to experiment. A scientist with a doctorate in analytical chemistry, he spent much of his earlier career in laboratories, pursuing answers and seeking solutions as he helped design and develop medical instruments. That curiosity carried over into his second career as commercial winemaker, which began when he and his wife bought a Fair Play vineyard in 1989. They first opened Oakstone Winery in 1997, but as it grew Smith turned over much of the winemaking to others. In 2003, itching to return to winemaking, he opened neighboring Obscruity Cellars to concentrate on exploring the potential of orphan grape varieties.

At the Amador County Fair wine tasting this summer, I tasted one of the results of his research, the Obscurity Cellars 2008 Fair Play Lemley Ranch Vineyard Charbono, which had won best-of-class at the fair's commercial wine competition. I was struck by the wine's meatiness and complexity. It was dark and full-bodied, but readily accessible, inviting several subsequent tastes. I liked its fleshiness and balance, and found it fun and intriguing. It was so strikingly different from other wines tasted that evening that the usual fruit-inspired descriptors didn't apply. Well, cherries and plums were in there, all right, but the overall impression ran more to autumnal earthiness. It carries a fair amount of oak, as well, but it's appropriate for the wine's full round flavors.

So little charbono is planted in California that state agricultural officials don't track its acreage, but the total figure is believed to be between 50 and 100 acres, mostly in Mendocino, Madera and Napa counties. Just a dozen or so wineries release charbono as a varietal. Over the years, wineries that have worked with charbono almost invariably have been associated with strong-minded, independent-leaning vintners, such as Inglenook, Parducci, Papagni, Bonny Doon, Pacific Star, Summers, Turley and Fife. Though never very popular, the wine half a century ago had its own club, The Charbono Society but its annual dinner ceased with a 1989 soiree at Inglenook Vinyeards in Napa Valley which for decades had been the most enthusiastic proponent of charbono. Today's Inglenook doesn't make a charbono.

Charbono's origins are uncertain, though retired UC Davis geneticist Carole Meredith found it identical to corbeau, long grown in France’s Savoie region, where it also is known as charbonneau.

Smith's interest in obscure grapes generally and charbono specifically began in the 1970s when as a home winemaker he attended a tasting in New York City. He was as

impressed by the quality of the carignane, charbono and other unheralded varieties he tasted that night as he was perplexed by their lack of esteem. "I was struck by how much I enjoyed them and by how much I learned by tasting wines I'd never heard of," Smith recalls. He learned then not to follow the masses in deciding what tasted good to him, and he put that lesson to practice first at Oakstone and now at Obscurity.

By the numbers: 14.1 percent alcohol, 124 cases, $24.

Context: Smith favors the charbono with porcini-encrusted steak, a recipe for which is on the winery's Web site, www.obscuritycellars.com. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Inglenook Vineyards was strongly promoting charbono, the winery's culinary director, Barbara Lang, experimented with several dishes she thought would be compatible with the wine. Pairings that were popular included roast haunch of venison with a pepper sauce and celeraic puree; skewered rabbit with sage, prosciutto and mild sausages; braised squab with porcinis and truffles; and dry Monterey Jack and Gruyere cheeses with walnuts.

Availability: Technically, the Obscurity charbono won't be available until a release party Oct. 23 and 24, but visitors to the Oakstone tasting room, 6440 Slug Gulch Road, Somerset, can buy it before then. The tasting room is open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.

The Zinfandel Question

September 19, 2010

Effectively ignored as a member of the "media elite," I'm about to play my card as "citizen voter." About a month ago, I asked the campaign offices of California's principal gubernatorial candidates - Jerry Brown and Meg Whitman - how I could send them a question concerning the state's wine trade. Whitman's people never replied. Brown's people sent me the typical boilerplate response saying he was "hard at work putting together a comprehensive set of policies" that soon would be posted in the "solutions" area of his website. I've looked, and find nothing there concerning California's wine culture, let alone an answer to my question.

I'll be the first to admit that my question doesn't have the gravitas of the issues that Brown and Whitman will be asked to address in forthcoming debates and forums, such as public education, budget stalemates, environmental safeguards and the like. My question is much lighter and more playful, though it does have the potential to help define just who they are, where they stand and how they might differ from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Their answer to my question may interest only me, but it also might intrigue other wine enthusiasts, not exactly a small constituency in California.

My question: Would they sign into law or veto legislation to declare zinfandel

California's state wine? A measure to this effect was introduced four years ago. It subsequently was watered down to designate zinfandel as the state's "historic wine." It breezed through the legislature, but Gov. Schwarzenegger vetoed it on the grounds that California makes many historic wines and that it would be unfair to single out any one of them for special tribute. In short, the tough guy buckled to the cabernet-sauvignon, petite-sirah and carignane lobbyists. If earlier governors had followed Gov. Schwarzenegger's weak reasoning, the golden poppy wouldn't be the state flower because roses also grow in California, the desert tortoise wouldn't be the state reptile because the rattlesnake also thrives here, and the West Coast swing wouldn't be the state dance because the macarena also is popular.

The reasons why zinfandel should be California's "state wine" or "historic wine" are too numerous and persuasive to repeat here at this time. By now, Whitman and Brown should be up to speed on the state's history, economics and wine culture, and should be able to tell us where they stand on acknowledging and celebrating zinfandel's singular role in establishing the character and color of California.

While I'm not too hopeful they will answer my question, I have one last chance at getting it before them. Personal Democracy Forum has set up a website, 10Questions.com, that gives ordinary folk a chance to ask gubernatorial and other candidates questions on matters that concern them. The format is an election itself. Visitors to the site vote on the questions they most want to see candidates answer, with the top 10 to be forwarded to candidates, who then have until Oct. 14 to post their replies. The intent of this give-and-take is "to allow voters, not media elites, to drive the conversation." My question has been posted. The deadline to add other questions and to vote is Tuesday. You can speed up your search for the zinfandel question by clicking on either "new" or "other." I wish I could say "vote often," but visitors can cast just one ballot per Google account. Nonetheless, get over there and vote positively, especially if you are a fellow fan of both politics and zinfandel.

California: More Than Napa, More Than Chardonnay

September 15, 2010

California's two principal wine-trade groups, the Wine Institute and the California Association of Winegrape Growers, quietly did something rather remarkable Tuesday: They invited the wallflowers of the state's wine industry onto the dance floor. Fair or not, the two groups long have been perceived as representing primarily the interests of corporate vintners, and if those wineries were based in Napa Valley or Sonoma County, all the better. Several years ago, mom-and-pop winemakers felt so out of the loop they formed another association, the Family Winemakers of California.

At Hotel Vitale in San Francisco yesterday, however, officials of the two older groups welcomed to the party underappreciated wine regions, obscure grape varieties

and small producers. And they did it with imagination, vitality and grace. The theme of the seminar and tasting was "Unexpected Grapes from Unexpected Places." The intent was to let a couple hundred members of the trade and media know that California has more to offer wine enthusiasts than cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay, and that wines need not be from Napa Valley or Sonoma County to be worthy of respect and investment.

Master sommelier Evan Goldstein kicked off the program with an overview of the California wine scene that was so smart and brisk it all by itself restored respectability to the PowerPoint presentation. Among other things, Goldstein noted that just 4 percent of California's wine is produced in Napa Valley, with another 6 percent originating in Sonoma County. The math is simple: 90 percent of the state's wine comes from elsewhere. He then proceeded to show why restaurateurs, retailers and the press should pay more heed to what's going on in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Mendocino County, Calaveras County, Livermore, Marin and several other frequently overlooked wine enclaves. His most disarming technique was a blind tasting in which participants were to speculate on each varietal and then pinpoint where it originated in California. He urged tasters to think in terms of "classic varietals not from classic places" and "unexpected varietals from classic places." If tasters hadn't figured it out on their own, Goldstein at the end of the tasting revealed that they'd had a riesling from Napa Valley, a vermentino from Paso Robles, a sangiovese from Wooden Valley and a cabernet sauvignon from Livermore, among other matches generally seen as non-traditional.

Participants then ambled about the hotel's patio, where some 150 additional wines representing "unexpected grapes from unexpected places" were being poured. Granted, both blind and open tastings showed that some grape varieties maybe shouldn't be cultivated where they are. Or perhaps the growers and winemakers gamely experimenting with unfamiliar grape varieties and new styles of wine simply are on a steep learning curve, with more encouraging results yet to emerge. However, I did leave the event wondering whether some varieties, most notably gruner veltliner and nebbiolo, ever will find a receptive home in California.

On the other hand, the two sponsoring organizations did demonstrate through the tastings that several minor varietals can be at least as exciting as such established players as cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and merlot. I'm thinking of the rich and persistent Clarksburg gewurztraminer made by Milliaire Winery at Murphys in Calaveras County; the fruity, fleshy and firm dolcetto from Rosa d'Oro Winery in Lake County; the lush and complex teroldego from Peltier Station Winery at Lodi; and the spicy and crisp grignolino rose by Heitz Cellars in Napa Valley. (The grignolino rose is no newcomer; Hetiz has been making it since 1961, and it's a remarkable testimonial to the wine's quality and value - $18.50 - that it continues to survive in the cabernet-centric Napa Valley.)

And again, the tastings reinforced my growing belief that the most exciting winemaking

in the state today involves blended wines, such as the rich, creamy and layered mix of green Rhone Valley grape varieties called Ruben's Blend, made by Twisted Oak Winery at Murphys in Calaveras County; the sharp and stony estate rose by L'Aventure Winery at Paso Robles, a mix of three black Rhone Valley grapes with cabernet sauvignon; and the marvelously expressive and elegant Patriarche by Holly's Hill Vineyards at Pleasant Valley in El Dorado County, another mix of black Rhone Valley grapes.

BECKY SUE EPSTEIN

About Becky Sue

For the past 20 years, Epstein has been providing food, wine and spirits coverage for local, regional and national publications on both the East and West Coasts, from *Art & Antiques* and *Luxury Golf & Travel* to *Food + Wine* and *Wine Spectator*. She began her career as a restaurant reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* while working in film and television during the 1980s and early 1990s. Having lived abroad for several years, her expertise includes food history and travel, entertaining, aperitifs, dessert wines and spirits.

Becky Sue Epstein is an experienced editor, broadcaster and consultant in the fields of wine, spirits, food and travel. Currently she is based in New England and holds several positions requiring a substantial amount of worldwide wine- and spirits-related travel:

- Senior Editor, Wine & Spirits for Intermezzo Magazine national lifestyle publication
- Editor, The Palate Press online wine magazine
- Contributing Editor for trade/retail The Tasting Panel Magazine
- Wine expert for LocalWineEvents.com
- Expert contributor on How2Heroes.com
- International correspondent on iWineRadio.com
- Blogger at BeckySueEpstein.com

Recent Articles

A Family Winery, From Growers to Empire Via One Guy

September 15, 2010

Soon after Santa Barbara County's winemakers had figured out how to make the best wines in their AVAs, great winemaking began inching northward and Paso Robles was its next stop. Grape growers and winemakers in Paso started trying out a few different wine styles, including Rhône and Bordeaux. This meant, basically, syrah-based wines and cabernet-based wines. Then some mavericks came in and mixed the two, creating cabernet-syrah blends. Traditionalists cringed, but people started trying the wines and found they were pretty darn good.

In the intervening decades, Paso Robles' growers have been refining their knowledge of the local mesoclimates, figuring out which grapes to plant where. Many have gotten very good at winemaking, too. Now, they're working on the marketing part.

Austin Hope is one guy who really understands this concept. The 35-ish family man is good-looking, super-friendly, quietly energetic—and he doesn't sleep a lot. He'll tell you that himself. He's got 80 acres of his own vines, 55 additional growers he works with, five different lines of wine, a wife, two daughters, several cats and dogs, and tremendous amounts of travel on his calendar. A new venture into sustainability certification for his vineyards can't make it less stressful, either. He's a guy who figures out what he wants to do, even if it's never been done before, and works relentlessly toward his goal whether it's great grapes, new wines, or new markets.

Austin's family moved here to grow grapes when he was a toddler, so he hasn't really known any other world—but he's definitely out to conquer this one. From his origins in a family that grew grapes for other wineries, Hope is creating a small wine-making empire. But at home, he doesn't seem like it. On the outside, he's easy-going, casual, surrounded by family and pets, grilling outside for a group of invited journalists. But there's a steeliness in him, and in his command of attention, that everyone who works for him seems to respond to. I got the message that it's great to kid around as much as you like—as long as you are excellent at your job.

This would also be true for the growers he works with. At Brave Oak Vineyard, for example, we met owner Tony Dominguez. It's a site Tony had his eye on for years. The minute Tony took it over (10 years ago) Austin was out in the fields with him to select planting locations and rootstock. They came to an agreement on a flat fee *per acre*, not per ton of grapes. This means that the yields on the grapevines can be as low as Austin needs them to be in order to make the wines he wants. And Tony gets a flat fee—provided the grapes are in excellent condition when he delivers them at harvest.

The climate and amount of rainfall vary quite a bit in the vineyards around Paso Robles, influenced by terrain as well as wind direction and proximity to the ocean.

In the different vineyards Hope owns and contracts with, grapes are positioned on a variety of trellising systems, even a high pergola-type structure for some in an arid area, which must all be hand-harvested.

Austin explains that his vineyards are planned to yield high-quality grapes, as little as 2-1/2 tons per acre, which means that he can only make quality wines that sell for a minimum of $12-$15 a bottle. As a contrast, he says, giant corporations often use grapes from yields of 8-10 tons per acre, which means they can afford to produce Central Coast wines for $7-$9 a bottle.

Hope Family Wines includes Treana, Liberty School, Candor, Austin Hope and Westside. Austin would rather have more lines, each with their own style, than one brand diluted by carrying too many whites or reds.

Liberty School ($14) comprises mostly varietal wines, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Syrah, along with a red Central Coast Cuvée blend. Treana has a cabernet sauvignon-based red ($50) and a Rhône inspired white made with viogner and marsanne ($25).

Candor is something more unconventional: multi-vintage wines. The theory behind Candor is to use some older wines, but "freshen them up" with a little young wine, says Austin. He has found this gives consumers the best of both worlds: nicely aged wines with a hint of lively, young fruit on the palate. The rosé is $16 and the Syrah and Merlot are $20. Westside Red, a newly-relaunched label (it was out of production for a time) is another multi-vintage wine, this one in a Southern Rhône style, called "Troublemaker" ($22).

Austin Hope Syrah is Austin's signature Syrah ($48). In this line he also currently has a rosé ($18) and a late harvest Roussanne, which is not made every year.

Before I went to Paso Robles, I knew I liked Austin's reds. The whites, not so much—though other people in my group enjoyed them. To me, the reds are much more interesting all the way through. They have appealing aromas and depth in their flavors. The whites are easy to drink, sometimes even lush, but not as attractive to me, personally.

At dinner one night we got to sample some older vintages of Treana. The whites I liked were older, like the Treana 1996 (Marsanne and Viogner) which had become more polished with age. But the older Treana reds had remained incredibly vibrant, and paired very well with the evening's barbeque. 1996 was the first vintage of Treana, and this vintage of the red was still abundantly flavored, smoky and tarry, with a soft, light body and finish. The 1998 Treana red (in magnum) was the star of the evening, with a medium-big body, and all the other components nicely balanced and integrated: acidity, tannin and fruit.

Shaken and Stirred
By: The Tasting Panel Magazine

San Francisco is the epicenter for the new classic cocktail

Super-premium spirits Bulleit bourbon, Don Julio tequila and Ketel One vodka on the scene in San Francisco.
Photos by Jenn Farrington

The City by the Bay and its surrounding communities are on the cutting edge in art, culture, technology . . . and the cocktail. THE TASTING PANEL takes an extended look at some of the venues where talented Bay Area mixologists are using Diageo super-premium spirits to shake up a seismic mixed drink revival.

Yes, There Really Is a Don Julio

As a professional, what makes you reach for one brand of tequila over another? Sometimes it's just habit. Other times, it's the most recent memory of a smooth taste.

In the Jalisco highlands, east of Guadalajara, I saw strong, attractive men (Refer to photo!—Ed.) harvesting shoulder-height blue Weber agave, grown in fields of copper-colored soil. Over at the processing plant, there's an enticing sweet scent like jelly cooking as the hearts of the cactus are slowly roasted in huge brick ovens for 72 hours before fermentation and double-distillation—the original ovens Don Julio himself built in the 1940s.

Yes, there really is a Don Julio. Young Julio started the company when he was 17. He had been working in tequila-making since the astounding age of seven, to help feed his family. In the early 1940s he became aware of a new demand for better quality tequila in the world. Though he's now in his 80s, Don Julio himself still inspects the agave fields; as he decreed, only the very ripest sections are ever harvested.

Out of all the tequilas on your bar, why reach for Don Julio,? Well, it's easy to grab the distinctive knob of wood on top of the bottle. But the real reason is the story.

RONALD HOLDEN

About Ronald

Ronald Holden has been writing an award-winning wine and dining blog, *Cornichon.org*, since 2004. A Northwest native, Belltown resident and unreconstructed Francophile, he has worked at KING TV and Seattle Weekly. He has published five guidebooks to the wine country of Washington and Oregon and is the wine columnist for *The NW Magazine*. He is also the director of wine tours for The International Vineyard, restaurant reviewer for *Belltown Messenger* and editorial director of *DeliciousCity.com*. In addition, he is a regular contributor to *Examiner.com*, the online wine magazine.

Recent Articles

Bookshelf: Cooking with Ethan & the gang
September 21, 2010

Like all chefs past their first restaurant hurdles, Ethan Stowell was ready to write a cookbook. He wanted to call it Anchovies & Olives, but the publisher he'd lined up, Ten Speed Press, balked. Too fishy, they said, too weird. Fine, said Ethan, who used the name for his next restaurant instead. (It was honored last month as one of America's ten best new places by *Bon Appetit*.) Meantime, Stowell opened yet another restaurant, Ballard's Staple & Fancy Mercantile, and his cookbook, now titled Ethan Stowell's New Italian Kitchen, finally goes on sale today.

Said Ethan's wife, Angela, as she watched a line of fans snake through the restaurant, "All it takes to open a restaurant is money. Almost anybody can do it. A cookbook, on the other hand, is a two-year investment."

Insatiable Americans buy more cookbooks than any other genre; one gets the impression most of them don't get read much, let alone used in the kitchen. Stowell's handsomely produced book is far better than most. First, it's got an engaging, slightly goofy style (that's how Ethan describes his own personality; co-author Leslie Miller captures it perfectly) but it's got a serious message: don't take things so goddamn seriously, it's just dinner. And don't make things so goddamn complicated, less is more, and tastes better, too.

You might say the Italians have known this for years, but Italian recipes all-too-often feel haphazard. Informal doesn't mean imprecise, Stowell tells us. Pasta, for example: wheat's highest calling, as long as you use high-quality semiolina or ultralight "00" flour (for egg pasta). "I've retained a strong reverence for pasta, for the delicate taste of the wheat," he writes. (And he started an artisanal pasta company, Lagana Foods, whose

fresh products are sold at farmers markets.) Spaghetti with sea urchin, radiatore with rabbit, cannelloni with pork cheeks, pappardelle with tomato sauce: they all earn no-nonsense measurements and luscious photos (by Geoffrey Smith).

I'm partial to the recipe for fried cauliflower with ham hocks; Stowell understands what family cooks of the Italian countryside have known for generations: cauliflower makes things sweet. And that's the genius of this book: it's not about complicated, fussy, time-consuming recipes; it's about simple techniques to create straightforward flavors.

Two other cookbooks, just for contrast.

From Hong Kong, two friends, luxury marketing maven Claudia Shaw-d'Auriol and photographer-designer Dominica Yang, teamed up five years ago to publish Delicious (Haven Bookls, $18.95). Now in its third printing and finally available in the US, it's an homage to the Martha Stewart school of pretty recipes and chic urban parties. You leaf through it for something simple (zucchini fritters to start, lamb meatloaf as a main course, apple "parcels" for dessert) and put the book back on the shelf with a sigh.

Far more useful is Williams-Sonoma Cooking Home, by Chuck Williams and Kirstine Kidd, to be released at the end of October, $34.95. (I received an advance copy from Kidd when she was in town for the International Food Bloggers Conference last month.) Williams, listed as "general editor," has been in the cookware business for over half a century, starting in Sonoma and expanding to more than 260 stores across the country. Over the years, Williams-Sonoma has sold over 30 million copies of its 300 branded cookbooks. For her part, Kidd was food editor of *Bon Appetit* magazine for more than 20 years.

What they aim for with this is the Irma Rombauer *Joy of Cooking* mantle, assuming that Mark Bittman (*How to Cook Everything*) isn't already wearing it. It's a 640-page behemoth, a reference work with 1,000 recipes, meant to live in the kitchen rather than the coffee table. I'd never put milk into a Bolognese sauce (where'd *that* come from? surely not from Italy), but those zucchini fritters, they're here, on page 354.

Let the Oktober Festivities Commence!
September 18, 2010

Several times a year, Seattle becomes a bizarre cultural outpost of an otherwise foreign land. Mexico (Cinco di Mayo), China (Chinese New Year), France (Bastille Day), Ireland (St. Patrick's Day), all excuses to get drunk in public. The advantage of Germany's Oktoberfest is that it actually lasts several weeks.

Beer, sausages, good times for weeks on end, but you don't have to travel to Munich. Feierabend imports the real thing, each brew served in official glassware. Pike Brewery leads the local brewpubs, as we've written in the past.

Gordon Biersch, next to the cineplex atop Pacific Place, doesn't look like a conventional brewpub; you can't see the brewing vessels that were lowered into the building by helicopter exactly 12 years ago, just before the roof was closed up. But they're there, and beers are the best thing Biersch has going.

Four brews have pride of place, with the seasonal Festbier, $5.50, now making its appearance. It's an excellent example of a moderately hopped German lager, a lovely bronze in color and just the right amount of bitterness. A stein costs $5.50, a buck less during early and late happy hours.

While there are more and more craft breweries with pubs attached, none even comes close to Biersch in scale. It's a $100-million-plus chain, one of the top 250 in the country, each store doing an average of $4 million in sales. Biersch has a conventional bar, the part you see when you emerge from the theater, with 3-D plasma screens for sports fans, but beyond that are a suuite of dining rooms that seat, all-in-all, 650 people. Outside hotel banquet faciligies, it's one of the biggest restaurants in Seattle.

There are over two dozeen similar Gordon Biersch breweries around the country, collectively turning out four million meals a year, an undertaking not without ambition, since each store not only brews its own beers but makes its own food from scratch. The trouble, as I've written more than once, is that corporate restaurants tend to lose their flavors as well as their soul; it takes enormous vigilance to run an army of managers, cooks, servers and bussers. (The motivating acronym at Biersch is EGET: "Every Guest, Every Time.") And so far, so good.

Seattle's exec chef Bill Heckler says he's given the new Oktoberfest menu a "creative approach to bold international flavors Gordon Biersch is known for," but there's not enough bold flavor to recommend the crusted Norwegian salmon garnished with a bland "dill cream" that tastes of neither. Best item on the special menu is the Jaegerschnitzel (a $15,95 pork cutlet with a mildly spicy breading and a tasty mushroom deglaze). The kitchen's indecisiveness is exemplified by the spaetzle (which the menu calls "spaetzels"). They're supposed to be fluffy egg noodle-dumplings, Biersch's are flavorless morsels of fried dough. The vaunted apple-cinnamon cobbler is served piping hot, but it's all dough, and unsweet at that. On the other hand, there's not much that can go wrong with the traditional German sausage platter (bratwurst, knackwurst and Hungarian sausages with pretzel sticks and garlic fries, $12.95).

Stick to what's safe (the Festbier, the sausages) and enjoy the 3D screens, and you'll be fine. The Oktoberfest promotion runs through Oct. 24th.

ROGER MORRIS

About Roger

Roger Morris writes about wine, food, and travel for several publications including *Robb Report*, *Wine Enthusiast*, *Intermezzo*, *Sante'*, *Sommelier Journal*, *Beverage Media*, *Drinks*, *Drinks Business (UK), Plaisirs de Vivre (Canada) and Sommelier News*. He also contributes to the regional publications *The News Journal*, *The Hunt, Signature Brandywine* and *ccdwell.com*, as well as his blog *BeenThereTastedThat.blogspot.com*.

Recent Articles

From the Alentejo Plains to the Douro Slopes

September 17, 2010

First things first: If you haven't tasted the delicious table wines David Baverstock has been making from Alentejo grapes for Esporao over the past 18 years, go out and buy some now. Esporao, like many Portuguese wineries, makes wines at various levels of price and corresponding complexities, and I was struck by the house consistency that Baverstock has achieved at all the levels. The simplest wines have some of the same appealing characteristics as the greatest. Beyond this, there is a consistency between vintages, although vintages definitely matter in the Alentejo.

Second: Mark your calendar for Spring 2011 when the first wines from Esporao-owned Quinta dos Murcas will start appearing in America of Douro table wines from Baverstock, an old hand at both Port and table wines from Portugal's north,

I just got back yesteday from visiting both estates on assignment to write five or so articles and had a great time. The food, particularly at the finer restaurants, was delicious, although we had a lovely lunch prepared by resident cook Dona Ana Maria of Murcas, including a fresh octopus with potatoes and broccoli (see photo). Through it all, there was not a single wine we tasted from the two estates that didn't show quality and that wasn't a very good food wine.

I'll be posting links to articles as they appear, but I hope you enjoyed this quick preview - including photos of the vines of Alentejo from a centuries-old tower, the harvest at Esporao, and a grape's-eye view of the Douro from atop one of Murcas' lofty vineyards. *Until next time.*

Cruzan Rummages Through the Spice Rack

September 6, 2010

Certain spirits are for sipping, what you reach for when you are relaxing or have something pleasurable to mull over. Pour me a Jack Daniels on the rocks during a long flight across the Atlantic when I'm leafing through my trip journal or a dollop of Cognac or Armagnac in a retro snifter while I'm at the bar listening to jazz piano after a pleasant, solo dinner or else when I'm reading the latest *Vanity Fair* in a stuffed chair on a wintry evening as the wind howls outside.

Now add Cruzan 9 spiced rum to make it a trilogy. Rum has always been an occasional drink for me, one that I certainly enjoy by itself or as the lead ingredient in a cocktail, but it isn't a regular on my iPod play list. But the other day, I received a promotional bottle of Cruzan spiced - No. 379 of the first 500 production run it says in the add-on label - and it blew me away. It's perhaps the smoothest full-scale (40% alcohol) flavored spirit I have tasted, and though it boasts nine "heirloom" spices, vanilla is its dominant aroma, both from the spice itself and the toasted wood. The other eight include cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper, even a touch of juniper berry. It costs about $16 a bottle.

Although it's a serious drink, the nose immediately says "vanilla-bean ice cream." But I've resisted the temptation to buy some and try the combination. Mostly, I've just been sipping it neat, both at room temperature and chilled. I haven't wanted to weaken it with ice, but sooner or later, I suppose I'll have to try that as well.

It's also a pleasant morning drink - just a taste after some strong Italian-roast coffee, which is what I'm having now at 4:30 a.m. as I'm working on this posting. The day is already rosy, and it isn't even daylight.

RENIE STEVES

About Renie

Renie and her husband, Sterling, were honored in March 2007 by Savor Dallas with the Spirit of Texas Award. They have a dual byline for freelance wine, food, and travel writing. In the last 20 years they have written and published about 900 articles. In addition, Renie runs the Cuisine Concepts cooking school where she is involved in a number of activities; including selecting wines to go with food, menu consulting for restaurants and organizations, food styling for photography for magazines, newspapers and television.

In May 2010, Anova Books/Reader's Digest published *North American Wine Routes: A Travel Guides to Wines & Vines, From Napa to Nova Scotia*.

Recent Articles

Understanding Herbs and Spices

Posted on September 11, 2010

Recipes such as Rose Geranium Rolls seem a little way out. Chive Biscuits seem reasonable and sound delicious.

If herb cooking is a whole new concept for you, start by smelling and tasting the dried herbs on your shelf. You will discover zesty alternatives to the salt, sugar, and fat in our modern diet Using herbs is a habit.

There are herbs used for medicinal (herbalism) purposes, for beauty (face packs) and perfume options. But it is for cooking that most people use them.

How does one know what herb to use with different foods? Start to learn each characteristic flavor by adding them to uncomplicated recipes such as basic egg or cheese dishes, vinaigrette, rice, stuffing or white sauce. Use one herb at a time to judge its strength and compatibility. Start with a pinch. If there is not adequate smell or taste, it could be that they've been on the shelf too long.

Throw away your dried herbs and spices at the beginning of each growing season.

What is the difference between an herb and a spice? Culinary herbs, with few exceptions, are seeds or leaves of a fleshy stemmed plant that generally die back at the end of each growing season. Herbs are of a mellow, aromatic nature rather than the pungent, zestful, hot taste of a spice. Spices are native to tropical or sub-tropical climates and can be part of the bark, root or seed of a shrub or tree which is woody in nature.

More to follow.

Understanding Burgundy

Posted on August 31, 2010

Burgundy, or Bourgogne, as the French call it, is unique in its fame for only growing two varietals, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Opposite in personalities like children in the same family, Chardonnay is always happy and easy to grow all over the world. In contrast Pinot Noir is ornery and capricious — there is always a little something that doesn't please. Which one of your children is Chardonnay and which one Pinot Noir?

After a two-hour train trip from Paris to Dijon, we joined Jean-Pierre Renard of the Burgundy Wine School for the leisurely 20 mile drive to Beaune. This area, the Côte de Nuits, is the northernmost point for red wine grapes to be grown successfully. Pinot Noir thrives bursting with aromas of leather, fur, musk, and meat, with tastes that vary from light to heavy in body. South of Beaune in the Côte de Beaune region, Chardonnay is prevalent with aromas of oak and vanilla and flavors of quince, peach, pear, lemon, and green apple. Our week's adventure covered the northern half of Burgundy from Fixin to Mercurey.

Burgundy becomes more complicated (Jean-Pierre would say 'rich' instead) to understand how there could possibly be almost 3000 wine-growing estates in Burgundy from Dijon to Macon which is only 79 miles long and one-fifth the size of Bordeaux. Stone walls called 'Clos' surround vineyards planted in unique terroir or earth, determining the character of what is grown on it. A number of estates have vines in one Clos…. 10 rows of Echezeaux, six of Richebourg, or perhaps three of Romanée-Conti. We asked, "How do they know what rows to pick?" With wide eyes and a twinkle, Jean-Pierre said, "Oh, they know!"

Monks built monasteries on surrounding hills to get sun instead of mist so they would feel better. Burgundy winemakers built on the work of the monks to enhance the terroir and placement of the vineyards. After centuries of work, the designations of appellations was legally defined in the mid-20th century. Today there are 33 Grand Cru Appellations (2 percent of total production), 570 Premier Cru (10 percent), 44 Village Appellations (35 percent) , and 23 Regional (53 percent). All Grand Cru red wines come from Côte De Nuits with the exception of Corton.

Thanks to these statistics, the light ‘went on’ for us as to why Grand Crus are so expensive. At the same time we realized that the less expensive Premier Cru and other appellations have similar genes so we can enjoy wines from Burgundy more often.

We see a sign, Fixin (pronounced Fis-ón) which brings back memories of which used to be the strong, heavy, rustic wine we were introduced to back in Neiman-Marcus Wine Cellar days. Jean-Pierre says today Fixin is much more elegant. Tasting them at Domaine Joliet Pere et Fils later in the week, we found that to be true.

Workers are in the fields training and fastening branches. All these vineyards are Pinot Noir. A high tractor is moving through the vineyards cutting the sides and tops of vines so that the vitality of the plant will go to the grape not the branches and leaves. Vines are kept low so the sun gets in.

Irrigation is not allowed so vines fight for themselves. More vines are planted in a smaller area to encourage competition. Root systems are deep, going way beyond the soil which is only the top 15 – 20 inches before the roots hit rock. Burgundian wines often display a specific minerality because of this.

After driving through Gevrey Chambertin, Morey-Saint Denis, and Chambolle Musigny (which Jean-Pierre said was probably the finest vineyard in the world), we approached Chateau du Clos de Vougeot, which dates back to the12th century. Home of the 75-year-old Confrerie des Chevaliers du Tastevin, there is a guided tour including The Well, which displays such ingenuity that leaves one dumbfounded, The Monk’s Kitchen and Dormitory, Wines Presses from the 15th and 18th centuries, and more.

The village of Nuits-Saint George, midway between Dijon and Beaune, is small by its size, but big by its renown due to the prestige of its wines, Romanee-Conti, Nuits-Saint-George, Echezeaux, and others. Aloxe-Corton, an even smaller village where we stayed in the ’80s, is precious to us. When we checked in our small hotel, we threw open the shuttered windows of our room to overlook the incredible vineyards of Corton Charlemagne.

At our hotel in Beaune, Hostellerie Le Cedre, Jean-Pierre opened two Grevey Chambertins and one Morey-Saint-Denis. We had waited all day for this moment. These wines followed his statement. “Burgundy wine should not be dark. If it is, the wine would be too harsh, tannic, and aggressive. It should be like silk — smooth, round, soft, and aromatic.”

It had only been five hours since we got off the train in Dijon (and after the overnight flight from the states). What we had seen and learned in so short a time, was exhilarating and surprising. Besides all this, there is loads more to share.