



A Nichols Worth of Wine

The Move to Mediocrity

Have you noticed how wines increasingly are beginning to taste far too similar? I'm not referring to the smaller cases producers – and to a lesser degree the big producers that vintage after vintage remain committed to making distinctive wines. It used to be that when you tasted a cabernet from Napa Valley, you could pretty much determine if it came from the famed Rutherford bench with its rustic, earthy backbone, or from further up the valley at higher elevations where the fruit showed more elegance and structure. Remember when chardonnay exhibited the fruit it was grown from rather than the barrel it was aged in?

Blind tasting wines always proves challenging for merchants, restaurateurs and writers, but an experienced palate would generally have little difficulty differentiating primary varietal attributes. Of late though, especially with California wines, the American wine drinker's fondness for the big fruit-forward style so prevalent today is prompting more winemakers to create "formula" wines to satisfy consumer preference. Listening to your customer is admirable, homogenizing your product to the point where differentiation is as elusive as controlling the weather is quite another. Some European vintners have not turned a blind eye to this phenomenon either. Winemakers from Italy and France continue to travel to California vineyards in increasing numbers to learn America's "secret" for standardizing the style of a particular wine.

The strategy to successfully compete in an oversaturated wine market where every vintage brings more brands and thus more wine seems to be to make wines that offend as few people as possible. Increasingly this has led to more industrialized factory wines from machine picked grapes, sweetened with sugar and bottled with artist-created labels with eye catching names. These wines not only no longer reflect an appellation, but all too often, not even the grape they are produced from. The wines are not developing this way on their own; it's the manipulation of the grape from the vineyard to the cellar.

There are a multitude of reasons for this move to mediocrity. Globalization, economics, industry consolidation, big corporate conglomerates beholden to shareholders, the demise of small production quality focused grape growers, savvy winery marketing departments with big budgets, and unfortunately, a very, very large segment of consumers who drive demand for these characterless wines all contribute. I applaud those winemakers who choose to resist this movement. Some producers in Tuscany are now disassociating themselves from the Chianti classification altogether because of the negative image linked to the many mediocre wines being produced in that region.

I suppose if there is a silver lining in all of this, it is that more and more people are migrating from non-wine beverages, including non-alcoholic drinks, to wines. I can only hope that their palates soon mature to the point where they will turn to the artisan options so widely available from local fine wine merchants and avoid those end of the aisle "bargains" in the big box stores.

Around Town

Help has arrived! The opportunity to explore and experience new wines in Collier County continues to grow in leaps and bounds. Along with a few friends, I drove up to the new Coconut Point Mall in Bonita to try a new seafood restaurant. Almost to the front door, not fifty yards away, I noticed a little bistro with six to eight tables on the sidewalk. Every table was filled with laughing, happy people. Everyone was swirling, sniffing and sipping from a number of wine glasses. Far too tempting to resist, I wandered over and soon discovered the area's newest wine bar, bistro, and wine merchant, *The Grape*, all under one roof!

The focus at this newly opened hotspot is clearly on encouraging the customer to experiment. With over 120 wines on the list and an equal or greater number of bottles in the adjacent wine store, customers get to choose between the "grape bunch", a 2.5 ounce pour of any three wines of their choosing (three wine minimum), by the glass, or by the bottle. An interesting marketing twist is that the restaurant's bottle selection also lists what they call the "Seller" price. This is what you pay when you purchase a bottle in the wine shop. If you do select a wine from the retail side of the store and bring it into the restaurant, *The Grape* doubles the price. Whether listing the retail price on the restaurant's menu somehow increases sales, I'm not sure. I do know that I don't necessarily want to be reminded of the mark-up restaurants charge to open and pour my wine.

Following the ever-growing trend of marketing wines by style rather than by the grape variety, *The Grape* employs a color-coded, numbered system complete with understandable descriptions of each of their ten wine styles. Each style is identified as light, medium, or full-bodied; red, white, sweet, or champagne. There is also an "Outstanding" style (more expensive red wines) and "Superior" (pricier whites) collection. For the wine admirer unfamiliar with the abundance of grape varieties now being offered, the system works well. Getting through the 96 by-the-glass wines on the list the night I visited, is time consuming, and four of the six wines I wanted to try that evening were "sold out". In fairness to *The Grape* though, this was a Monday evening after their first weekend open. By now I trust they have worked through the inventory issues and the inexperience of our server, who after a few of our simple inquiries, deferred to the bartender who visited our table and confidently recommended a number of interesting and available wines.

Wine in hand, we worked our way through many of the menu choices, including the superb *Cambozola*, *Proscuitto* and Fig "Pita Pisa". Other items from the menu we tried and mostly enjoyed included the *Tapenade* spread, an assortment of the *Mediterranean Quesadillas*, *Antipasto* and the *Shrimp Remoulade*. Although we were not honored by a visit, it was refreshing to see the chef working the room, delivering food to the tables and chatting with customers.

The Grape is located in Bonita at the Coconut Point Mall. Call 992-5040 for information.

Help is also on the way for wine enthusiasts who live near downtown Naples. A new *The Grape* is slated to open in the summer of 2007 at 868 Fifth Avenue South.

Did You Know...

Bordeaux, where cabernet sauvignon has long been regarded as king, is actually more widely planted with the merlot grape, especially at the chateaux of the Right Bank.