



A Nichols Worth of Wine

December Value Picks

2005 Huber Gruner Veltliner

Long time readers and those who know me, appreciate that I like finding and introducing wines that require a willingness to experiment. Gruner Veltliner (*grooner velt liner*) is such a grape. Indigenous to Austria, gruner veltliner is one of the world's most versatile white wines. It stands on its own and matches well with many dishes, particularly simply prepared chicken. I have found this particular wine in a few wine stores around Naples, but if you can't find the Huber, give any gruner veltliner a try. The bottle price of most gruner veltliner's is under \$15. If you want to try this varietal before you buy the bottle, the Naples Grande Hotel offers gruner veltliner by the glass.

2004 Yalumba Merlot

From Eden Valley, in the southern most region of South Australia's Barossa, this opulent merlot from the 150 year old Yalumba winery is one of their many varietals and blends. While Yalumba produces more than a million cases a year, this wine drinks like a handcrafted offering; it is well balanced, smooth and velvety with a nose and flavors of plums, blackberries and cedar. An incredible wine at three times the price of about \$15, Yalumba wines are widely available.

Holiday Bubbly I love this time of year. Not that I ever need an excuse to drink champagne, or sparkling wine, as they're forced to label it outside the town of Champagne in France. It's just that the celebratory nature of the season lends itself to the popping of the cork. Whether you're buying for your own personal enjoyment, the perfect stocking stuffer or to ring in the New Year, here are three favorites: Domaine Chandon Blanc de Noir (about \$14.), Veuve Clicquot Brut (under \$40), and Krug "*Grand Cuvee*" Brut (\$125. to \$150). Did I mention that a bottle of any of these selections would be a great holiday gift for your wine loving friends?

Around Town

There's a new kid in town. *WineStyles*, a franchise wine merchant operation based near Ft. Lauderdale, has grown rapidly to more than 135 stores across the nation and is adding stores at a pace reminiscent of Starbucks in their early years. Actually, *WineStyles* reminds me somewhat of the venerable coffee retailer in that they offer a great product and personalized friendly service in a clean, well-designed setting. Where *WineStyles* differs from the savvy Starbucks, one might argue, is with their attractive pricing strategy. Virtually their entire stock is priced under \$25. They do have a small section tucked into the back of the store named "*If you insist*" which allows you to spend more, but clearly the message is value. And to truly set themselves apart from their competitors in the ever-growing world of wine retailers, they categorize their wines by style rather than the variety of the grape or location. To the seasoned wine consumer it may seem "cute" but it works, especially for customers who grow increasingly confused by the seemingly constant change in wines, vineyard locations and producers. Equally unique is that *WineStyles* selections are not your run-of-the-mill labels. No Yellowtail or Kendall Jackson here.

I knew I was in for a treat when the first two wines lining the shelves as I walked in were an Albarino and a Gruner Veltliner; not your everyday varietals. Most of the wines they offer though are recognizable by the grape if not the producer. No need to be intimidated. The staff is eager to assist with your purchase. *WineStyles* is located in the Riverchase Plaza on North Tamiami Trail (next to one of my favorite restaurants in town – Cote d'Azur).

2006 Harvest Report

In a word, *extreme*. That's the best way to describe this year's harvest around the globe. From the onset back in early spring where heavy rains delayed bud break in California to prolonged freezes in the middle of picking in Australia, 2006 will be a harvest to remember.

Labor shortages in California vineyards attributable to recent immigration issues, massive botrytis infections (a certain boon for dessert wines) and extraordinary yield fluctuations were felt up and down the entire west coast. That is not to say that all is lost. In fact, a number of wine producing regions may yet turn out classic wines. Conditions appear more favorable in the Central Coast.. Early murmurings in Washington and Oregon include "the best vintage ever!"

In France, a harsh winter and early spring rains plagued the start of the 2006 Bordeaux and Burgundy harvest. As of this writing, all is quiet on any predictions as to the quality of the harvest in these areas. For the moment I choose to interpret this as overall, not a stellar vintage. In the southern wine-growing regions of France, including the Rhone, there is growing optimism for the vintage, intimating promise in the way of low-yields and high quality.

Italy appears to have had a more even growing season with many wine regions leaning to a successful year. Tuscany and the Veneto regions in particular are waxing ecstasy over this year's crop. South America seems to continue on its role of successfully good vintages that began in 2002. South Africa enjoyed a "gentleman's" harvest with no pressure to get the fruit in which may mean no surprises – good or bad.

In Australia and New Zealand, the devastating punishment of Mother Nature's freeze, frost and rains reduced some vineyard yields by 80% but following successive vintages of high yield, high-quality wines it could provide a much needed balance to a four year surplus of wine in the vineyards down under.

Spain, which I think is the most underrated and unrecognized wine region in the world, has announced the 2006 vintage to be "optimistic", which doesn't necessarily sound – well, optimistic. On a positive note, yields are down significantly in some regions,. While that does not always bode well for the grower, its benefit to the consumer is generally better quality.

As additional harvest reports become available, updates will be issued.

Did You Know...

The higher the storage temperature of wine, the faster the wine will age.