

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Consumer Backlash

The main duty of a toaster is to make toast. If it doesn't, or if it burns the bread regularly, you think nothing of returning it and getting one that works as it should.

This applies to almost all consumer goods, from cars to suits, watches to TVs, cable service to such simple things as table linens.

However, for some strange reason, wine and food seem to be exempted from this consumer demand. People seem to accept, however grudgingly, bad food and wine, and seem fine paying outrageous prices for them (especially the wine).

The same syndrome that created the story of the emperor's new clothes may be at play here—the natural reluctance of people to speak up.

Part of the reason for this is that when dining out, the event is supposed to be festive or at least a pleasure. Only truly contentious folk prefer to start an argument over steak ordered rare that's well done.

There seems to be a natural reluctance by consumers to fight back when a dish in a restaurant fails to satisfy. Food and wine that differ radically from what the consumer expected is usually accepted partially because few consumers feel expert enough to challenge the authority of a chef, sommelier, or wine maker.

I call this the Tyranny of Expertise, in which consumers assume they do not know enough to speak up, for fear of being seen as unknowledgeable.

Tom Wark of the American Wine Consumer Coalition also suggests that one reason for diners' reluctance to speak up is that restaurant meals are

consumed so fast that it's hard to complain. By the time the manager arrives, the food and wine are gone.

Perhaps there's also the fear that to complain after the fact seems hollow. No one wants to hear a restaurant manager say, "If it was so bad, why did you eat/drink it?"

The topic also applies to foods prepared and consumed at home.

I began thinking about this subject two years ago after we bought some highly hyped tri-tip. An ad said it was dry-aged and tender.

It was so tough I began thinking of that water buffalo we had in the Australian outback some years ago that had been shot that morning. The only aging it got was on top of the shooter's truck.

The tri-tip marked a key moment. If I let this purchase go unreported, the grocery people would not know there was a problem with its foods. The money we spent was far less important than the message.

So I returned to the store with the already prepared tri-tip (nearly the entire piece) and spoke to a manager. He never blinked, returned my money, and admitted that I wasn't the only one who had such a problem.

Since then I've tested whether the returned food/wine tactic (always for reasons that I believe are completely justified) leads to any revelations.

What I have learned is interesting.

Start with the fact that for the most part, there have been no nasty episodes; in general sellers make an effort to correct what I perceived to be a problem.

(See *Backlash* on page 2)

Corkage Policies

The web site Open Table has a page devoted to corkage policies for various restaurants.

It doesn't appear to be very accurate. As a result it has left us in a quandary.

Case in point: Open Table says that Caffe Delucchi in San Francisco has free corkage for the first bottle, so I made a reservation for that evening.

Once they had my pertinent data, including phone number, I asked the corkage: \$15 she said.

Now, Open Table didn't get the zero corkage line on its web site by inventing it. Someone at the restaurant provided it. So I asked the woman on the phone if she'd check with a manager.

She said she would, and would see me for my reservation.

I asked her to check with the manager now. She said he was off duty and that she'd call him tomorrow.

Assuming that the web error regarding corkage could indicate other errors (such as incorrect web menu prices; which we have faced before) we changed plans.

Fair warning: take what you read on the 'net as only possibly correct. Call ahead to check that and other policies. It's prudent.

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Backlash

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In one case a pound of “pure Kona coffee” was bitter and tired. Another time an expensive olive oil was rancid. Both were returned with no problems.

Then came the crucial test case: a bottle of Zinfandel I ordered at a restaurant about a year ago after a waiter highly recommended it. It was \$52. The server had said it was from a new Sonoma producer and it was great. With that comment, I tried it. The wine was excessively oaky, volatile, and was high in alcohol, even though the label said it was “only” 14.7%.

The first-taste pour was all I needed to tell it was a bust, and I simply explained my case. The server took the wine away, and I then ordered something I knew.

Of course, not everyone is able to determine, solely from aroma and taste, that a wine is delivering what it should. In restaurants, many of our experiences are related to extraneous

issues—smells from the kitchen, perfume from a nearby table, etc.

One solution to the problem of wine and food quality is to create a good dialogue with the server/seller and find out as closely as possible what the wine or food will be like before you order.

Recently at the superb Mendo Bistro in Ft. Bragg, we were offered a sauce we’d never heard of before. The waitress tried to explain it, but a better tactic was to taste it. No problem, said our server and came back with a small taste. It was excellent.

Wark said he could forgive a restaurant for a poorly prepared sauce, or a slip from the kitchen, such as a dish that wasn’t hot enough.

“But what I’m not going to put up with,” he said, “is bad service.” He noted that one bit of retaliation is not to return or leave a small tip.

(Indeed, Pete Wells, the *New York Times*’ restaurant critic, had a superb article recently in which he suggested

an end to tipping, and he included some reasons most people had never considered.)

A better tactic, Wark said, is to use popular web sites like Yelp and Trip Advisor to write reviews reflecting your experience. He said restaurateurs tell him such sites are a key to how they operate and they listen carefully to what diners say.

As for grocery stores, we usually get the name of the clerk who recommends something and return to him or her when there’s a problem.

One reason there are wine tasting rooms is so you can actually try a wine before buying. And quality cheese shops do the same. And in ever-increasing numbers, many food purveyors now sample new products.

But when an unsampled item turns out to be less than satisfactory, consumers should complain a lot more than they do.

Most café owners and grocery stores actually prefer that scenario to having disgruntled consumers.

Trombetta

The 2011 vintage in California was a tussle for many wineries, and among those who faced the most danger were wineries in their first two years of operation.

One of the newest star wineries, Trombetta, took two crucial steps to avoid disaster. The first was to hire Paul Hobbs, a fine cool-climate strategist. Then to base its fruit on a superb location, the Gap’s Crown

Vineyard in the cold Petaluma Wind Gap off Petaluma Hill Road, just east of the southern Russian River Valley.

The result in 2011 was a tricky harvest in which some of the pickers actually quit early because they were being drenched by the rains on Oct. 2.

But because picking began at 1 a.m. (!), the majority of fruit was in

before the worst of the storm hit.

The result (see Tasting Notes) is a 2011 wine that owner Rickey Trombetta says is more like an Audrey Hepburn, rather than what she called the Marilyn Monroe of 2010.

What is distressing to Trombetta as well as to Hobbs, is that both believe there will be a number of dramatically fine red wines made in 2011, but both also fear some in the media will misunderstand the wines and give them low scores.

For a new brand like Trombetta the scenario is daunting. But the proof is in the numbers: the 2011 Trombetta PN has a pH of 3.5 and total acid of 6 grams per liter, with 14.2% alcohol, indicating this wine will be superb in a number of years.

The ’11s shouldn’t be dismissed

Wine of the Week

2011 **Marichal Merlot**, Canelones, Uruguay (\$15): The aroma here is berries and herbs, with a trace of underbrush; the tannins are from fruit, so the wine improves nicely with decanting. Uruguay has 80 wineries and Global Vineyard Importers of Berkeley had the courage to seek out one of the best. There is also a solid Tannat (\$15) in the line that is nowhere near as dark and foreboding as that grape can be. Nice value.

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

Exceptional

2011 **Trombetta** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, Gap's Crown Vineyard (\$58): Dark cherry, violet, and a spice/sandalwood complexity start the procession of aromas. The wine improves markedly with air, and displays a depth within the context of superb fruit and a racy finish. One of the best 2011s I tasted this year.

2012 **Zocker** Gruner Veltliner, Edna Valley, Paragon Vineyard (\$20): Minerals and earth spice dominate the aroma with hints of stone fruit and star anise. The entry is totally dry, and cries out for savory foods. Should age nicely for a year or two, but nearly impossible not to drink now—and fast! A great wine from Christian Roguenant.

2011 **Talbott** Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands, Sleepy Hollow Vineyard, “Logan” (\$25): An aroma

of wild berries/roses signals a cool climate; faint earthy notes give the wine a distinctive Central Coast lilt with underbrush and sandalwood/pepper tones. Still a baby, but this terrific value wine is actually better than many wines priced twice the price, and will age well for 2-5 more years.

2012 **Tangent** Grenache Blanc, Edna Valley, Paragon Vineyard (\$13): A bit less aromatic than the next wine, but with a finesse of chalk, dried pear, and superb balance. One of the best Grenache Blancs I have ever tasted.

2012 **Tangent** Viognier, Edna Valley, Paragon Vineyard (\$17): A fruit basket aroma as well as fresh peach/pear and a spice note. Dry, but succulent, a wine that will thrill Chardonnay drinkers who are tired of oak.

2011 **Bradford Mountain** Dry

Creek Field Blend, Dry Creek Valley (\$22): A Syrah-Zin blend that's better than the corresponding Zin, with complexity and depth of flavors and a lot better with air.

2012 **Tangent** Albariño, Edna Valley, Paragon Vineyard (\$17): Tropical (pineapple?) fruit and spice notes indicate it will be sweet. It is not. A superb wine for non-spicy Asian dishes. Albariño doesn't get much better.

Very Highly Recommended

2010 **Gallo** Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, “Signature Series” (\$40): Hard to fault this ideally-scented and flavored red. The aroma is classic 1980s Napa Valley and the oak aging is near-perfect. And the wine has the requisite structure to age. My only question: why are wines of such character so infrequent from this reliable winery that delivers great value so often?

Genius at Work

I've known Christian Roguenant for 30 years. Talk about flying under the radar!

Above you will see reviews of just some of Christian's latest efforts. All (including some wines that are not reviewed here) are superb and sell for so little that they would never get the recognition they so deserve.

(And don't for a second believe that the price of a wine and the score it gets are unconnected “facts.”)

Born, reared, and educated in France, Christian is a brilliant wine stylist who began to make the 2012 wines about a decade earlier when he began to see how each variety of grape should be handled in the cold-climate vineyard.

What works for Grenache Blanc may well be a disaster for Viognier; what makes for a terrific Gruner Veltliner could make Sauvignon Blanc a loser.

The Tangent project of the Niven family (which owns and farms a huge portion of Edna Valley vineyards) is a way for Christian to display his French training with a wide variety of grapes.

In addition, he also makes a number of great Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays of startling character, and his work with sparkling wines is on the level of top-flight Champagne.

Please note: There are no quotes from Christian in this article. I never called him. Because I know what I

would get: the same thing. “It comes down to the great grapes I have blah blah blah.”

But those grapes would not be what they are without this man spending his mornings, noons, and nights among the vines.

Another reason I didn't try calling him: likely he's in the vineyard.

Bargain of the Week

2012 **Tangent** Sauvignon Blanc, Edna Valley, Paragon Vineyard (\$13): A cross between Graves and the Loire, the aroma is just varietal and the texture broad enough to go with a wide array of more delicate seafood dishes. Subtle and superb.

I haven't yet tasted many 2011 red wines from California (Pinot Noirs and a handful of Merlots), so seeing an '11 Cabernet the other day reminded me of the excitement consumers are in for. Let me modify that statement: for our readers.

That's because most wine publications will probably trash the vintage. Already we have seen scores for early-release 2011s that are lower than usual. I suspect the reviewers do not understand the vintage.

All seem to agree that the 2011 vintage in California's North Coast was challenging because of October rains. As a result, many reds are lighter, a bit lower in alcohol, with less time in the barrel, higher in acid, and many from grapes infected with a trace of botrytis.

So the wines aren't very showy now. But a silver lining is there. You just have to be patient.

I've always said California wine makers are at their best when they're challenged. Though this is less true today than in the past, many well-

schooled wine makers dealt with the rain and made a style of wine for a many grapes—Cabs, Syrahs, Zins, and others—that may be superb.

The key problem in 2011 is what wine makers call "rain events." Best translation: rain. And more of it than most red wine grapes can handle.

The result was more botrytis on red grapes than has been seen in California in decades. No form of rot is a benefit in red. Most everyone who makes red wine had some form of rot, but many used various means to remove any rot flavor.

In some cases, a completely inert fining agent (polyvinylpolypyrrolidone, or PVPP) was added to juice before fermentation to wipe out negative aromas. Others used sawdust as an additive to abate negative aromas. Both are filtered out before bottling.

In general, most 2011 red wines (on their own, without Mega Purple additions) will be a little lighter than the 2012s—which was described by one wine maker as a year when it was easy to make blockbuster fruit

bombs with lots of depth.

Many of the 2011 reds, by contrast, may well be a tad more delicate than some past years and in some ways are similar to the wines of 2006, which means that many will have a bit less time in barrels and will be hard to evaluate when young.

But for the most part, better (higher) acid levels, better (lower) pH levels, and a more age-worthy style were the result.

This isn't true across the board, of course. Some wineries got slammed by the heavy October rains, and here you have to be very selective about the wines.

Some reds may seem awkward when young, but will age well because of their balance. Others will show thinner flavors and could be less than appealing now, and won't age well.

In some ways, then, the vintage is dicey and calls for consumers to look well beyond what a wine is on release and to try to see if it's an ager. Many will be. ©2013

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