



Chocolate & Tobacco

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



I quite like chocolate ... and, while I used to smoke the occasional pipe or cigar (although I haven't since 1995), I don't much like tobacco. Except when it comes to Cabernet Sauvignon. Allow me to explain.

One of the classic descriptors for good ripe Cabernet Sauvignon is tobacco. When wine professionals - and wine geeks - say "tobacco", we're not referring to tobacco smoke or to the taste of tobacco. Rather, we're referring to the smell of cut tobacco leaf. For me this is not the aroma of cigar or even pipe tobacco; it is the smell of the tobacco you get when you break open a filter-less, unlit Camel cigarette. Tobacco the descriptor fits in with such classic terms as cigar box (tobacco and cedar) and pencil shavings (cedar and graphite) that are useful in describing the aromas and flavors - and even the developed bouquet - of great Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines, whether young or old, from around the world. 2006 Araujo Cabernet Sauvignon tastes (among many other things) of tobacco. 1992 Caymus Special Selection tastes of tobacco (along with both red and black fruit, dusty gravel, and pencil shavings). So also do 1996 Phelps Insignia, 1995 Ch. Latour, 1994 Ch. Lafite Rothschild, 1999 Almaviva (Chile), 2004 Quintessa, 2004 Catena Zapata, and 2002 Yalumba Signature. These are all Cabernet-based wines that exhibit classic Cabernet varietal character. They all taste of tobacco. And none of them smell or taste of chocolate

So where does chocolate come in? More and more these days, when I taste riper-style, new world Cabernet Sauvignon (and some other ripe, concentrated, higher alcohol wines - including in some cases even Pinot Noir), I find some sort, form, or nuance of chocolate. Sometimes, as in some new world Pinot Noirs, it is a hint of cocoa powder or even mocha - which can be OK or even desirable as long as the wine retains some red fruit and a balancing element like the bitterness of cola - or at least a beam of minerality. Other times, it might be a nuance of milk or even dark chocolate - which also can be OK if the Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, or Syrah being tasted/drunk is balanced enough to retain at least some red fruit - and hopefully some dusty-gravelly terroir character. But, if there is no remaining red fruit (only very ripe black fruit) or distinctive mineral-gravel-or-dust terroir note to balance the chocolate, it is generally not OK. And when that chocolate nuance becomes the smell (which is well past the more subtle "aroma") of a freshly opened can of Hershey's chocolate syrup, a line has been crossed. There is a disturbance in the force. Something is rotten in Denmark. Or something is over-ripe in Rutherford. Or St. Estephe. Whatever.

Virtually never do rich sweet chocolate aromas co-exist in the same wine as tobacco. They are aromas that indicate a different range on the scale of ripeness. My preference for the tobacco nuanced Cabernets has to do with two things: age-ability and suitability for the dinner table. I like to drink Cabernet Sauvignon and Cab-based blends from around the world with dinner. When I drink one of these chocolate-scented Cabernets - and I will admit that I occasionally enjoy them - it is almost always after dinner in lieu of Port and/or dessert.

Tobacco, along with its buddies cedar and graphite, is a prime indicator of ripe but balanced Cabernet Sauvignon. Too much green flavor - whether bell pepper or olive - (and more than a hint can be way too much) indicates at least some under-ripeness. And too much Chocolate - especially of the smell of canned Hershey's syrup variety - indicates over-ripeness. Here of late, we haven't had to worry too much about green, under-ripe flavors in Cabernet Sauvignon. All the major Cabernet-producing areas have been able to at least ripen their grapes. Bordeaux hasn't had an under-ripe vintage since 1992.

The last northern California vintage that sported any really green flavors was 1998 - and that vintage (originally panned as a "bad vintage" by both the Wine Spectator and the Wine Advocate) is now all the buzz. That buzz is that the better wines have come around - seemingly they have ripened in the bottle - and are now tasting pretty good. And the better 1998s from the Napa and Alexander Valleys are holding up much better than all but a very few wines from the much more highly touted 1997 vintage.

What happened? The 1997s were delicious - low-acid, fat, juicy, and full of succulent fruit (and maybe a little bit of chocolate) with a ripe, rich texture when they were first released. They tasted great - as long as you drank them over the first 4-7 years after the vintage. Then that over-ripeness (and corresponding lack of acidity) began to show as that sweet fruit crumbled without an acid backbone to hold it together. Here of late, the 1997s I have tasted have been on the down side of the aging curb. The only 1997s I've tasted recently that are still holding together are Opus One, Quintessa, and Araujo. And only the Araujo 1997 seems to be still improving.

On the other hand, the 1998s initially showed some green bell pepper and olive notes despite the fact that they had reached what 12-15 years earlier would have been considered "normal" ripeness. Because they were not over-ripe, the acidity in the wines gave them the backbone that allowed them to age and - here is the key word - DEVELOP into the wines they are today. As a rule, the 1998 Cabernets did not taste good young. They were wines for the cellar rather than wines for immediate gratification.

Don't get me wrong; I like immediate gratification. I have burned the roof of my mouth too many times on molten pizza or too-fresh-from-the-oven chocolate chip cookies to think otherwise. I enjoyed the 1997s on release and for a few years after as much as anyone. But - in the spirit of "I told you so" - I also told anyone who would listen to drink up their 1997s. Early on I thought the 1997 wines were too much like certain 1992s - some of which were juicy, fat, and saucy but ultimately unbalanced and quick to slide down hill. Although I seem to remember saying that the northern California 1998 Cabs and Cab-blends were better than the main-stream wine press initially indicated, I did not find them particularly satisfying or even easy to drink when they were young. Also, I have to admit that I have heard about more "now delicious" and "now excellent" 1998s than I have actually tasted of late. All the 1998s I bought have long since been returned to the water table.

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But I digress. The point of this little rant is that super-ripeness – as expressed by chocolate nuances – seems to have in many of the most sought after Cabernet-based reds replaced ripeness – as expressed by the scent of tobacco (and cigar box and/or pencil shavings).

A wine maker recently told me “the recipe” for this sort of wine. “Let the grapes hang on the vine until the combination of ripeness, concentration, and dehydration brings the sugar level up to 28-30%. Then pick ‘em and water the must back to 26% sugar and ferment. You’ll get black fruit and chocolate, your alcohol will be under 15.5% and the wine will have little or no varietal character. But don’t quote me on that.”

Ripeness – full physiological maturity – is great and no one is suggesting that the market wants “green” wines. Nevertheless, the extreme farming for low yields – often below the point where the vineyard is in balance – and ripeness reduces the imprint of terroir (place) and the balancing, stabilizing level of acidity even as it raises sugar level and builds richness and texture. The result of this exaggerated farming is too often ponderous, chocolaty, over-ripe, mono-dimensional, naturally-higher-in-alcohol, low-acid wines. Some people – including some very influential press types - seem to love them. Others, not so much.

The backlash against the higher alcohols often associated with these super-ripe wines has been building for the last three or four years. Winemakers have employed such alcohol reduction techniques as adding water to the must before fermentation commences or removing alcohol after the fact via the spinning cone. Why not just raise yields a little bit? Or maybe pick just a bit sooner? Even if ever-higher alcohol contents are less an issue now than they were three years back, super-ripeness as manifested in the smell of chocolate to the exclusion of any classic Cabernet aromas is still there and is still a problem.

If you like to age your wines, you are buying California Cabernets now for drinking three to five or more years from now. If you prefer classic, tobacco-scented Cabernet Sauvignon, taste carefully before you buy 2007s and even 2008s. If you prefer a little – or a lot of – chocolate in your Cabernet, that’s OK. You’ll enjoy a lot of the bigger name 2007 and even many 2008 Cabs. Just remember the lesson of 1997 - these riper-style, lower acid, and yes, chocolaty reds WILL NOT KEEP for long. They are not balanced for it. If you buy ‘em (and if you like them you should), go ahead and drink ‘em. Enjoy that immediate gratification; I guarantee that despite their higher alcohol levels, they won’t burn the roof of your mouth. ✱