



Blue Chips, Something New, & Good Eats.

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



I am writing this from the ninth floor of the ever so elite and luxurious Best Western Grosvenor (aka BWG) at the San Francisco International Airport (aka SFO) in the wee hours of Thursday morning. Why, you may ask, am I at the luxurious and elite (not) BWG-SFO on a balmy summer night? That would be because we (the lovely Miss Carol is tagging along) have to be at SFO in less than seven hours to check in for the 8:55am Continental Airlines flight

back to Houston. Yes, in support of Spec's never ending effort to bring you the best wines at the best prices, I am traveling again. This has been a unique and somewhat whirlwindish trip, not all the details of which would make scintillating reading. Nevertheless, there are some highlights that bear mentioning.

Sunday evening and all of Monday found me participating as the token retailer at Peter Michael Winery's "Sommelier Summit" held at the winery in Knights Valley. (Don't worry about Miss Carol, she was having a massage and doing some shopping while I was working.) It was a very informative and very tasty event. Of course, saying Peter Michael Winery is "in Knight's Valley" is like saying the Monte Rosso Vineyard is in Sonoma Valley. Rather, both are above – in fact, high above – their respective valleys. The Peter Michael Winery (PMW) estate vineyards feature some rolling terrain but also some good-sized blocks of vines on slopes quite reminiscent of those along the Nahe in Germany – which is to say very steep.

Peter Michael's Cabernet Sauvignon-based and Sauvignon Blanc-based wines are from the lower, more rolling terrain and the Chardonnays are from the highest and steepest (as well as coolest) plots. PMW also makes some Pinot Noir from vineyards in the Sonoma Coast (his Sonoma Coast estate vineyard is just now coming on line) and the Pisoni vineyard in Monterey's Santa Lucia Highlands and is now working on an as yet un-named Cabernet Franc-dominant blend from their new Napa property (formerly known as Showkett), Peter Michael Winery Oakville. It seems futile for me to publish tasting note on wines we (Spec's) get so little of but suffice it to say, all the wines were at the least "Excellent" and some were "Outstanding". The prices are high but this is no expense spared winemaking utilizing grapes from extreme farming using all sustainable practices.

Tuesday and Wednesday were spent visiting eight other wineries in order to "see how they work". On Tuesday, I visited the Santa Rosa winery of Vintage Wine Estates (who own Girard, Sonoma Coast, Stone Fly, and Windsor Sonoma as well as International Wine Accessories, Press restaurant, and both Dean & de Luca and the Oakville Grocery. After that we visited the Sonoma Valley vineyards of Kunde and then went for a vineyard tour and tasting at Paradise Ridge Winery, which is located at the extreme eastern edge of the Russian River Valley AVA. After Paradise Ridge, we headed for Pezzi King (also very steep vineyards located high above the Dry Creek Valley - and which will be in many Spec's stores in about three weeks) in Dry Creek Valley. Tuesday evening found us at Ramey Winery in Healdsburg before we had a nice drive over to Yountville.

Wednesday started with a quick stop in the Girard tasting room in Yountville before longer stops at Shafer, Araujo, and Duckhorn. I know, it's a rough life but someone has to do it.

Blue Chips

My thought for the trip concerns the "blue chips". The dictionary defines blue chip as 1) A high value gaming chip. 2) A stock or other investment that has a high price because of its perceived reliability." High Value, High Price, High Reliability. Hmm...

My thinking is that, just as in the financial industry, there are blue chip wines – great high value, admittedly high priced, but also high reliability wines - many or most of which seem to get less buzz each year. This, despite the quality and innovation found at these producers. What are these blue chip wines? They are the top-tier, usually Cabernet-based wines from the likes of Ridge, Ramey, Duckhorn, Caymus, Shafer, Phelps, Beringer Private Reserve, Opus 1, Quintessa, Heitz, Robert Mondavi Private Reserve, and even wines like Araujo and Peter Michael. These are great wines with the great track records. If they are so great, why don't they get more play in the press? They may not have the freshest story or the best PR spin. And because they have been all over the wine press for years and the press is doing what the press always does – looking for something new or different to discuss or bash. Never forget that the wine press (as with all other press) is not really in the business of telling you what the best wines are; they are in the business of selling newspapers or magazines or even website subscriptions and, of course, advertising. Don't get me wrong. I subscribe to both the Wine Spectator and the Wine Advocate - and find both quite useful. I also take what they print with a certain degree of skepticism.

What new is there to say about Ridge Montebello, Shafer Hill Side Select, Caymus Special Selection, Peter Michael Le Pavots or Araujo Eisele Vineyard Cabernet? Maybe nothing other than this: all these wines are reliably Outstanding. Regardless of whether the press is buzzing about them, these admittedly expensive wines are the blue chip leaders that set the standard for top quality Cabernet-based red wine in the US. They were the cult wines before there were cult wines. Most are even available in quantities that make them (unlike the newest fetish wines), at least at their price points, relatively available.

Don't forget about the blue chips. They offer the most flavor and consistency and all without the aggravation (in most cases) of trying to score a few bottles.



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Something(s) New

Whenever I travel, I always learn something new. This trip was no exception.

Tuesday afternoon found us sitting on the deck at Paradise Ridge tasting the delicious Paradise Ridge “Grand View” Sauvignon Blanc grown in a vineyard we could plainly see below us from the deck. I asked Rene Byck (sales manager and family partner) how that wine could be grown in the Russian River Valley (as its label indicated) when we were east of highway 101 and appeared to be in Sonoma Valley. He responded by saying “good question” and pointing up to the ridgeline just

east of and above the winery. “That’s the appellation boundary. Everything on this side of the ridge is in the Russian River watershed and is in the fog influence zone. On the other side of the ridge, the water drains elsewhere and the fog is much less a factor in keeping the vineyards cool.” The barbed wire fence on top of the ridge is the actual border.

Later on at Ramey, associate winemaker Cameron Frey pointed in passing at something he called a “Guth Mixer”. “Huh?” I said. “Wait a minute. Back up. Guth Mixer?” He then explained that this was a mixer that could be inserted into a tank like an emersion blender but through a racking valve in the side of the tank rather than through a top opening. This mixer, which only works with a ball valve, is great for stirring the lees in a big tank, among other uses. In almost 30 years of visiting wineries, I’d never before heard of a Guth Mixer but I now understand its utility and usefulness in the process.

At Shafer, owner Doug Shafer showed us a couple of things I hadn’t seen before. The first was an anonymous looking panel with a few small vents in it hanging on a cave wall. Turns out that this is a NASA-developed air cleaner that kills mold spores. Why is this important? Mold in barrel cellars is one of the things than can cause a “corked” or TCA aroma in wine. Shafer then walked us into his barrel room featuring all stainless steel supports and chocks so that the only wood in the room was the barrels themselves. I’d already noticed the same thing in his caves. He explained that any wood could harbor mold and chemicals that could cause “off” aromas to develop in the wine. By eliminating most of the mold spores and eliminating as much wood as possible, he is able to make a cleaner wine. Quality comes from farming the right grapes on the right terroir but it also comes from this sort of attention to detail in the winery.

Good Eats

Lots of Spec’s customers ask me where to eat when they are visiting the wine country and San Francisco. Often, I don’t have a good answer. I usually eat where I am taken or more often at wineries or in private homes when I am traveling. I’d like to be of more help but I don’t often get to the nicer wine country restaurants. When I am in Napa, I am likely to grab a quick bite at Gott’s Roadside (an outdoor, semi-gourmet hamburger stand formerly known as “Taylor’s Automatic Refresher”) or at the La Luna Market (a Mexican grocery store with a pretty good taco counter) on the Rutherford Cross Road.

On this trip, I ate at three restaurants that are worth a mention.

In Yountville, we had dinner at Hurley’s. We could have gone to Bistro Jeanty or Bouachon or Ad Hoc or ... well, you get the idea. They are all excellent but we wanted a bit less fancy meal and did not want to deal with the crowds or break the bank. Hurley’s is a very attractive restaurant featuring a Kraftsmans-style interior design and a good, not too frou-frou menu with a nice variety of dishes. The wine list is small but interesting and there is a good wine by the glass selection. Unfortunately, the prices are very high with some wines marked up over four times the cost. Hurley’s does have a no corkage fee policy so it would be a good place to bring a bottle you’d picked up at a winery earlier in the day. Our food was good but we felt that with a little more attention to detail, it could have been better. My steak was perfectly cooked but lacked any real flavor. I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt and guess that I just happened to get a substandard piece of rib-eye. Everything else on the plate was fine and the sweet potato French fries were among the best I’ve had. All in all, we will probably return but we will most likely bring our own wine.

In Calistoga, we ate lunch at the Pacifico Mexican Restaurant. In all my trips to California, this is the closest thing I have found to a good Texas Mexican restaurant. In fact, the food and menu compare favorably with the El Tiempo restaurants at home in Houston. The guacamole was excellent if a little lightly seasoned, the red chunky salsa was as good as any I’ve ever had, and the Carnitas were properly cooked and served and were quite tasty. Carol’s vegetarian quesadillas were made using a whole wheat flour tortilla made with vegetable oil rather than lard. It had a nice texture and a good flavor. While the margaritas were weak and “mixy” and overpriced, this is California rather than Texas so I didn’t really expect better. For a good “non-wine country” meal in the wine country, I will definitely go back.

As we were leaving the Araujo estate, Bart Araujo asked us where we were having dinner. I said we didn’t know, as we were headed to the BWG-SFO and we weren’t sure, with traffic and all, how long it was going to take to get into San Francisco. He suggested we try Boulevard, which was just at the foot of the Bay Bridge. When we tentatively agreed, he had his staff print out directions and call to make an open ended reservation for us. We were to call the restaurant and let them know when we were on the Bay Bridge. We did and we are glad. Our table was ready when we arrived (despite the restaurant being full with several folks waiting for tables). Our waiter was attentive but not fussy. The menu was well chosen but not extensive. The wine list is excellent and also well chosen but again a bit high in prices. Boulevard allows corkage (for a \$25.00 fee) but will waive one corkage fee for each bottle you buy off their list – which I think is very fair. As to the food, this may have been the best meal I have ever had in San Francisco. Miss Carol’s filet was cooked perfectly and the two bites she passed to me were some of the best beef I have ever had. My sea bass came out badly overcooked but as soon as I pointed out the issue, it was quickly and graciously swept away and replaced. The replacement sea bass was perfectly cooked and quite delicious.

As to the BWG-SFO mentioned at the beginning of this article, perhaps one reason it seemed so inadequate is that the previous three nights had been spent in real luxury at the Hotel Healdsburg in northern Sonoma County and at the Luca in Yountville in south central Napa Valley. The Hotel Healdsburg is situated on the square in Healdsburg but is nevertheless quiet and comfortable with posh, if somewhat stark interiors, and great service. This was not my first stay there and I will look forward to going back again. This was my first stay at the relatively new Luca but with the service and comfort level they provide (including excellent internet access), I will happily stay there again whenever the opportunity arises. 🌸

