



Resolved

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



I've never been real big on making (or keeping) New Year's resolutions. Lose weight. Exercise more. Spend more time riding my horse. Learn ___(fill in the blank)_. Clean up my language. This is all stuff I need to do all the time anyway. It's easy to resolve to do these things but it is also easy to eat that short rib, blow off the morning walk, and decide it is too rainy/windy/cold (all of which have clothing to overcome) to ride. @#%&! I can do all that in one day.

But this year seems different. I still need to do all those things but I also have some wine related resolutions that I think I can keep. In 2011, I resolve to ...

... Drink More Beaujolais

Beaujolais? When I first got started with wine, Beaujolais wines were on every retailer's shelf and most every wine list. Back in the early 1980's, the only Houston restaurant that didn't have any Beaujolais on the list was Tony's and it wouldn't have sold there because it was too cheap. At that time, Louis Jadot and Louis Latour were doing a great job with Beaujolais Villages. Georges DuBoeuf was making fine Beaujolais-Villages and some interesting Cru Beaujolais (Moulin a Vent, Morgon, St. Amour, Fleurie, etc.). Chateau de la Chaize Brouilly (on of those Cru Beaujolais) was on lots of wine lists and widely available at retail. Duboeuf's wines took off and dominated the category. Beaujolais was the "bistro wine" and the wine for a romantic picnic. And then something went wrong. More and more of the smaller Beaujolais producers copied DuBoeuf's style and suddenly an awful lot of Beaujolais began to taste the same. Beaujolais, at least in the US, became a bit boring and then passé. While inspiring Beaujolais was still being made at the Villages and Cru levels, there was less and less interest from US consumers and so less and less of the good stuff made it over here. And, as less good stuff made it over here, there was less and less interest on the part of the US consumer. Beaujolais spiraled down to the point that few wine lists offered any. It became an afterthought to drink with ... well, what?

Even though more and more producers began to reject the DuBoeuf style and even though Georges DuBoeuf's wines became less homogeneous,

Enter 2009. 2009 is the best vintage maybe ever for Beaujolais. The 2009 Beaujolais Villages wines now in the market and the crus, both now available and coming soon, are simply too good to ignore. It's not that the last several vintages have been bad; actually they have mostly been very good or better. But 2009 is exceptional. If anyone is going to like Beaujolais, they are going to like the 2009s. I served several 2009 Beaujolais on Thanksgiving day, both with lunch and dinner and everyone enjoyed them, especially my old wine geek friend Rick Jamail. The flavors were bright and fresh, vivid, and even a bit edgy. The wines were so fresh it was like having fresh fruit burst on your mouth. With no heaviness, they satisfied without satiating.

My first two wines of the New Year were a Spanish Cava (Raventos y Blanc) and a bottle of Henri Fessy Beaujolais Villages 2009 drunk on New Year's Day with homemade carnitas served over a creamy cilantro-lime-jalapeno dressed salad. Delicious. Refreshing. Reviving. And inexpensive. I will drink more Beaujolais this year.

... Make Peace With Nebbiolo

Rumor has it that I don't like Italian wine. While that is not entirely true, there are a lot of boring Italian wines out there and there are certain types of Italian wine that generally leave me cold. Nebbiolo is a case in point. While I have had the rare revelatory Barolo or Barbaresco (both made from Nebbiolo), more often than not - actually MUCH more often than not - Nebbiolo disappoints. Over the years, my experience has been that Nebbiolo lacks fruit and freshness. Among the classic descriptors for Nebbiolo: rose petals (pretty good) and road tar (maybe not so good). The best Nebbiolos I have tasted - from the best sites in Barolo and Barbaresco - can seem to split the difference between Grand Cru Burgundy and Cote Rotie, offering both fruit and terroir, fragrance and funk (but in a good way). But they are few and far between, usually made in microscopic quantities, and they usually carry some pretty steep price tags. Nevertheless, two of my favorite wine people - Spec's Italian wine buyer Joseph Kemble and the Houston Chronicle's wine columnist (and football writer) Dale Robertson - keep after me about Nebbiolo. Independently, they both recommended the same two wines: Damilano Nebbiolo 2008 and Luigi Penna Nebbiolo d'Alba "Vigoto" 2006. Both of these cut the road tar to the faintest of grace notes and reward with a vivid cherry with a hint of cherry stone fruit. Clean and fresh, each achieves balance with a welcome hint of bitterness (another Nebbiolo peculiarity) at the end. They are bright and delicious and priced within the realm of affordability. Both so good that I, even I who "hate" Italian wines in general and Nebbiolo in particular, am willing to explore further. In 2011, I will try to make peace with Nebbiolo. Consider this my olive branch. Joe and Dale, don't let me down.



... Do Something About Syrah

Just as I am at least rumored to not like Italian wine, I also have had my problems with Syrah. It really was never a problem with Syrah per se. The main problem was with Syrah from the northern Rhone - most of which smelled to me like "pumping diesel fuel into a hot tractor in a stinky barnyard on a hot and humid summer afternoon after a rain". The image of that smell is so strong I can hear the flies buzzing. For years, this smell - a combination of Syrah, terroir, old cooperage (funky barrels), dirty cellars, and brettanomyces (a spoilage yeast) - kept me away from the Syrahs of the northern Rhone.

While I clearly remember enjoying, for instance, Guigal Cote Rotie 1979 with Bill Edge and Michael Lonsford in the early 1980s, for much of the last 25 years, the northern Rhone has been off my wine radar. Just as I avoided the northern Rhone I also avoided the earthy, funky, clumsy California Syrahs that imitated or maybe emulated the wines of the northern Rhone. About the only Syrah I drank was Shiraz from Australia and then even that began to lose my interest as the levels of alcohol and extraction and manipulation went too far.

continues on page 2

For me, the pendulum began to swing the other way as I tasted wines from Domaine Remeziers (Hermitage and Croze Hermitage) and especially the Cote Roties from St. Cosme. These were clean wines made from fully ripe fruit that expressed terroir without excessive funk (yes, "funk" is a wine technical term). They were in fact delicious. At about the same time period, I began tasting some interesting Syrahs from some California Pinot Noir producers. These folks brought a Pinot Noir sensibility as well as Pinot production techniques (cold soaks, punch downs in open top tanks) to Syrah. The resulting wines were more pretty than ponderous ... and I found that I liked Syrah. Syrah is now a "go to" wine for me to accompany anything braised and a lot of other things as well. Good quality Syrah can start at under \$10 and great stuff can be found starting in the mid \$20's.

This quiet conversion took place a few years ago. I have been enjoying lots of California and increasingly more French Syrah at home and out in restaurants. As a recent convert, I feel the need to do a little evangelizing on behalf of Syrah. In 2011, I resolve to host some Syrah tastings and serve more Syrah to my friends and customers, and do more to get the word out. There is another great grape out there and its name is Syrah.

... Drink more Port ... and Sherry ... and Madeira

Way back in July 2010, my now-17-year-old son John started pestering me to make mushroom soup. I know this doesn't sound like much but were not talking about Campbell's from a can here. He wanted the homemade, long-simmered, beef stock-based mushroom soup I make around Christmas every year. This is a start-cooking-on-Thursday-and-eat-on-Saturday soup (see box for recipe). It is way too rich and hearty for summer eating so I promised him we'd have it at Christmas. And we did. The ever-appropriate Rick Jamail, not even knowing we were having soup, much less mushroom soup, showed up for Christmas dinner carrying a bottle of Lustau East India Cream Sherry. It went perfectly with the (very rich) soup, proving both a complement and a contrast – the best of all food-wine matches. (I had planned to serve a nice Madeira but Rick's Sherry was better.)

Later that evening - that would be after the Roast Beast and All-Time-Favorite-Step-Mom Patricia's lovely and delicious rustic tart tatin - we finished our Christmas dinner with Port, in this case a bottle of Quinta do Noval Vintage Port. It too was lovely and just the perfect way to end a celebratory evening. For some in attendance, it may have been the first time that had enjoyed Sherry and Port at the same meal. Sherry has long been out of fashion and Port (especially Vintage Port) has been in a bit of a slump over the last few years. It is really a shame because the wines are so good; we should enjoy them more often (as we used to). We've gotten past thinking of Champagne as a celebration-only beverage (it is an at least once a week wine for us at home now) so maybe we can develop a Port and Sherry habit as well (Miss Carol agrees with me on this). While I will leave it to someone else to evangelize Port (and Sherry may well be a lost cause), I do resolve to drink more Port and Sherry in 2011. If drinking and enjoying Port and Sherry still requires an occasion, I may have to manufacture a few. And somehow or another I'll work that other lost-cause fortified wine Madeira in there as well

... Eat Out More at Better Restaurants.

We have gotten into the habit of eating at home as often as possible. This happened for two reasons. First, I enjoy a quiet evening at home with my wife and it seems like we don't get enough of them. Second, I really enjoy cooking. We (the lovely Miss Carol and I) get out to a few nice restaurants (Haven, Backstreet, Charivari, Hugo's) and some Mexican and Asian dives but it seems like we eat as much at the better BYOBs (Vietnam, La Vista, Lucio's, Corelli's, Collina's, etc.) as anywhere. This is partly because I have so many wines I need to try and partly because so many restaurant wine lists are so grossly overpriced. As I know what wines cost, I am particularly cognizant of pricing rip-offs such as the up to 500% markups I found on one Galleria list. Yet, even with that variety, I feel like we are in a rut.

All that said, eating in a new good restaurant is the opportunity for both food and wine discovery. I get ideas for new dishes I want to cook and I stay in tune with what is going on at the most creative end of the food business. I've been reading Alison Cook and she has me wanting to drive to Pearland (Killen's), Alvin (The Barbed Rose), and around the corner (Tango and Malbec). I guess I'll need to stop in Tomball one night after riding my horse in Montgomery and check out Bootsie's. Feast and Kata Robato beckon (but likely without Miss Carol who is just not THAT adventurous). I resolve to get to all of these and more in 2011.

You know, these are all New Year's resolutions I think I can keep. Here's to 2011. ☘

How I Make Mushroom Soup:

I start with a good homemade beef stock (see below) to which I add chopped oyster mushrooms, shitake mushrooms, and baby bella or crimini mushrooms as well as a small pack of mixed dried wild French mushrooms (Porcinis and what not) that I had reconstituted for two days in water along with a whole bunch of flat leaf parsley, two bay leaves, a medium onion (chopped) and the cross cut whites from three leeks as well as a cup and a half of sweet Cream Sherry. I let that simmer for four hours, remove the bay leaves, and then puree it using an immersion blender. After pureeing, I whisk in some cream (I use about a cup-and-a-half for six quarts of soup), taste, and adjust the seasoning, mostly by adding black pepper (lots) and just a little salt.

Beef Stock:

Roast beef neck bones and a calf's hoof for 1 hour at 400°F. Add all the contents of the roasting pan (including all the juices) to a stockpot with water, some Gallo White Port, celery, onions, carrots, and some fish sauce. Use a little bit of the water and wine to deglaze the roasting pan and add all that to the stockpot as well. Bring it all to a rolling boil and then immediately reduce to a simmer. Simmer with the lid askew over-night (8-10 hours) on low heat and then strain. Refrigerate the strained stock for at least one full day and then de-fat it after the fat has risen to the top and solidified. The final stock (when chilled) should be as thick as almost set Jello but not at all fatty. This is the stock I use to make my beef-based soups and to make gravy for Christmas roast beef.