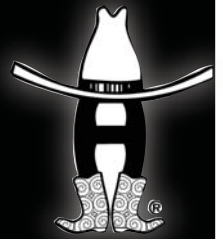




A Local Endorsement The Winners of the 2012 Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo INTERNATIONAL WINE COMPETITION

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



2012?

Almost everyone who lives in Houston has at some point attended the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Most people know that it starts around the end of February or the first part of March and that it runs for three weeks. As soon as the Show is over (usually on the third Sunday in March), the next show year

begins as the almost 30,000 volunteers unwind from almost three weeks of Rodeo and the planning starts for the coming year's Show. Show personnel talk in terms of Show years so, as we are now in the build up to the 2012 show, this is the 2012 Show Year – even though it is still 2011. Keeping that in mind, the recently completed Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo International Wine Competition (November 12 and 13 of 2011) is the Show's "2012 International Wine Competition".

An International Wine Competition with a Texas Flavor

Since the 2004 Show Year, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo has held an International Wine Competition. That first year, the International Wine Competition had 872 entries from 189 wineries from six states and thirteen countries. In this ninth year, the 2012 International Wine Competition garnered 2454 entries from 736 wineries located across the United States and around the world. The wines were divided into classes and each class was judged by one of the 18 five-member panels consisting of local wine trade members and consumers with a few invited out-of-town guests. These panelists voted either "no medal", "bronze", "silver", or "gold" for each wine tasted. Within each panel, the votes were tabulated and often discussed and sometimes tweaked before being finalized. Up to this point, the Houston Show is like any other wine competition. Here's where the Texas flavor kicks in: Once the medals are determined, each panel selects the top two wines from each of the various classes to receive a Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Trophy Belt Buckle designating that wine as the Class Champion or Class Reserve Champion. Where appropriate, a Texas Champion and Texas Reserve Champion as well as a Champion and Reserve Champion from the Competition's featured country are chosen. For the 2012 Show year, France is the featured country. (If a wine has not earned at least a silver medal, it is not eligible to earn any buckle.)

All of the top scoring Class Champions (wines that scored either five gold medal votes or four gold and one silver votes) were then tasted and considered by a "super panel" consisting of the eighteen panel heads and several other invited judges. This super panel selects the wines that will receive the show's five "Top" awards (Red Wine, White Wine, Sparkling Wine, Dessert Wine, and Value Wine, each of which earns a handsome set of western chaps with the award tooled into the leather) as well as four of the Competition's six Saddle awards (Grand Champion Best of Show, Reserve Grand Champion Best of Show, Top Texas Wine, and - for 2012 - Top French Wine, all of which will receive a Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo trophy saddle with the award tooled into the stirrup leathers). The final two saddles – for Top All Around Winery and Top Wine Company – are awarded based on a statistical analysis of the scoring database.

A Local Endorsement

These awards - medals, buckles, chaps, and saddles - constitute a "Local Endorsement" in that they are granted by panels of mostly local wine enthusiasts (no panel has more than one invited guest judge and many are all locals). Why is a local endorsement important? Different areas of the country and even different areas of the state of Texas have developed what is recognized in the wine and food world as a "local palate." Comparing the restaurant scene and the level of seasoning in the cooking of Houston and San Diego or Austin and Chicago shows the regional difference in taste in food. Food flavors and styles in Houston tend to be a bit spicier and more robust with fusion influences from diverse places such as Vietnam, Eastern Europe, Louisiana, various parts of Italy and China, and of course Mexico – literally all over the world.

At the same time there are wines that are very popular in one state that are barely a blip on the sales radar in another. Each locality has regional preferences that are on display for anyone to note. The wine taste of choice in Houston (and much of Texas) seems to be more Cabernet-centric than any other state's. Maybe it's that whole "slab (of Beef) and a Cab" thing. Still, Houston drinks its Zinfandel and enjoys Syrah and especially Pinot Noir and Malbec. New World Merlot does very well but is rarely mentioned. Maybe it is Houston's wine scene version of comfort food. Riesling has been revived and Pinot Gris (Grigio) is big but Chardonnay dominates. For me, a local endorsement of a wine is a better indicator of quality and appeal than a good review from *The Wine Advocate* or *The Wine Spectator*.

For years, the Dallas Morning News Wine Competition has provided that local endorsement for Dallas and Fort Worth. Over the last nine years, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo International Wine Competition has grown to provide that sort of local endorsement for wine lovers in the greater Houston area. Awards from both the Houston Show and the Dallas Morning News Competition seem to affect sales in other Texas markets as well.

The Winners

Here are the biggest winners from the 2012 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo International Wine Competition, the wines that won the top awards and that will certainly enjoy the most notoriety:

Grand Champion Best of Show: Marchesi Antinori Guado al Tasso, Bolgheri, 2007

Reserve Grand Champion Best of Show: Cellar Costers del Ros L'Obila, Priorat, 2004

Top Texas Wine: Messina Hof Solara, Texas, 2004

Top French Wine: Vincent Girardin Pouilly Fuisse Vieilles Vignes 2009

Top All Around Winery: Francis Coppola Winery, Napa Valley

Top Wine Company: Trincherro Family Estate

Top Sparkling Wine: Laetitia Vineyard & Winery Brut Rose, Arroyo Grande Valley, 2007

Top White Wine: Marchesi Antinori Castello della Sala Estate Cervaro della Sala, Umbria, 2009

Top Red Wine: Niner Wine Estates Twisted Spur, Paso Robles, 2008

Top Sweet Wine: Hardy's Whiskers, South Eastern Australia, NV

Top Value Wine: Red Diamond Winery Cabernet Sauvignon, Washington State, 2008

While this is a great selection of fabulous wines, to stop here would be a disservice to any wine lover. The wealth of this competition is to be found in the Class Champions and Class Reserve Champions, the Texas and French Class Champions and Class Reserve Champions, and especially in the double gold and gold medal winners.

For the complete list of winners please go to
<http://www.specsonline.com/pdf/LIST.pdf>



More from the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo:

Buckles, chaps and saddles will be awarded to the champions at the *Rodeo Uncorked! Roundup and Best Bites Competition* Sunday, Feb. 19, 2012, at Reliant Center. In addition to the champion wines, guests will sample food from area restaurants and catering institutions, and vote on their favorites in the Best Bites Competition. The top three restaurants or catering institutions will be named that evening.

All champion wines will be auctioned at the Rodeo Uncorked! *Champion Wine Auction and Dinner* Saturday, March 3, 2012, at 6 p.m. in Reliant Center. For tickets to these Rodeo Uncorked! events, visit www.rodeohouston.com, email wine@rodeohouston.com or call 832.667.1128.

A selection of winning wines will be available for tasting, or by the glass and bottle, in the *Champion Wine Garden* both at the World's Championship Bar-B-Que Contest, Feb. 23-25, 2012, and during the run of the Show, Feb. 28 – March 18, 2012, in Carruth Plaza. For more information on tickets and the Champion Wine Garden, visit www.rodeohouston.com.

The **2012 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo** runs Feb. 28 – March 18, 2012. The Show is a Section 501(c)(3) charitable event, committed to benefiting youth, supporting education, and facilitating better agricultural practices through exhibitions and presentation. Since its beginning in 1932, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo has committed approximately \$283 million to scholarships, research, endowments, calf scramble participants, junior show exhibitors, school art participants, and other educational and youth programs. For more information on the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, visit www.rodeohouston.com. ✨