



Rave & Rant

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



A Rave

It has been said that I don't like Italian wine. I know this to be true because I'm one of those who's said it. Instead, I should have said that I don't like bad Italian wine ... and there is rather a lot of it out there. Nevertheless, I sometimes find that I need to drink or serve some good Italian wine. When I do, I go to the expert – Joe Kemble, Spec's Italian wine buyer. He has never steered me wrong.

Last Monday (10-18-2010), I needed to serve three Italian red

wines in a wine class I was teaching for the Rice University School of Continuing Studies. I told Joe that I needed a good representative Tuscan Sangiovese, something good – preferably Nebbiolo – from Piedmont, and a rich Veneto Amarone-style red. He recommended Damilano Nebbiolo di Alba, 2008, Vinioli "Vignabeneffizio" Morellino di Scansano 2008, and Zenato Ripasso 2007. All three were winners.

We started with the Damilano Nebbiolo di Alba, 2008. The Damilano family control most of the Barolo cru of Cannubi and Joe tells me that a good bit of young vines Barolo-Cannubi gets declassified into this bottling. The wine was bright red in the glass, medium weight, dry, and freshly balanced with medium phenolics offering lots of bright fresh red cherry fruit. My initial thought was that it tasted like Pinot Noir from southern Burgundy (although it is 100% Nebbiolo). As I rolled it around, it showed a hint of rose petal (a classic Nebbiolo descriptor) and a faint whiff of "road tar" which is often a giveaway for Nebbiolo in blind tastings. The wine was fresh, delicious, and clean in the mouth with a super finish that offered a welcome hint of bitterness in the end. While it was aged 15 months in oak barrels, the wood is completely integrated. Try it with game birds, water fowl, and all sorts of braised meats.

Next came Vinioli "Vignabeneffizio" Morellino di Scansano 2008 from the coastal hills of Tuscany. Morellino di Scansano's DOCG regulations require at least 85% Sangiovese in the mix and I thought this had some Cabernet Sauvignon in it as well. It turns out that it is 100% Sangiovese fermented in small stainless steel tanks and aged in mostly older European oak barrels. The color is a darker red purple and it is dry, medium-to-full-bodied, and balanced with moderately chewy phenolics. The fruit is darker red cherry with a bit of red and some black berry fruit notes. Accents run to cedar and black pepper with a bit of dust from the oak and terroir. There is a pleasingly dry chewiness from the fresh tannins. I'd love to drink a bottle of this with a grilled strip drizzled with some thick green condiment-grade olive oil. Delicious.



Finally, we had the Zenato Ripasso 2007. In Ripasso, we have a wine that splits the difference between basic Valpolicella (an Italian analog to Beaujolais-Villages) and Amarone (its higher alcohol, richer sibling offering a cross between a dryish Port and a super ripe Zinfandel) and Zenato does this style as well as anyone. Grown in the Valpolicella Classico area of Sant'Amrogio, this Ripasso is a blend of 80% Corvino, 10% Rondinella, and 10% Sangiovese. Here the color is a deeper, darker purple and the wine is dry but full and rich with a good balance and riper softer tannins. The ripeness brings mostly black fruit accented with notes of red fruit, dark earth, and exotic spice. The wine has a seductive richness and lush texture that makes me want to serve it with a rich cheese and mushroom pizza with only a hint of tomato. It is pure pleasure in the mouth.

Joe Kemble's philosophy in picking these wines – he has visited all three of these producers – and others like them is to find the producers who, over the last 10-15 years, have improved their farming practice and cleaned-up and modernized their wineries. (That means riper, cleaner fruit coming into the winery and better practices in fermentation and élevage.) He is looking for clean fresh fruit flavors and balance in the wines. He won't settle for the dirty, funky wines that came from some of these areas in not too distant years past. I think he is doing a bang-up job. He's even got me somewhat open-minded about Italian wine again.

A Rant

Part of the job of being the fine wine buyer for Spec's involves tasting some bad wines. Sometimes it seems like a lot of bad wines. Sometimes they are so bad it becomes almost comical.

I tasted a line of five bad wines this afternoon with a salesman who knew enough to know the wines were bad. At least he wasn't trying to convince me otherwise. It got to be funny and at some point, it became an intellectual exercise to try to figure out why they were bad. Was it the grapes? Was it the winemaking? Was it the blending? In this case, I'm afraid it was all of the above. The Pinot Grigio had over 20% Chardonnay blended in and tasted like it didn't know whether to be fat or fresh so it was neither; it was flat with no charm at all. The Chardonnay, also an orthodox blend, was trying hard to be Kendall Jackson Vintner's Reserve – but it lacked the fruit and the actual quality to get there. The dilute Pinot Noir was red and wet – and absolutely nothing more. The Cabernet Sauvignon was almost drinkable but it was the Merlot that gave us pause. It was pretty bad and would have been easy to skip over entirely but the blend had me puzzled: 76% Merlot, 8% Cabernet Sauvignon, 2% Petite Verdot, 2% Segalin, 2% Tannat, and 10% Dry Red. 10% "dry red"? Do they not know what is in the tank? Are they embarrassed to tell us? Maybe some scary stuff in there. As my wife Carol would say "Uh oh, you got him started." And then the rest of it. Just enough Merlot to legally call the wine Merlot blended with 10% Cabernet Sauvignon – which is a traditional blending partner of Merlot - and Petite Verdot which is another although more rare traditional blending partner with Cab and Merlot. No problem there ... but wait! There's more! 2% Tannat? Tannat is a grape found in the southwest of France (specifically in Madiran), in Uruguay, and less commonly in Argentina and, oddly enough, in McLaren Vale. Tannat is not widely grown in California (actually it is quite rare) so what was it doing in this sad blend? In any case, the real stumper here is not the Tannat; rather, it is the 2% Segalin. Segalin? Say what? Wine geek that I am, I'd somehow missed Segalin - so I had to look it up. Out comes my trusty Oxford Companion to Wine (also known as the Gospel According to Jancis Robinson) and there on page 619 is Segalin.

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Ségalin is a recent INRA crossing of Jurançon Noir X Portugais Bleu which has good colour, structure, and flavour and is authorized in South West France. (See also Caladoc, Chassan, Portan.)

Whoa. A crossing between Jurançon Noir and Portugais Bleu? Really? Who'd a thunk it?

Suddenly I have a picture of two sort of mid-tier French viticulture graduate students grape-geeks sitting in a bar slamming Pastis and smoking black cigarettes.

Jacques: ... and professor Segalin was sleeping in class while we took the test today.

Henri: He is Dr. Obscure. Pretty much worthless ...

Jacques: So dude, why don't we breed a new variety and name it after him.

Henri: Like what?

J: Like we could take Jurançon ...

H: Jurançon? Jurançon is so out ...

J: Dude, yeah, that's why it's cool. So, we take Jurançon and cross it with Portugais ...

H: Portugais, man that's obscure. They only use that stuff in like Austria and ...

J: I know dude, its uber-cool so ...

So our French heroes here breed a new variety that has almost no utility and somehow some grape farmer in California ends up planting a few acres (just imagine the conversation between the farmer and the ag agent who recommended he plant it – “Well Frank, I just read a notice about this new grape from France ...”) and winds up selling the obscure grapes, probably as bulk black, to a monster big wine company that inexplicably makes it into an odd varietal wine and then has to get rid of it by burying it in a blend.

This disaster of a wine gets bottled as a reserve wine under a once proud Sonoma winery name that is now merely a label they own. The funny thing is that they even listed this obscure variety it in the blend. And if they listed this Segalin, what exactly was in that “10% Dry Red”? More to the point, why was Segalin even planted in California? Why hasn't it been grafted over to something more palatable or at least readily saleable? What is it doing in this admittedly lousy blended Merlot? What were they all thinking? (By the way, the same winery also blended Sangiovese into that utterly non-descript Pinot Noir. Go figure.)

The whole thing kind of makes you wonder what allis planted out in the hinterlands of California. This is really the dark side of commercial winemaking. And of wine buying. Don't worry; Spec's won't be carrying this wine or

any of its
cousins ...
but it has
been a day
in the life. ✨

