



Travel, Priorities, Etc.

by Charles M. Bear Dalton

As noted last week, I have been traveling a lot lately. Travel makes it challenging to get my articles done and turned in on time so this week I had set aside early Wednesday morning to work on an article. Then the phone rang (my phone normally doesn't ring at 6am) with the news that my seventeen-year-old son John, with whom I had just had dinner the night before, was in the hospital waiting to be scheduled for an emergency appendectomy. My priorities changed and I went out to spend all day Wednesday at Memorial Hermann Hospital in Katy where they took great care of my boy. Despite the situation, John and I got to have a little quality father-son time to boot.

The hospital had WiFi in the rooms (which is more than I can say for a lot of the hotels I have visited in Europe) so I was able to send and answer some emails (which included sending out updates on John) and even do a little work while he was in surgery and recovery. "A little work" but less than I'd have liked because the hospital's firewall filtered out access to anything having to do with alcohol. Anyway, my boy's on the mend and that's what's important.

Having my day reprioritized like that threw what I was working on out the window (or at least back a week) so today you are getting a bit of random wine stuff.

A while back, I wrote about wine tasting "different" on days with lower versus higher barometric pressure. It seems to me that wine – especially young wine—shows more forward and often tastes better (maybe "brighter" but certainly more expressive) on days with lower barometric pressure and conversely is more apt to be "closed" and not showing as well on days with higher barometric pressure. I think this phenomenon has to do with how readily the wine releases its volatile gasses that make up aroma and flavor.

Last week while my wife and I were in Breckenridge (a beautiful spot well worth visiting winter or summer) visiting our friends the Holders, I noticed that some of the wines we were drinking with dinner both at our friends' condo and in restaurants tasted different. Different how, you may ask? Well, I'm not sure. As Breckenridge is located at an elevation of 9,600 feet. I was having a hard time breathing. It got better over time but I would not say that I acclimated. Maybe the wine was interacting with the air differently. It could be that this is because the air is thinner but I think it more likely that this is due to the lower atmospheric pressure at higher altitudes.



This lower pressure was brought home to me when I undercooked the pasta for a dish I was preparing. If I ever knew, I had forgotten that at 10,000 feet, water boils at about 193°F rather than the 212°F that we are used to. This is due to lower atmospheric pressure. Partly due to what was available in the local shops (there are no Spec's in Colorado) and restaurants we wound up drinking three Ridge Vineyards wines in two days. We had a Ridge Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 (at our friends' condo with the undercooked pasta) and two Ridge Zinfandels (2009 East Bench and 2008 Ponzo) at a fourth of July dinner on the balcony at Relish -a Breckenridge restaurant I would highly recommend. I am very familiar with all three of these wines and they were all very enjoyable even if a bit different than expected. The Ridge Santa Cruz Mountains Cabernet Sauvignon - which I think is among the most under-appreciated Cabernets made in California – seemed to show a bit too forward. It was like the treble was turned up way too high on the stereo. The two Ridge Zins both seemed to have a little extra treble (or brightness) but they may actually have benefited from it. Both showed very well with good freshness, especially the Ponzo Vineyard with its brighter Russian River Valley fruit and extra year of development.



My wife notes that the Breckenridge Avalanche Ale she first enjoyed in Breckenridge tasted better there than it does here – but she also acknowledges that there may be some romance of place involved in that perception, and she does enjoy drinking it here. I did not notice as much difference in a Coppola Claret or on any of the bubbly we drank - a Gloria Ferrer Brut and two Gruets (a Blanc de Noirs and a Brut) and I didn't notice anything different about the Schloss Vollrads Riesling QbA (I have forgotten the vintage) we drank. Maybe the Claret wasn't as complex to begin with but it did drink well. And maybe sparkling wines, due to their effervescence, more readily offer their aromas and flavors at whatever altitude or barometric pressure. In any case, all three of the bubblys (wines I'd be as likely to buy in Houston as in Colorado) tasted great. I'm not sure what to make of the white other than to note that it was very much as expected.

So this atmospheric pressure effect on the taste (in the broader sense of "taste" as Sensory Evaluation) of wine may be a phenomenon that manifests itself most clearly on more complex red wines. Nevertheless it seems to be there and most likely has at least some effect on most all wines.

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At the end of a long tasting day, my favorite thing is to drink a glass (or two) of Champagne or at least a good sparkling wine. It refreshes me and just brightens up the moment but there is another benefit as well. When you have been tasting a lot of young red wines, your teeth begin to show a purple stain and your tongue can turn purple black. Champagne seems to dissolve a lot of that purple pigment so in addition to tasting good, Champagne actually helps clean up and restore your mouth. And since we usually have some nicer older wines with dinner after that glass of Champagne, having a fresh palate at the end of the day can be a very desirable thing.

And speaking of Champagne, I find that I like certain brands of Champagne more when I am in Europe than when I am in Houston. Since Bordeaux and Houston are both very close to sea level, I don't think it has anything to do with altitude or atmospheric pressure. Rather, I think it has to do with shipping. Some of the Champagne we get in Houston is apparently shipped in less than perfect conditions and the wine suffers for it. Which means that you the customer ultimately suffer for it if you buy and drink those wines. So we don't carry some Champagne I really like. If we are able to get the shipping worked out, we'll probably add these brands to our selection.



Which brings up the problem of shipping. On all shipments and deliveries that Spec's controls, we successfully insist on refrigerated containers and trucking. Unfortunately, UPS, FedEx, and the other parcel delivery companies that sometimes deliver wine are not

temperature controlled. I am acutely aware of this because many of the samples California wineries send at this time of year are heat damaged even if they are sent overnight, morning delivery. Sometimes this heat damage is visible in that the cork is bulging or there is obvious seepage. Sometimes, the tell-tales are limited to a cork with a wine streak on one side that goes almost – but not quite to the top. And sometimes there is no visual damage at all but you can still taste the flattening of the wine. To go back to the musical analogy: the treble is mostly gone and the bass is muted. If it is really bad, even the mid-range gets muddy. Generally speaking, it is best to avoid shipping wine to or from Houston from early March to late November – and even in the cooler months, there is some risk. I have photos going back several years of me riding the Salt Grass Trail in February with my sleeves rolled up. ✨