



Thinking About Wine

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



An Unusual Wine Competition

This last Sunday (9/26/10), I participated as a judge in a very unusual wine competition. No wineries entered their wines and few (if any) even knew the competition took place. No wines or

wineries will receive awards or even much in the way of recognition. Instead, the members of the organization that held the competition chose and entered the wines in four categories: white wines, Cabernet Sauvignons, Pinot Noirs, and other reds. The top wine in each category won a prize, not for the winery but for those who entered it. The whole competition was about bragging rights, about who entered “the best” wine.

That’s all pretty different from the normal wine competition ... but not so different from a bunch of guys each bringing four or five bottles to a hunting lodge and competing for bragging rights for the weekend. What struck me as truly unique about this competition was the way in which my three fellow judges and I were asked to evaluate the wines. Within each category, the wines were presented one at a time and then removed before the next wine was served. The tasting was totally blind and the order of service random (more on that in the next section). In two categories, we knew the dominant grape variety – Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir – but in the other two, we only knew it the wine was red or white. We were asked to evaluate and score (on a scale of 0-14) each wine in isolation. There were no comparisons and there was no discussion. You tasted and rated the wines and the chips fell where they fell. It was a novel way to run a wine tasting and an idea that, with some refinement, may have some merit. The only “taste-off” we had was for the top wine in the “other red” category where there was a two-way tie.

There were a few wines that really stood out for me but I have little idea whether any of the other judges liked them or not. There were definite winners and losers but there was no way to gauge consensus among the judges. In any case, the wines I tasted got an honest appraisal with no outside influence. While there are problems with this system - some wines clearly did not get a fair shake - the idea is intriguing.

Recognition

One of the wines in this competition that really appealed to me sort of struck me as a bolt from the blue. In the middle of the “other red” category in the midst of Malbecs and Tempranillos, Syrahs and Meritages, an elegant, juicy-fresh-refreshing, light-to-medium-bodied, red-fruit-filled, cherry and raspberry-scented red wine showing class and terroir popped up. It pushed all the right buttons and I scored it 13 points out of a possible 14. The fellow next to me scored it 5 out of 14. Since he was glancing at my score sheet as we turned them in, he noticed the discrepancy and commented on it. He said he found the wine very light and lacking in depth. I told him I thought it was a Beaujolais (which is supposed to be lighter and fruity) and that, if it was Beaujolais, it was classic. I also noted that I thought it was a 2009 which is a great vintage for Beaujolais. We then went on tasting but I made note of the entry number. After we finished tasting, the organizers brought out the bottle - which turned out to be Louis Jadot Beaujolais-Villages 2009.

Now before you launch into me for bragging on my own tasting prowess, this sort of thing only happens for me every once in a great while, usually only when the wine is classic and I am on top of my game. Most of the time when I taste wines in competitive blind tastings, I am lucky to get the continent and maybe the country of origin correct. I like to think that that is due to the globalization of styles of wine – but it is probably more a case of me not being as astute a taster as I like to think. I don’t feel too bad about it though; most other people are not as good at tasting as they like to think either.

What makes me mention this here is that this utterly charming refreshing, frankly delicious wine got buried. One reason was that it was served in an inappropriate situation – in the midst of a catchall other red category where low acid, black fruit, and tannin are the rule. Another is that my fellow tasters are not familiar with Beaujolais and so did not have the experience to recognize this excellent wine for what it is. While it was indeed an “other red”, it deserved better than to be buried in the middle of a minefield of tannin and extraction. Be on the look out for it.

Minerality Without Terroir

Minerality and terroir are two concepts that tend to be tightly linked in the wine world. When we say that a “wine reflects its terroir”, we often ascribe a mineral and/or earth character to the wine. And indeed terroir often grants wine, especially white wine, a mineral note. To taste a single-site Burgundian Chardonnay grown in limestone, a chateau-bottled Bordelaise cru classé Sauvignon Blanc grown in gravel, a prädikat Riesling grown in slate, even Gamay grown in Beaujolais’s granite, is to taste the mineral character provided by growing the right grapes in the right terroir. That terroir-based minerality may show up – as in that Riesling - as the smell of cold water splashing over rocks (what I call “mountain stream”). It may show up – as in that Chardonnay - as the smell of children’s vitamins (Flintstone or Ninja Turtle). It may express – as in that Sauvignon Blanc - as a swirl of liquid mineral mixed into the fruit of the wine.

But what happens when you taste a subtle minerality in a wine that seems to have no terroir character? What if you taste a Chardonnay that is blended from grapes grown in the Russian River Valley, Carneros, Monterey, and Santa Barbara and it too has a mineral component? Do you ignore the minerality because you know this is not a wine of terroir? Of course not. The wine has a mineral component that is plain to see or at least plain to taste. So where does the minerality come from? It comes from the varied terroirs but doesn’t reflect any one of them. The wine is minerally without expressing any particular terroir.

Blended white wines can (and if well made often do) express this generic sort of minerality - just as blended red wines can express a generic sort of earthiness. Good Pinot Grigio blended in northeastern Italy, good blended Pfalz Riesling, good Pinot d’Alsace, and good generic Bourgogne Blanc Chardonnay all express minerality without terroir. While these wines lack specificity of place, they generally offer the virtues of consistency, availability, and value. ✨

