

Grape Vine

A monthly Internet newsletter about wine, wine buying, wine tasting, and wine collecting – V.Pina, Publisher – Vol. 1 Issue 6

This month in the Grape Vine we introduce you to the wines of Argentina. We will also discuss the issue of wine production and how it differs from year to year. In this issue we will tackle the wine elite (also known as wine snobs). Lastly, we'll suggest some great wines to go with holiday foods. Enjoy!

Wine 101 – Where grapes are grown and wines are made

Argentina

Argentina is one of those countries that many people have heard of but don't know a lot about. For instance, did you know Argentina is the fifth largest producer of wine in the world? That doesn't mean, however, that all of the wine is good. For many years the vast majority of wine produced in Argentina was consumed locally (and not exported), so maintaining high quality was not a priority.

Today, wine quality is on the rise in Argentina. Like Chile, international wine companies from the United States, France, Spain, and Italy are investing heavily in Argentina and challenging the local wineries to make equal commitments to improving viticulture (grapevine growing), grape selection, and wine-making technology. In addition, the prices of many Argentine wines are lower than comparable wines from other countries. All in all, the results are quite impressive.

Argentina is known predominately as a red wine country. Its production and quality of white wines (like Chardonnay) is improving, but in general, Argentina is known for red wines made from the Malbec or Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. Argentine wine labels are also easy to understand, as they almost always list the grape on the label.

Let's look at the grape wine producing regions of Argentina.

Argentina's main grape wine growing regions:

- **Mendoza** – Known for red wines made from the **Malbec** or **Cabernet Sauvignon** grapes and white wines made from the **Chardonnay** grape. Two thirds of all wines produced in Argentina come from this region.
- **La Rioja** – Known for white wines made from the **Torrontés** grape and red wines made from the **Malbec** grape.
- **Rio Negro** – Known for red wines made from the **Malbec** or **Cabernet Sauvignon** grapes and white wines made from **Chardonnay** and **Sauvignon Blanc** grapes.

- **Cafayete** – Known for white wines made from the **Torrontés** grape and red wines made from the **Malbec** or **Cabernet Sauvignon** grapes.

Wine 102: Vintage Variation

I'm often asked "What's the deal with buying wines by the year (vintage) they are produced?" Or "What's the difference between a bottle of wine labeled 1999 and the same wine labeled 2000?" I will preface my answer by stating something I've said before. That is, over 90% of all wine purchased in the United States is consumed within one year. What that means is most Americans buy wine and consume it shortly thereafter, and I believe, with little consideration to the year listed on the label. I also believe that many people who buy wine look at three other things; the price, the wine type (e.g. Merlot), and the wine producer (e.g. Mondavi). The 10% of wines that are not consumed within one year are generally purchased by collectors who are "really into" wine and therefore pay more attention to the yearly variations of wine harvests.

Back to the hubbub about vintage variation (wine variations from year to year). It is true that wines vary from year to year, and not to mention, from place to place. This is due to the simple fact that each grapevine does not produce exactly the same quality grapes as it did in previous years. This is in addition to the variations in growing conditions, like climate, rainfall, as well as winemaking and the like.

With that said, many upscale wine lovers pay attention to the wineries and wine journalists' opinions (sometimes conjecture) about the harvest of a particular year. For example, wine geeks like me have read a lot recently about the 2000 vintage in Bordeaux, France (not to mention the 1997 vintage in Brunello di Montalcino, or the 2001 vintage in Germany). What that means is the wine industry has declared the grapes harvested during the 2000 vintage in Bordeaux, France were of extremely high quality. The point is "with great fruit one can make great wines." Does this mean the 1999 Bordeaux wines are garbage? Absolutely not. However, for the discriminating wine lover and wine buyer, the 2000 vintage represents potentially higher-quality wines and an opportunity to stock up, albeit at higher prices.

Another quirky example would be in California. Many people consider the 1998 vintage in California wine country to be lower in quality than the 1994, 1997, or 1999 vintages. However, if you dig a little deeper you will realize that some regions in California had a better 1998 than others. After all, it's a big state and the weather in Santa Barbara is different from the weather in the Napa Valley. In other words, there were some stunning California wines from the 1998 vintage but there were also some poor wines produced in that vintage.

If you are really into wine and intend to buy or are buying significant amounts of it, it makes sense to pay attention to the quality of the vintages from year to year among the regions that produce the wines you like. However, if you're an average wine lover or just getting into wine, you are better served by getting to know what wines you like and then finding reliable wine producers that make good-quality, affordable wines year in and year out. For example, I like Pinot Noir. Among California wine producers, I like the Villa Mt. Eden Pinot Noir. For the last three or four years they have produced a very good, fruit-filled Pinot Noir at the \$10 price point. Pinot Noir for \$10! That's like getting an Internet wine magazine for free!!

Wine 103: The Wine Elite (aka Wine Snobs)

You already know that I believe wine is not just for the elite. As a matter of fact, I cringe when I think of wine as only being for the elite. Wine is as much part of the history of the middle class of the United States as apple pie and Chevrolet. The problem is that things got skewed for the middle class as a result of Prohibition. Coming out of Prohibition and then World War II, wine, particularly quality wine, became something only the privileged could afford. These individuals had the means to travel to Europe, drink the finest French wines, and eat at three-star Michelin restaurants. These individuals knew what you now know, that wine should be a normal part of everyday meals. Meanwhile, for the rest of America after WWII, we were being force-fed beer and sugar-infused soda pop, liquors, and spirits as part of our meals.

Wine snobbery came about as first the privileged and then those more informed about wine became among the few in society who understood wine, and intimidated those who knew little or nothing about wine. Some wine snobs have the potential to further alienate those new to wine by perpetuating the image that wine is complicated, what with their cryptic use of language to describe wine and their preference for only the most-expensive bottles of wine.

The mystery of wine is not a mystery at all. There is more public information about wine than there has ever been and the amount of high-quality, affordable wine is at an all-time high. It is easier than ever to learn about wine and to apply that learning to help you find great, affordable bottles of wine.

The key to getting into wine is to buy different kinds of wine, experiment, taste, take notes, and read. It won't take long for you to begin realizing what you like and what you don't. Hopefully, what you like are not just the \$50 bottles, because as you know, there are lots of wines out there that taste every bit as good as these but cost far less. As they say "A wine always tastes better when you know it's good and you know you didn't pay a lot for it." I get a special feeling when I conduct a blind wine tasting and the most popular wine of the night is under \$10, but the participants think it is going to be much more expensive.

Wine 104: Wines for the Holidays

What do you think of when you think of the holidays? Shopping? Food? Spending too much money? It doesn't have to be that way. Holiday meals require thoughtful selection of wine. Let's look at a few classic holiday meals and some wines that match well with them.

Thanksgiving Turkey. The traditional Thanksgiving turkey is a multi-flavor experience. You have your choice of white or dark meat, gravy, cranberry sauce, and flavorful vegetables. Typically, you want a wine that will not overpower. You want the food and wine to be in balance. You also want a wine where the fruit is noticeable. The fruit flavor in the wine will complement the taste of the meat, cranberry sauce, and vegetables. A fruity red wine like Pinot Noir (French-made red Burgundy and American Pinot Noir) is a classic match with holiday turkey. The silky-smooth, red-fruit taste of Pinot Noir goes well with the diverse flavors of holiday meals.

Beaujolais (Gamay grape) is another holiday-friendly wine. First of all, Beaujolais is in greater supply, especially in November (has the Beaujolais Nouveau arrived yet?) and December. Secondly, Beaujolais

wines are even more fruit-forward than Pinot Noir and generally not as high in alcohol. But most of all, Beaujolais is more affordable than most other red wines.

Among white wines, I like Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris, or Sauvignon Blanc with Thanksgiving turkey. They are all dry wines but with enough fruit flavor to complement the numerous flavors of holiday turkey. If you really want to do something different, try a German Riesling or Italian Moscato d'Asti with turkey. Close your eyes and enjoy the ride!

Holiday Ham: Holiday ham is almost always made with a glaze of some kind and therefore has a certain level of sweetness. To complement these flavors, a wine is needed that has its own distinctive fruit flavors. Red wines like French Bordeaux and Italian Chianti Classico can complement ham very well. Among white wines, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc have the weight and flavor to be good matches too. For a change of pace, consider a demi-sec Champagne.

Pot Roast: A hearty meal like pot roast craves firm red wines like a French Côtes du Rhone (which are usually made from the Syrah grape) or a spicy red Zinfandel from California. Heavy meats crave a wine that can keep up. Few white wines can do so with a meal like this, therefore a medium to full-bodied red is the way to go.

Pecan or Pumpkin Pie: Desserts like pecan or pumpkin pies require a wine that has more sweetness. A dry wine would spoil the taste of the pie. Consider a Spätlese-level German Riesling.

Apple Pie: Another classic Thanksgiving dessert. Try it with French Sauternes. If this is beyond your budget, try a medium-sweet dessert wine from New York State or Canada.

November's Vine Cuttings

(recommended wines)

White Wine

**1999 Emile Willm Pinot Gris "Cuvee Emile Willm"
Alsace, France (Pinot Gris grape)**

A surprisingly affordable white wine (\$15.99) from the Alsace region of France. This wine has all the makings of a winner: fresh pear and apple combined with mineral notes. This wine is dry enough to match with most any fish.

Red Wine

**2000 Justin Cabernet Sauvignon Paso Robles,
California (Cabernet Sauvignon grape)**

This winery has improved their red wines every year for the last several years. They make a few Cabernets, but this one has the best quality-to-price ratio (\$19.99). Cherry fruit, leather, and oak notes. Try this wine with Filet Mignon.

For all of you wine lovers, the Boston Wine Expo will be held February 1-2, 2003, at the World Trade Center. If you are into wine or want to get into wine, this is an event not to be missed. For more information go to wine-expos.com. See you next month.

Next month: German wines and our first buying guide!