

Vin de Vin Wine Tasting and Collecting Consultants

Grape Vine

A monthly Internet newsletter about wine, wine buying, wine tasting, and wine collecting – V.Pina, Publisher – Vol. 1 Issue 5

Wine friends, this marks the fifth issue of the *Grape Vine*. If any of you have read the four previous issues and still think you know nothing about wine, you're wrong. You have learned about as much about wine as most Americans know. Let's review what you've learned in the past four issues of the *Grape Vine*:

- You've learned about the wines and wine regions of France, California, Australia, Italy, and Spain, among the biggest wine-producing countries.
- You've learned about the importance of getting familiar with different kinds of grapes, how they are made into wine, and how to read a wine label.
- You've learned how to buy wine at a wine store or in a restaurant.
- You've learned about natural corks, synthetic corks, and screw cap bottles of wine.
- You've learned about how wine is made! And that's not all...you know nothing about wine. Bah humbug!

In this issue of the *Grape Vine* we'll introduce you to the wines of Chile. Also in this issue you will find a special section on dessert wines (they're not just for dessert anymore). Elsewhere in the issue there is a piece on starting your own wine collection. Lastly we will break down the cost of a bottle of wine. Enjoy!

Wine 101 – Where grapes are grown and wines are made

Chile

Before I traveled to Chile, I must admit I never thought much of the country. Most of us know it's in South America and it is a long, slender-looking country on the west coast of the continent. Well in terms of wine, there is a lot of good coming out of Chile. First of all, winemaking in Chile has improved a great deal, just in the last five years. Secondly, prices are still reasonable for a majority of Chilean wines.

That doesn't mean all Chilean wines are great; it just means there is a lot of it on the American market, and much of it has a good quality-to-price ratio. Chile has been such an attractive country of late among international winemakers that some of the world's leading wine makers are investing in, consulting on, or producing wine there. Among them, Baron Philippe de Rothschild, and Michel Rolland both French winemakers, Kendall-Jackson and Robert Mondavi from California, and BRL Hardy from Australia, to name a few.

Among wine makers, Chile is known as a “phylloxera-free” country. That is, Chile is one of the few countries that has not experienced the effects of phylloxera, a grapevine disease that can and has destroyed vineyards around the world. What that also means is that Chile has some of the oldest (and theoretically, some of the most productive) vines in the world. Old vines generally produce concentrated grapes, which *can* be made into excellent wines.

Like many other New World countries, Chilean wines list the grape that they are made from right on the label.

Let’s look at the grape wine producing regions of Chile.

Chile’s main grape wine growing regions:

- **Aconcagua Valley** – Known for red wines made from the **Cabernet Sauvignon** and **Merlot** grapes.
- **Casablanca Valley** – Means “valley of the white house” in Spanish. Most famous for white wines are made from the **Chardonnay** and **Sauvignon Blanc** grapes.
- **Maipo Valley** – Known for red wines made from the **Cabernet Sauvignon**, **Merlot**, and **Pinot** grapes and for white wines made from the **Chardonnay**, **Sauvignon Blanc** and **Sémillon** grapes.
- **Rapel Valley** – Includes the wine regions of **Cachapoal** and **Colchagua**. They are most famous for red wines made from the **Cabernet Sauvignon**, **Merlot**, **Carmènere**, and **Pinot Noir** grapes and for white wines made from the **Chardonnay** and **Sauvignon Blanc** grapes.
- **Curicó** – Known for white wines made from **Chardonnay**, **Gewürztraminer**, **Riesling**, and **Sauvignon Blanc** grapes.
- **Maule** – Most famous for white wines made from **Chardonnay**, **Sauvignon Blanc**, and **Sémillon** grapes and for red wines made from the **Merlot** grape.

Wine 102 – Dessert Wines

If I were to guess which type of wine we know the least about it would be dessert wines (Champagne comes to mind also). You’re probably saying to yourself, “It took all I got just to understand red and white wines, why do I have to learn about dessert wines?” My response, “Grasshopper, dessert wines are like a goose that lays golden eggs, when you have one you wish you had another.” Dessert wines are special treats like a great dessert. You don’t need to have one every night but if you have one on occasion, you may be happily surprised. Some people like dessert wines like Port when it can be matched with a cigar, while other people like Sauternes with crème brulee. There are many types of dessert wines but we can simplify them by dividing them into three groups:

1. **Naturally sweet wines:** Occur as a result of grapes that allowed to dry on the vine, increasing the sugar content. In other words, these are wines made from dried grapes. Dried grapes are ones that are left on the vine longer and therefore begin to shrivel and intensify. Many of these grapes are affected by a kind of naturally occurring rot (*botrytis cinerea*). If you’re thinking “I’m not drinking wine that’s made from rotten grapes,” this rot is a good kind that turns the aging and drying grapes into something more like a raisin. This rot is so good that it is often

referred to as “noble rot.” German beerenauslese and trockenbeerenauslese (Riesling), Hungarian Tokay, French Sauternes and Quarts de Chaume are all examples.

Other dessert wines are sometimes made from grapes that are harvested well into the winter when they are nearly frozen. In Germany these wines are called “eiswein,” which is German for “ice-wine.” In Canada and other cold-climate wine regions, ice-wine is a mainstay of the wine industry. Canadian ice-wines are a must try.

Most of these wines are harvested by hand, which contributes to their high cost. In addition, many of these wines are sold by the half bottle (375 ml), which is more than enough for most wine drinkers, not to mention a smaller bottle is generally more affordable. Try any of these wines with dishes using fruits (like apples, apricots, or pineapple) or glazes, crème brulee, fruit cheesecakes, or sharp cheeses.

2. **Fortified wines:** Port is the most well-known example of fortified wines. Port wine grapes are harvested and crushed but fermentation is interrupted. In this case, grape brandy is added to stop the conversion of all the sugar in the original wine to alcohol (fermentation). The addition of grape brandy nonetheless increases the alcohol content of the wine, which makes the wine taste even sweeter.

Port wines are named after the city in Portugal where Port was originally made, Oporto (actually it is made in a city across the river), but port and fortified wines are also made in California and Australia. Another example of a fortified wine is Banyuls from the Languedoc – Roussillon region of southern France.

Fortified wines are made in many styles but the best are usually expensive. In terms of matching fortified wines with fare, Port goes well with two classic foods, among others, chocolate and bleu cheeses. On the other hand, some believe Port with a good Cuban cigar is about as good as it gets.

3. **Solera:** If you started making dessert wines 100 years ago and with every year you blend in subsequent year’s sweet wines, you would be employing the solera method of making wine. In other words, it is the partial blending of fresh wines with aging wines. There is a constant flow of young wine in every barrel of wine made using the solera system. Sherry, which comes from Spain, is the most famous example of a dessert wine made using the solera method. It is conceivable that every bottle of Sherry contains some wine, however minute, that is very old indeed. Montilla-Moriles wines from Spain, and Australian Tokay and Muscat are other examples of wines made using the solera method. Try matching these wines with fried fish, gazpacho, nuts, tapas, chorizo, ham, or consommé, or mild cheeses.

Wine 103 – Starting Your Own Wine Collection

So you wanna start a wine collection, eh? Sounds good. Where do you begin? Well I would think there would be three major factors to consider. First what wines do you like? Second, how much wine do you see yourself owning? Third, where would like to store your wines?

In terms of what wines you like, that's really a personal decision. You should consider owning wines that you enjoy, are within your budget, and go with the foods you like to eat. For most people this would mean a mix of white and red wines. You may also consider stocking up on dessert wines (see above). The point here is to consider buying wines for all the circumstances where you feel wine is necessary (meals, aperitifs, guests, parties, etc.). Some people prefer certain white and red wines for food and other wines just to have by themselves. Keep in mind that not all wine will age gracefully. Most wines produced are intended to be consumed with a short period of time (no longer than one year). What this means is "drink the wines you buy." In the year-end issue of *Grape Vine*, there will be a buying guide listing my recommendations of specific wines.

How much wine you choose to own has a lot to do with your budget, the prices of the wines you like to drink, and how much and the type of space you have. I can't advise you as to your budget for purchasing wine other than you know you're spending too much on wine when you cash your check at the wine store! However, if you know what wines you like and want to start a small "cellar," look for a dark place with a constant, cool temperature, preferably humid, like a basement or closet. Direct sunlight can cause wine to overheat or "cook," which will damage the wine. If you choose a place that is too dry, corks can become brittle and break and allow oxygen in, which will ultimately spoil the wine. It goes without saying that long-term heat exposure, like being next to a heater or oven, will also cook a wine. Ideally a basement with a year-round temperature between 50 and 70 degrees is recommended. If you can keep it closer to between 50 and 55 degrees, then that would even be better. Big fluctuations in temperature will also damage wine so that is why keeping your collection in a place that gets real hot in summer and really cold in the winter is not recommended.

Wine 104 – What goes into the cost of a bottle of wine

This is a question that I am often asked at the wine tastings I conduct. There are three main areas that contribute to the cost of a bottle of wine: production, distribution, and marketing.

Let's start with a simple concept to understand, the cost of production. The cost of the land, grapes, labor, materials, and winemaking are part of the hard costs of producing wines. Grapes grown on valuable land (think of grapes grown in Bordeaux or Napa Valley versus those grown in New Zealand or Chile) or harvested by hand instead of machine increase the cost of making a bottle of wine.

The cost of distribution is pretty straightforward. As you may have read in a previous issue of *Grape Vine*, nearly all wineries work with middle-people like importers or distributors to get their wines to the retailer. Of course the importers or distributors take their cut for providing their service. There are other costs like taxes, inventory, and shipment charges that importers or distributors must pay in order to offer a wine in a particular country or state. Retailers cannot be cheated out of their piece either. All in all the cost of moving the finished bottle of wine from the winery to the store shelf involves a number of entities, each adding a cost along the way that will be factored into the ultimate price.

The last major area that contributes to the cost of a bottle of wine is also the one that is often the most perplexing; marketing. When I say marketing I mean not only promotion, advertising, public relations, etc., but the practice of pricing wines based on their perceived place/status/brand image in the marketplace. For example, let's say that ABC winery produced a Merlot that retails for \$50 and

scores 90-plus (out of 100) in many of the major wine-rating publications. XYZ winery also produces a Merlot that scores 90-plus in those same publications but its retail price is \$20. In all likelihood XYZ winery will increase their prices next year to be closer to ABC's Merlot because they feel that their wine is every bit as good and they are losing money by not offering their equally popular wine at \$50. Another argument, albeit weaker, that the XYZ winery could make is that they fear that consumers will be hesitant to buy their Merlot because the public would be skeptical of a wine that has such a low price but a rating equal to the \$50 Merlot. The point is much of wine pricing is based not necessarily on logic but on positioning, perception, and marketing. Wineries are constantly looking to offer a mix of their wines at different price points but maintaining commensurate quality. When a lower-priced wine gets lots of rave reviews wineries feel they can justify moving that wine into a higher price point. Unfortunately for consumers, this is not a great scenario. That is why it is important for consumers to know and trust their palates, take notes, and familiarize themselves with specific wineries that consistently offer high-quality wines at affordable prices.

October's Vine Cuttings (recommended wines)

White Wine

2001 Tommasi Le Rosse Vigneto Pinot Grigio (grape), Valdadige (region), Italy

Some people like Pinot Grigio, others don't. It is the number one imported white wine in the U.S. That said, not all of it is great. This winery has been producing good-quality, affordable wines for some time. This wine is smooth, full of clean, fresh, tropical fruit. Medium-bodied, this wine went very well with seafood pasta. All this for \$12.

Red Wine

2000 Louis Bernard Côtes du Rhône (region), France – Primary grape - Syrah

I recently conducted a wine tasting and this \$9.99 bottle of wine nearly stole the show. This is a really balanced wine from a reliable producer. Not too tannic or too dry but just enough fresh, ripe, red and black fruit. You could easily drink a bottle of this with a meal and think you are paying three times what it really costs. Rated 89 by *Wine Spectator* magazine.

Two wine tastings, a trip to Atlanta, and a trip to Vin Expo Americas pushed back the publication of this issue. A return to normalcy is expected in November. In next month's issue we'll introduce you to some great holiday wines. See you next month.

Next month: Holiday wines and wine snobs! Cheers!