

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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## A Passion for Flavor

I love Grenache.

Whether made into a dry rosé; a pale, Beaujolais-ish red, a mid-weight red, or even a dark, brooding monster (a rather rare beast), it can be an utterly captivating companion.

But as with most other hard-to-grow red wine grapes, there are harsh realities that must be dealt with, one of which is that the variety needs lots of heat to develop the ripest flavors, though too ripe and the wine turns to raisins, and not ripe enough runs the risk of an element some call herbal.

Moreover, with ultra-ripe fruit, an alcohol in the 15% range can come at the expense of some of the distinctive varietal character that defines the variety, since this grape may be likened to one that is aromatic—a bit like what you get from Aleatico.

Bonny Doon's Randall Grahm also loves this grape, so much so that his fanciful invention back in 1984, Le Cigare Volant, was a Grenache-based blend that, to this day, remains one of the most important such blends ever devised in California.

Grenache is its heart, though it is a hard grape to find. (See story at right.)

At a retrospective tasting of the 25 years of LCV, staged at the fabulous Manressa in Los Gatos last Sunday, Grahm opened the event with, "This is a journey, and a chance to reflect on the journey I have been on, and where the journey is next to go."

As a dedicated terroirist, who believes the soil is the soul of wine, Randall was reflective of his passion to make distinctive wines, not all of

which (he admitted) will be seen universally as great. But their context will be their destiny, and (reflecting that his thinking about this subject isn't dissimilar from that of topology), he said that "minerality will be the hallmark" of most distinctive wines.

That Cigare Volant is a reflection of what California can do to emulate Châteauneuf-du-Pape is a given. And that the wine could age 20 years is a leap of faith. The fact that the earliest LCVs were alive (albeit from larger formats) did surprise Grahm, who was asked about the phenomenon.

"Now I'm making wines to age 20 years," he said, "but I didn't think about such things then" (in the '80s).

Grahm has bought Grenache fruit for his top red wine for decades, yet hopes to solve that issue by growing it all for his future wines at his new property at San Juan Bautista.

Grahm isn't sure he can achieve what he suspects can be done with the grape, though he knows that farming it isn't going to a joyride.

The fact that the grape is so prolific means it must be grown with an eye toward limiting production. In addition, the vine's very aggressive foliage is a bit like some of those Afro 'do's so popular in the 1970s, and calls for tonsorial delicacy.

At the tasting Grahm staged, one thing was clear: A blend of Syrah and significant portions of Grenache can make for a wine that develops a fascinating panoply of aromas and flavors that are, after bottle aging,

## Getting Grenache

Some years ago at a Rhône Rangers' walk-around tasting, I asked every producer of Syrah, about 50, a simple question:

Do you blend in Grenache?

Most said no. Of those that did, about 90% eagerly added, "But if you know where I can get some, I'd use it!"

Fewer than 7,000 acres of the grape grow in California, and in fine wine regions such as Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake counties, the grape accounts for no more than 300 acres, combined.

Growers are reluctant to plant it because they fear it will not sell, even though wine makers want it.

One aspect to the grape that should encourage planting is that it is prolific, yielding 10 to 15 tons per acre easily.

At those levels, quality is compromised. To make a fine wine from it, the grape should be held to about 6 tons per acre.

Some of the best are from old vines in Australia and Spain. And of course Grenache is the key variety in Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the southern Rhône.

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## Passion

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less like Syrah and more like those of the southern Rhône.

Grahm served the winery's last bottles of a few of the wines, dating back to 1984, but was most candid in his remarks about where he went wrong in the mid-1990s by trying all sorts of tricks to beef up production and gain complexity. He also bottled two wines with synthetic corks, an experiment that failed and eventually led him to screwcaps.

Some of the winemaking tactics proved disastrous, he said (oak chips and organoleptic tannins added to some wines during aging), but he swears by biodynamic influences.

Moreover, harkening back to a recent lead article here on the cooler areas in which Syrah can grow to an

unreal level of depth, Grahm now has sources of Grenache in cooler areas such as Soledad, where he has his Ca' del Solo Vineyard and which he calls "the (climatically) coolest place in California where Grenache might ripen."

Another finding: Since he began to use screwcaps for all wines, the Cigare has kind of benefited in an odd way: it is more difficult to evaluate when it is young.

Obviously there is a drawback to this: A first whiff of the stuff is unlikely to reveal much because the joint venture of the closure and use of sulfur dioxide at bottling has a way of retarding all wines.

As a result, my first whiff of the 2006 (I reviewed it favorably here months ago) was just cautiously

optimistic. Two recent tries, though, proved that the wine merely needs time.

Indeed, any early reviews of any recent vintage of Le Cigare should be paired with another evaluation six months later.

Another benefit of the closure (not to Grahm alas) is that Cigare's typically backwardness helps to slow sales. This means we can usually find the wine some months after release, and it's all the better for the time.

A final message of this amazing event: Grahm isn't merely the man who pens esoteric newsletters. The former philosophy major has a more serious side in which his legacy to the wine world is only partially fixed.

We await his vinous future with breathless eagerness.

## Petite Sirah

Paraphrasing an old line, any similarity between Syrah and Petite Syrah is purely coincidental.

But as so many dark Syrahs are becoming utterly boring, clumsy, and pedantic, our old, disregarded friend Petite Sirah may be just the curative.

Unlike Randall Grahm's blended red of our lead article, which ages into a charming dinner companion, Petite Sirah is the brooding, rustic red that most people don't age, and which seems to work with game—preferably on the hoof or wing.

So it was a no-brainer the day after Grahm's soiree to join Jo Diaz and a handful of other maniacs up the mountain at Hess Collection to do a blind tasting of Petite Sirahs aimed at seeing which wine would pair with which songs on an album of old 1940s standards by a modern pop stylist.

That effort, devised years ago by wine maker Clark Smith (who is an unapologetic Grahmist if ever there was one), proved amusing, if not definitive: A concept that needs a lot more scientific investigation,

which still may not prove much of anything, even though it will be fun.

So we return to the wine, which Diaz lovingly mothers on behalf of PS I Love You, the group that exists to reveal the glories of this rugged beast.

What was appealing most about the blind tasting was how many wineries were taming it by dealing with the sandpaper-like tannins, and allowing some of the fruit to shine through.

The best thing you can do with Petite Sirah, in my estimation, is to age it. I have, and the rewards are there (in good cellar conditions).

This is the grape (if you recall) that has been used to add color if others (like Merlot, Cabernet, Zin) come up short. Left alone, it will bite. Taming it isn't easy, but today's wine makers are doing so in ways that make it a greater success.

What a lovely back-to-back brace of tastings.

## Wine of the Week

**2008 August Kessler Rheingau, Qualitätswein (\$17):** The 2007 vintage of this fabulous blend of Silvaner and Riesling was our wine of the week a year ago. This version (80%-20%) is perhaps even better, with lime, jasmine, and apple scents, a dramatic soft entry and a dry finish. Perfect to sip with crackers and dip, or serve with Asian dishes, seafood, or lightly seasoned chicken dishes. Imported by Vineyard Brands.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted double-blind last Monday.

## Exceptional

2005 **Quixote** Petite Sirah, Napa Valley (\$50): Violet, plum, fresh cherry and deep, concentrated flavors of black fruit. Screw-capped, so it needs a lot of air to open up. Superb balance; a wine that will be better in two more years.

2005 **Langrty** Petite Sirah, Guenoc Valley, Serpentine Meadow (\$40): Elegant, racy aroma of earth, cedar, plums, and blackberry. Air makes it more complex. A superb wine from a property with a long history with the variety.

2006 **Twisted Oak** Petite Sirah, Calaveras County (\$24): Spiced black cherries, hints of pepper, violet, truffles and wild underbrush. Nice balance and texture. A bargain.

2007 **Artezin** Petite Sirah, Mendocino County (\$25): Deep, rich flavors of violets, jam, and a bit of coconut. Excellent wine, better

balanced than the winery's 2006. From Hess Collection wine maker Randle Johnson.

2008 **Diamond Ridge** Petite Sirah, Lake County (\$18): Elegant black-fruit nose; deep and rich fruit/earth complexity. It's so young the tannins stick out now, but it will be great in a year or two. From wine maker Clark Smith.

2007 **Miro** Petite Sirah, Dry Creek Valley (\$23): Black- and blueberry fruit with spice notes (it almost seems as if Zin was blended in) with a soft, seductive finish.

2005 **Ursa** Petite Sirah, Sierra Foothills (\$22): Red fruit, dense, plump and soft. Rather sprightly because of a low pH (3.52).

2005 **True Grit** (Parducci) Petite Sirah, Mendocino County (\$30): Red and black fruit, lean and almost refined, this wine is still a baby and benefits from decanting.

(A "regular" Parducci PS, \$11, is an excellent and balanced bargain. Tasted open.)

2006 **EOS** Petite Sirah, Paso Robles (\$18): Balanced fruit and nicely structured, almost elegant (if you can call any PS elegant!). Good value.

2007 **Artezin** Petite Sirah, Mendocino County, Garzini Ranch (\$35): Jammy and Zin-like spice, with a hard tannin fraction that simply needs time. The wine's stat sheet show it's just a bit tight right now: alcohol of 13.9%, and low pH of 3.62. Give it 2-3 years before trying.

2005 **Lava Cap** Petite Sirah, Granite Hill, Reserve (\$30): Plump red fruit and a soft, juicy taste from nearly 15% alcohol. Great flavors, best served cool after decanting.

## More Alcohol

Wine bloggers on the Internet seem to have discovered that wine has a lot of alcohol. And the chatter about it is gaining some attention.

This publication has decried the rise of alcohols over 14% for about 15 years. Bob Thompson, an old friend and one of the most astute and insightful of all American wine writers, quit the wine business when almost all wines drove over the cliff.

His tipping point was 14.0%. I spoke with Bob the other day, and he confirmed that the absurdity of excess alcohol had not declined, but in fact it was worse now than ever.

As someone said recently, 15% is the new 14%.

When alcohols rise, you need

more acid and a lower pH to balance it all, and few wine makers have the courage to handle it, so the result is wine with a clumsiness that simply defies food matching.

And so it was with a wistful sigh that I saw the first wine column for *The Wall Street Journal's* Lettie Teague this week in which, after a long set-up, she states categorically that "Alcohol delivers flavors."

Sure, and what flavors would that be? The flavors of alcohol! Duh.

I know Lettie and am plussed (opposite of nonplussed) that she would state something so patently opposed to what is clearly evident.

Take a whiff of unadulterated vodka and you'll get the aroma that

wine has at 15% alcohol. Compare that with the purity of aromatic character that comes from a 7% alcohol Kabinett from the Mosel, or from a 10% alcohol Vinho Verde, or even a Cabernet at 12.5%...

Oops, I almost forgot. They don't exist any more.

### Bargain of the Week

2007 **Line 39** Petite Sirah, Lake County (\$10): Lighter in weight, but charming red fruit, fine-grained tannins, and a lilting finish. Only 13.5% alcohol and a superb pH of 3.57. Stunning example of PS at the price!

## An Outrageous Proposal

Many small wineries make most of their profits by direct sales to wine lovers. Larger wineries rely heavily on wholesalers to represent them.

A reason for this is that small wineries, especially family owned farms, can't get wholesale support, so they resort to interstate shipping.

This week an odious bill was put into U.S. Congress that would all but wipe out family wine farms.

HR 5034 is a nasty scheme by the National Beer Wholesalers Assn. (NBWA) that would effectively destroy interstate shipping of wine and threaten most small wineries.

I called Ted Bennett, co-owner of Navarro Vineyards, one of the most respected small wineries in the country, and asked if the bill would put him out of business.

"It probably would—which is their intent," said Bennett. The bill, he said, was supported by "a bunch of wholesalers who don't want any competition."

He said small amounts of quality

wines mean almost nothing to wholesalers in terms of profit.

"Oh, sure, they like having us [prestige wineries] around to give them a little glitz, but all the money they make is with the big guys—wineries that make a half million cases a year and more."

Few wholesalers know or care about small wineries. "All they're doing is moving boxes. How much can you make with 20 cases of our Pinot Noir? The real problem is that we're rapidly approaching a time when we [the United States] will have 10,000 wineries and fewer wholesalers than ever before. It's a bottleneck and...it's pretty anti-consumer, isn't it?"

The House bill would give states such rigid control of alcohol sales that it would essentially mean that government approves of a monopoly for the middle tier of the three-tier distribution system.

The euphemistic title of the bill is "The Comprehensive Alcohol

Regulatory Effectiveness Act of 2010." It should be called the Death to Family Winery's Act.

Navarro, for example, ships more than half of its production to consumers. If that avenue to sales were eliminated, literally thousands of farm wineries would be destroyed.

In 1978, California had more than 800 wholesalers and the country had thousands. Since then, the number of wholesalers in the nation has shrunk to a few dozen, with five giant companies now controlling a vast amount of the wines sold in the three-tier system.

Congress has never seen this as a threat to consumers, even though literally thousands of family farms can't get any representation at all.

Now greedy beer distributors want to remove their only other means of getting wine to consumers.

Query for the NBWA: We know about Coors, Miller and Bud, but how many of your members represent craft beers? ©2010

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