

Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

The Weekly Wine Commentary

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Defining Greatness

In the quest to make great wine, many wine makers have chosen to re-invent the wheel by choosing varieties like Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon.

The fact that the two grapes grow rather well around the world means that many wine makers still harbor hopes of making the next Château Latour or Le Montrachet.

Few have.

And yet the seeming worldwide standard for great wine continues to revolve around these two grapes, even though fascination is growing for varieties that still can make great wines within the context of both the varietal and the regional character that are hallmarks unto themselves.

The question is, I suppose, far more fundamental: Is it possible to make a great wine from Riesling that is not from Germany? Is it possible to make a great Gewurztraminer that's not from Alsace? And so forth.

Or, in other words, must there be a paradigm that is widely believed to be a classic to which others shoot?

In some people's minds, the quest to make great Pinot Noir does reduce down to the question of: Is this wine as good as great Burgundy? If not, some would argue, then it cannot be a great wine.

I have a hard time with this even though I generally believe in its overall philosophical ideal. And one case in point for me is Barbera, a grape that simply does not have a single, defining, universally accepted worldwide classic that defines the

best of its type.

One could argue that Giacomo Bologna makes the best. Others would suggest Pio Cesare, or Vietti. Some would make a case for the fact that the only great Barbera can come from one of the three Piedmontese regions where it has appellation status—Alba, Asti, and Monferrato.

Then there are snobs and cynics who make the case that the phrase “great Barbera” qualifies as a non sequitur since there is no such thing.

And there are a number of strikes against this grape ever being seen as great. First, it often displays a lighter color than some red wine lovers think is essential for any great red wine. And it is often seen as a secondary grape in Italy, where in its native Piemonte it is a distant second place to Nebbiolo, which is Italy's star grape, making Barolo and Barbaresco.

But by far the single greatest strike against Barbera as a great-wine-producing grape is its acid. The damn thing is almost puckery.

Many Italian grape varieties are tart. Barbera is the tartest, and the result is a wine that is hard to like as a stand-alone. It simply can't be sipped while standing up at a reception (most Cabernets these days can). It is best with tomato-y dishes where the acid in the food helps to bring out the fruit in the wine. and where the wine helps to display nuances in the food.

I adore many Barberas since it is nearly impossible for wine makers to obliterate the acid. That means the

(See *Greatness* on page 2)

A New Appellation

When you taste through the Pinot Noirs of Russian River Valley, you get an aroma (or at least you should) that gives you more strawberry and almost raspberry.

The difference between Russian River and Freestone is subtle, and the aromatics are similar. However, the latter usually offers a bit more of the “forest floor” rustic-ness and a light “wild berry” spice character that also can define Gevrey-Chambertin. Not that I would equate the two.

Also, Freestone is a lot dicier in terms of ripeness. In 2006, for instance, Pinot did ripen sufficiently, but the acids were a lot higher than normal and some wine makers were a little fearful that the consumer might not understand the wines.

For these reasons, I am certain that some time soon an application for an appellation will be sent to the government and that Freestone will be its name. See Page 3 for more details.

Inside this issue

Wine of the Week	2
Tasting Notes	3
Freestone Update	3
Bargain of the Week	3

Greatness

(Continued from page 1)

structure of Barbera wines tends to be firm enough to work with a wide array of foods—even seafood. But the flavors usually are strong.

A reason for this is that as tart as the grape is, and the wine can be, almost never is it very tannic. Sure, there can be an aroma that delivers some forest floor herbal-ness, some almost leafy, spinach-y-ness.

But the saving grace of this grape is that for all its tartness, it is not going to harshly coat the back of the palate with the sort of hard tannins that so many Cabernets that are made today do, and in spades.

And yet there is one final “proof” that Barbera can never be

considered, by the arbiters of greatness, a great wine:

It’s never very expensive.

Even with the U.S. dollar’s collapse against the euro, the finest Barbera from Italy (probably it is Bologna’s Braida Bricco dell’ Uccellone) would run \$60. Few of the others ever top \$25, with the vast majority under \$20.

And almost no domestic version ever reaches as much as \$25.

That’s not what you’d pay for a Bordeaux First Growth. And thus snobs would say that that is absolute proof that Barbera cannot make a wine that may be defined as great.

And yet there are those who

would vociferously argue that there can be no question of Barbera’s utter greatness since it almost always has the proper acid to go with food and almost never is so burdened with tannins that it coats the palate with bitter astringency.

Moreover, with its acid as a focal point, the wines Barbera makes can be fascinating when they reach 8 to 10 years of age. Typically they don’t go much beyond that, though a few that I “lost” in the cellar have been surprisingly fascinating when opened at 15 and more.

For me, Barbera can make great wine, and the fact that it is lower priced is a benefit to all wine lovers.

Sangiovese Update

Some years ago, at a Cal-Ital symposium in San Francisco, a number of wine makers who back Italian grapes here mounted a podium to speak of their passions.

All said that Sangiovese had a future in California, and said it may be a bit of time before the consumer sees it.

Then Darrell Corti, the brilliant Sacramento wine merchant, arose and chastised them all, suggesting that their real commitment ought to be to Barbera.

Barbera, he said with conviction, was an overall easier grape to grow,

had more going for it in terms of depth and flavor, and went better with food.

But the financial and emotional commitment made by Italy’s Piero Antinori in the early 1980s to a major Sangiovese project in the Atlas Peak area of Napa Valley and the successes of Sangioveses from Swanson, Staglin, Silverado, and others prompted many California producers to back the grape of Tuscany.

Included were wines from Montevina, Martin & Weyrich, Vino Noceto, Enotria and Monte

Volpe (Greg Graziano brands in Mendocino), Seghesio, Bennessere, Luna, and at least two dozen others.

Problems with the grape have held it back from taking on prestige status. For one thing, it’s an uneven ripener, so some berries are usually green when harvested. Either that or the grapes are left so long on the vine that alcohols are in the 15%+ range.

Also, it is easily over-oaked and it is best made when the color isn’t very dark, which seems to be a tactic few want to follow. Too many of these wines are pitch black and overly extracted with tannins.

And considering its considerable acid, this can be a most difficult wine to like on release.

I love those Sangioveses that do *not* have overpowering alcohols and whose fruit is still more berry-like than the jam/raisin/prune so many acquire with later picking.

Between the two grapes, I prefer Barbera.

Wine of the Week

2006 Fog Dog Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$40): The “second label” of Freestone, this more rustic version offers a wild-spice raspberry and forest-floor character, less sublime and more exotic than the pricier wine. Indeed, I liked this wine just as much as the Freestone, and consider it quite a bargain. Also excellent is the 2006 Fog Dog Chardonnay (\$40), lighter but still as complex as the Freestone (see Tasting Notes on Page 3).

Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

Exceptional

2006 **Radio-Coteau** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast, "Terra Nuema" (\$50): Brilliantly complex with pepper, violet, light strawberry, and deep fruit flavors. Great structure with lighter tannins and good acid.

2006 **Dutton-Goldfield** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Freestone Hill Vineyard (\$58): Red berry and cherry fruit, faint trace of smoke and forest floor; ripe black cherry mid-palate fruit, but a leaner finish than others here. Magnums just being released.

2006 **Freestone** Pinot Noir, Sonoma Coast (\$75): Deep, rather concentrated aroma, with dark fruit, a hint of sandalwood and slightly more tannin than the two prior wines. A bit backward now, and best with air. A superb first release with great balance, but it needs some aeration to open up.

2006 **Eberle** Barbera, Paso Robles (\$22): Bright red cherry and cranberry aromas with hints of oak and faint earthy complexity. Superb balance and lushness. A bit young; two more years will open it in gorgeous ways. But it's hard not to drink it now with food!

2006 **Freestone** Chardonnay, Sonoma Coast (\$75): Dramatic bright citrus and floral notes with a complex layer underneath from lees contact and subtle oak. Like a great White Burgundy with more fruit!

2005 **Dewn** Syrah, Santa Barbara County, Bien Nacido Vineyard, "Special Release" (\$40): From Bonny Doon, this dramatic red wine has pepper, spice and a Central Coast complexity with herbs and underbrush. Tasty and tannic, needing time. To order, call winery at 888-819-6789.

2006 **Le Cigare Volant** Blanc,

Monterey County (\$22): A blend of Grenache Blanc and Rousanne, one of the best white Rhône blends you will see. With a dried and fresh fig aroma and traces of white pepper and honey. Should improve with a year or two more in the bottle.

2007 **Ca del Solo** Muscat, Monterey (\$18): Wild spiced pear and apple aroma with carnations and gardenias in the background. A relatively dry wine that has a bit of residual sugar, so works nicely with spiced Thai dishes.

Very Highly Recommended

2005 **I Quaranta** Barbera d'Asti, "Asia" (\$22): Earthy/violet and tarry aroma with sour cherry entry and very tart mid-palate and finish, but a classic match for marinara sauced dishes. Imported by Terra Verus, Austin, Texas.

Update on Freestone

One of California's most expensive wine projects has taken some \$30 million and a decade to get off the drawing board and into a glass.

Joseph Phelps' Freestone project, which started with a land buy in January 1999, was launched Monday with a small, private press dinner in San Francisco. And the wine is as good as you would imagine.

Yet even at \$75 a bottle, this challenging project is more for artistic and wine quality reasons than it is for profit.

The dramatic vineyard property owned by the successful Napa Valley Cabernet maker is located in some of western Sonoma County's

least hospitable soils. It exists mainly to make a statement and that is: Freestone is California's Burgundy.

If you believe that the greatest of all Pinot Noirs is from Burgundy, Bill Phelps would have the world believe, as he does, that Freestone is the best America can do with the same grape variety. And that it competes with France's best.

Finding a location where Pinot will thrive and produce a world-class wine is the goal of literally thousands of passionate wine people.

The French have always said that vines make the greatest wines when they live on the edge of disaster, ripening fully only now and then. Phelps believes, and plant scientists

agree, that Freestone offers such conditions.

It's defined by its cold winds, fog, and unrelenting cold nights.

Freestone is a sub-region of the southern Russian River on the western edge of Sonoma County,

(See **Freestone** on page 4)

Bargain of the Week

2007 **Espiritu de Chile** Gewurztraminer, Valle Central (\$11): Wild spice, rose petal, and grapefruit aroma; slight residual sugar in the entry, but lovely finish with good acid for pairing with Asian foods. Imported by Racke USA, Sonoma, CA.

Freestone

(Continued from page 3)

less than five miles from the Pacific in an area so blanketed by fog most mornings are downright cold.

Oddly, Pinot Noir was a second reason to plant here. Ex-wine maker Craig Williams and winery president, the late Tom Shelton, wanted a cool region from which to draw better Chardonnay, and Freestone seemed like the place.

But since longtime grower and star viticulturist Warren Dutton had Pinot Noir planted nearby, and since Dan Goldfield was among a number of people making great wines from Freestone, Phelps put in some red grapes.

And then it was discovered that Freestone may actually be too cold for Chardonnay!

Still, Pinot was a risk. And the first four Pinots off the acreage

(2002-2005) were oddly different from one another; most were sold off, a few bottled as Fog Dog.

Freestone, the wine, debuted Monday. It is a 2006, a blend of two hillside acres. One is the 40-acre Fog Dog Vineyard in Russian River, the other, called Quarter Moon, is 55 acres and is in the Sonoma Coast appellation.

It is clear that Bill Phelps, now running the company, succeeding his father, is passionate about the project. So passionate, in fact, that on Monday evening at the superb Spruce restaurant in San Francisco, he was eager to serve the 2006 Freestone alongside wines from four high-priced competitors.

The Freestone held its own and was one three great wines on the table (based on my scoring notes).

The company was so committed

to the Freestone name, in fact, that the company wants to make sure there is no connection to Phelps' Napa Valley label or image.

Moreover, the company went to some lengths to guarantee it would own the rights to the name Freestone.

It had been a wine brand trademarked by Rudy von Strasser of Von Strasser Winery in the Napa Valley, a dedicated fly fisherman

Von Strasser said the name came "from [fly] fisherman's nomenclature. Freestone rivers are free flowing rivers that start small and as snows melt or rain runs off, they grow larger as they merge with tributaries."

Phelps bought the name from von Strasser, and now is thinking of applying for a federal appellation for the region.

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