



I am in an unpleasant mood this month. Recent tastings I have gone to have piqued my ire on an issue that has been brewing for quite a while now. The wine industry is a quirky machine and little bumps in the road can be noticeable. There is something else that has my dander up as well and perhaps I should address that problem first, just so you have an idea of where I am coming from.

At the writing of this column the beloved Boston Red Sox are a woeful 3-14 (the worst start in the club's 96 year history) and are easily the laughing stock of major league baseball. The problem is that there is far more than just one problem that needs immediate solving. The starting pitching rotation has an earned run average of around 6.00, the defense (or lack thereof) averages nearly two errors per game, second baseman Wil Cordero couldn't throw my grandmother out at the plate and Mike Stanley can't throw anyone out at second, the supposedly fearsome lineup is mostly hitting a buck and change in this year of the "juiced" ball, Tim Wakefield is 2-10 since the 1-4-1 start last year and Kevin Mitchell spends way and I mean WAY too much time at the buffet table. I am not a Cubs fan. I am used to the Sox finding some stupendous way to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in a late/post season game. I am not used to being out of the race 17 games into the season. Even the nicest bottle of wine can draw my criticism when I see the Sox getting spanked by second division teams like the Rangers and the Royals.

The real issue I want address is the size of wines that are being produced these days. Wines are having a tendency to get bigger and I am not talking about the size of the bottles. When I refer to the size of the wine, I am talking about the sensation one experiences from the concentration of fruit, oak and assorted flavors the wine carries. Admittedly this problem may be more isolated than I know since the low wages paid by the Edge don't permit me to go on wild wine buying trips. But speaking from the perspective of someone who drinks a good amount of West Coast wines there seems to be a disconcerting pattern emerging over the past few years and most notably over the past two years.

Now, bigness in a wine is not necessarily a bad quality. In fact it can be a darned admirable one. When a wine becomes too big; that is, when the size of the wine intrudes on the qualities that make the wine desirable in the first place; then there is a problem. Wines are not just about expansive flavors. Subtleties and nuances are often times what separate great wines from merely good wines.

Perhaps the most vivid and closest to home example can be found in Oregon's Pinot noir. Pinot noir is the greatest of the wine grapes. Finesse, subtlety and grace with power are what Pinot noir is all about. This wine is meant to have delicate touches that highlight big, bright fruits and moderate amounts of oak. The taste of an excellent Pinot noir should leave you, after each taste, knowing what the flavors are but having a hard time describing the way they combine and linger.

In the '90s a bigger style of Pinot has fallen into favor both with a certain number of producers and with many consumers (thus ensuring the rise of this particular style). Prior to fermentation a wine maker can affect the "size" of the wine with the time of harvest and with the length of cold soaking the fruit gets in the fermenter prior to being inoculated with yeast. After fermentation the amount of new oak barrels and the length of time the wine spends in those barrels will also play a role in the flavors of the wine. Bigger wines will, generally, have gone through longer cold soaks (3-5 days is an average soak time for Pinot noir) and will be in new oak for a longer period of time. This style is the style which is now the darling of the media, wine judgments and with consumers who are buying more expensive wines.

Despite my disgruntledness about the style I actually do find the quality of the winemaking to be admirable, even top-notch, in many of these wines. However, the big flavors are mostly forward flavors that overwhelm the exceptional qualities that make the wine interesting. What captures the interest of people is the stunning level of flavor the wine exhibits initially. The wines are so huge that in judgments and scorings the best made of these monsters will often fare better than a well composed wine that lacks the sledge hammer effect. The well composed wine will be the wine that one would find to go better with food (the real purpose of wine) and be a more interesting drink over the long haul. With Pinot noir the best statement the wine can make does not involve its potential to knock you down with flavor. If you want that in a wine drink a Cabernet, a Merlot or a Zinfandel. That is if Zinfandel still tasted like Zinfandel.

Zinfandel is the lonely child of the wine world. This wine has gone through various stages of production in its brief (by wine standards) market existence. In the late '70s and into the '80s Zinfandel was turned into the pink wine that America loved. White Zin was until 1995 the highest sales volume wine of any wine in America. In the late '80s as wineries' contract with Zinfandel vineyards expired some "rogue" wineries came in and purchased the grapes for the purpose of making premium red wine (thus offering the growers more dollars per ton). Red Zinfandel is by its very nature a big, brambly wine with lots of heady flavors. When well made and with the use of good fruit there is the potential for excellence, subtlety and nice balance.

With the '93 vintage some California producers started to push the alcohol levels in their Zins into the high 14 and 15% ranges. With the 1994 vintage some wineries are pushing Port-like levels of 16 and 17%. This makes for eyebrow searing stuff. While some hard-core Zin fans will tell you that a balance is still being struck between the concentration for fruit, oak, tannins and alcohol I say that a good wine is being bastardized for sensationalism. I mean, what are you going to eat with this stuff and how much of it are you really going to want to drink? It is as if Zin went from light, semi-sweet pink wine right to hide-the-kids-away monster beverage with hardly a stop in between.

My worry is that this stylistic endeavor is a reflection of what is going on with our society. Have we gotten to the point where immediate gratification is such a part of our lifestyles that even things that are based upon subtlety are doomed to suffer? Have we been too easily willing to sacrifice nuance for flash, in the rush to live our e-mail oriented existences? Is the rush for things that are purportedly interesting in and of themselves robbing us of the things that actually make life interesting? Perhaps the big wines are merely a fad and will pass as people settle in on a more conventional style. I worry that they become the virtual reality, the action/adventure movies, the fast food of our time.

Wine can make life a lot more interesting. But it starts within each of us. Books, knowledge, poetry, music, large bodies of water, time spent alone, etc., can all be interesting but they can only make you more interesting if you expose yourself to them and think about and reflect upon them. Wine is the same way. The interest and intrigue lies within the reflection you have upon it, not whether it made you look like the guy in the sneaker ad. In the spirit of becoming more interesting, head on down to the good Reverend's book store with a bottle of wine (and a Bud or two for the proprietor), buy a book and sit around the wood stove. I know that hours of drinking with Mr. Hults made me a more interesting person.

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Recommended Wines for the Month: It is May and before you know it the tourists will be descending like large vultures in weird clothes. It is the love-hate relationship one endures for living in an interesting area. That's right, your favorite watering hole is filled up with people ordering the "Catch of the Day". So what to do? Well, break out a bottle of wine, some bread and whatever else is laying around and head to the back porch. You might want to consider taking along one of these:

Elk Cove 1993 Chardonnay Reserve Exceptional: A Chardonnay made from 100% of the new Dijon clones that are slowly starting to appear in Oregon (holding the promise of better quality Chards). This Chardonnay from one of Oregon's better white wine producers is stunningly rich, loaded with soft pear fruits and shows hints of baked pie crust. A good buy, but limited availability. \$15.

Elk Cove 1995 Pinot Gris: Elk Cove comes up big this month! The first of the 1995 Pinot gris are starting to trickle onto the market. I like Pinot gris and as far as a summer white wine with food it is hard to beat. My rap on Pinot gris is that it often needs food to mellow it out enough to drink. Elk Cove's has a smooth mouth feel to go with tropical fruit and a clean, crisp finish. Good with food, but also smooth and weighty enough to enjoy on its own. About \$12.

Fiddlehead Cellars 1994 Pinot Noir: The top end '94 Pinots are starting to appear. This has been a consistent winner in past years. Kathy Jacobs treks up from California to make markedly better Pinot noir than at the winery in California. Smooth and rich already, loaded with sweet fruits and finishing with spicy accents and a touch of tannins this wine is one of the best of a very good vintage. Again, very limited availability so snatch it up if you see it and it should go for \$30 or less.

To Fear or Not to Fear
by Margi Curtis

Sorting through the family laundry, one of my sons' old T-shirts surfaces, so ratty, I wonder if it even deserves washing. It is covered with rips and holes, frayed on the edges, well worn but still arrogantly sporting its bold red NO FEAR logo. This is the shirt I begged my 12 year old not to wear to school anymore, and he begged me right back to be allowed to wear it. You see, it was a hand-me-down from his High School brother, and it is cool, still somewhat white and his favorite shirt etc., etc. Oh, the awesome power of an absolutely understood adolescent icon, not to be underestimated by those on the other side of the age line.

I looked again at the logo, and pondered the concept of 'no fear', how it probably originated in the buzzing mind of a young male entrepreneur looking for just the right catch phrase to make his fortune in the youth fad market. Judging by how much extra one of these plain white T-shirts costs, I think he succeeded.

'No Fear' could be viewed in two ways, as an "In-Your-Face" sort of statement that carries the "I am young, invincible, untamed, get out of my way" kind of attitude, or the "I am brave, I can do anything because fear doesn't get in my way" philosophy. I have wondered, each time I see these words on an article of clothing, which kind of meaning the wearer wants to project, if either.

We were raised in fear, many of us, in the place where looming large was the judgment of God, the Devil's Temptations and the danger of Eternal Hell. This holy trinity of fears operated as a powerful mechanism for social control. Fear is the biggest weapon around, but it has mixed results.

What if, in fact, we became a species of no fear, or maybe less fear? It has been pointed out to me that a certain amount of fear is healthy, and after all, we are born with innate fears; the fear of falling, the fear of abandonment and the fear of death. Ominous words, those.

Out of these primary fears all other secondary fears emanate like a web from a spider. Some fears are useful, some debilitating. We spend our lifetimes navigating the tightrope between them.

One morning at work, I looked up from the monotony of the day, and into the ravaged face of a woman who works nearby, someone I am only superficially acquainted with. It took a moment for me to register what was wrong with her face. The heavy, frightening concept hit me that this woman had probably been beaten up, and makeup was hiding a lot. Body language and emotional signals made me suspect this to have been domestic violence. She was in shock, but functioning as though the act of buying a soft rabbit for her new grandchild would assuage the horrid reality of her life. She walked away, and I was left with the confusion of what to say, what to do.

Throughout this day I wondered, from the point of view of one not stuck in such a situation, why would a person stay? I am not her, I don't carry her experience or her fears. I can hardly imagine her life, yet I do know the fear of the unknown, the fear of others' opinions and the fear of being alone. I would pin the parent of these as the fear of abandonment. I can recognize that one a mile off, it is an old friend. I ache for this beaten woman whose self esteem barely breaths beneath her physical and emotional wounds.

Later, I am folding the clean laundry. There it is again, the ragged T-shirt come back around asking me to decide its fate. I only set it aside, still oscillating. I could so easily just make it disappear into the ragbag. Possibly it would never be missed. I can't though, because that feels dishonest. Maybe this poor old remnant has given my boys a slight lift of courage in its small way. It shouldn't matter much against the vastness of life's difficult choices if a 12 year old goes to school and his teachers think his mother doesn't take care of him. My own fears are in this mix. At some point one has to let go, and this requires courage too.