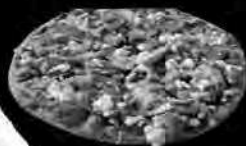


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Wine BY LANCE SPARKS

More Time on Wine

Let good wines lie for a few years.



Last month, we investigated the mysterious alchemy worked by time on wines, specifically fine Bordeaux, the massive reds of France's Gironde Valley. We noted that great Bordeaux wines are hugely (feloniously) expensive, even though they tend to increase in value over time. And over time they almost certainly increase in charm, depth and complexity. Allowed to reach full maturity, they yield flavors so rare and rich that consumer demand drives their value into the stratosphere, beyond reach of most people in the world. Chateau Petrus 2000 must be grand merlot, but \$1500 per bottle? Strictly for the criminal classes, drug cartel kingpins and megacorp CEOs.

Much more accessible are top-shelf California (and Oregon and Washington) cabernets and merlots, which, while not quite reaching the grandeur of Great Growth Bordeaux, can achieve startling depth and complexity. Single case in point: A few years ago, friends sent me two bottles of **Jade Mountain 1998 Merlot Caldwell Vineyard, Napa Valley** (\$30), not a very good year but a very good maker. The back label promised that the wine's "approachable character" would "tempt early drinking, though restraint promises that longer term aging will be well rewarded."

Translated loosely, this meant that, like many winemakers across the globe, folks at JM recognized that 90+ percent of any vintage will be consumed within a year of its release, meaning the market responds well to wines that are made for immediate drinking. Those wines are made to be less tannic (mouth-drying), more fruit-forward.

We opened the first bottle, found it delicious — big, ripe, juicy with black fruits (currants, cherries), round and firm — but it seemed to be holding something back. I stashed the second bottle, opened it only recently; the flavors had deepened, melded, grown richer, more subtle, tinged with woodsmoke, hints of chocolate and licorice, sweet toasty oak, the finish long and lingering. The difference between a very good wine at two years old and that same wine at five (with years to go) was simply beautiful.

Last night, I sat to dinner with Soho Sandy and Peter Poet — perfect T-bones, 'shrooms, baked spuds — and we poured **Raymond 1999 Napa Valley Reserve Merlot** (\$24); the wine was a brilliant color, aromas rich in fruits and oak, flavors of ripe black cherries, cassis, chocolate, notes of coffee, very tasty. But clearly this was adolescent merlot; given even a few years to mature, it would show a satin grace to replace its awkward enthusiasm. Two nights

before, we had tasted **Rancho Zabaco 2001 Chiotti Vineyard Zinfandel** (\$25), blockbuster zin, huge in fruit, spice, woods (lovely tinge of cedar and sandalwood), drinkable now, sure, but in two years or a little more, this wine would write poetry on the palate (from Emily Dickinson, blowing off the top of the head).

Can Oregon wines perform this well? Certainly some of our best Bordeaux varieties — cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc — have been

around long enough now to have a track record. Contact **Valley View Vineyard** in the Rogue Valley; ask if they still offer older vintages of their exceptional cabs and merlots. Or, from the same region, ask Dick Troon of **Troon Vineyards** if he'd like to let go of some '85, '89, or '94. Be ready for deep surprise. And watch the coming years as some of our best vineyards from the

Rogue, Umpqua and Columbia Valleys release more of their Rhone varieties — syrah, petite sirah, grenache.

Oregon pinot noir, says common wisdom, does not age particularly well. Best to drink these, experience shows, within three to five years after release. Lovely in their youth, they tend to fade rapidly, losing the vibrant freshness of their fruit in a half-dozen years or so. But I have tasted, over two decades, some Oregon pinots at 10 to 12 years old that show a velvety elegance that can only be achieved with time.

Not only reds mature gracefully. Germany just released its 2001 vintage, touted as a classic year. Mosel Valley rieslings, in particular, are showing spectacularly. Many of these are made to reach varying levels of sweetness, but don't think of Blue Nun or gooey, sugary schlock. The high acidity and low alcohol in these wines yield a sweetness like no other, delicious with foods, especially Asian dishes, fresh seafood, cold meats, cheeses. We recently drank **Monchhof 2001 Urziger Wurzgarten Riesling Spatlese** (\$24): brilliant fruit flavors of ripe pears, white flowers and slate/mineral purity that chimed like a bell. We followed with a Sundance Wine Cellars find: **Jos. Christoffel Jr. 1982 Wehlener Sonnenuhr Riesling Auslese** (\$36) — dazzling at over 20 years old. The sugars and acidity had held the wine perfectly. In its maturity, it was delicate and rich, silky smooth but still firm, a flavor sensation of rare beauty.

It takes a little money and a lot of self-discipline (I admit being short on both), but if you can invest now and hide just a few of these from yourself for even a few years in a good, cool place then "find" them at their peak, you'll discover why wine stirs such passions and commands such prices. **EW**

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