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Wine BY LANCE SPARKS

Bottled Sunlight

Wine provides solace
for damp spirits.



In the garden, the flowers are melting. A low-slanting rain blows in from the west, from the wind-blasted Pacific surf; I can almost hear, almost feel the pounding, pulsing thump of the waves as they beat like kettle-drums against black basaltic flows. The last of the tulips bend their heads groundward. A single sunburst-orange poppy, opened only two days ago, sags and wilts, sodden and weary. Brilliant pink azaleas drop into a pink mush, like sippy icing on an ice cream cake. Even pansies turn motley faces toward muddied earth and only dream of sun.

We share the dream. I wish this leaden sky would break, or a quickening breeze would rend this gray blanket to tatters and send the remnants to some water-desperate segment of the world, if only for a few days, time enough to shed these moist, layered husks and get down to skin, to roast for a few minutes under a rowdy, deadly sun above a white-blue, ozoneless sky: Burn me, cook me, batter my buttered body, kill me if you must, but let me feel the heat before I combust spontaneously and drift away in wisps of happy smoke.

Uh-uh, no change. OK, some change – hail. Maybe if I sacrifice a chicken? Doubtful. Seems like God/gods might be too busy with war or watching sports. Once again, we turn for consolation to wine, sunlight caught in bottles.

Here are two glints of pale, pure gold from one of my favorite Oregon producers: **Bethel Heights 2002 Pinot Gris** (\$12) is the color of morning sunbeams and delivers delicious flavors of ripe pears with pretty mineral notes and crisp acidity, a superb match for fresh wild salmon grilled on an open fire (if outdoor cooking ever again becomes possible). Or find some fresh spring veggies, wok up a spicy Asian stir-fry, serve with yummy **Bethel Heights 2001 Pinot Blanc** (\$12), creamy body, ripe, round tropical fruit accents with just a whisper of sweetness to complement the tingle of peppers. The folks at Bethel Heights sit on a nearly perfect plot of Oregon vineland just north of Salem, and the wines they release wear their labels as proud promises of fine winemaking and distinctive quality — what winefolks call *terroir*, a “freedom” word (from that country that gave us “freedom” fries, “freedom” bread and “freedom” ticklers) meaning the wines taste like the place where the grapes were grown. And that’s very, very good.

Most California chardonnays make me rant; too often they’re so over-oaked we might

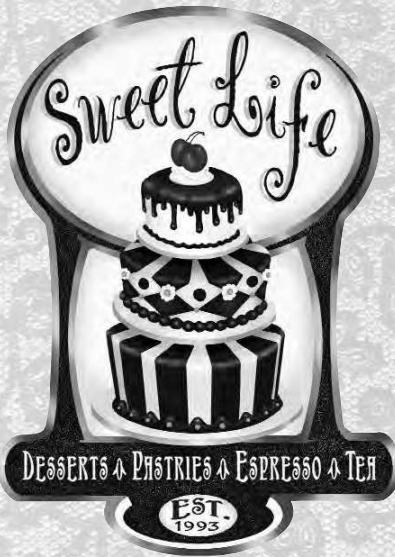
as well save money, drink water and just suck on a chair leg. But lately some of the best (and still affordable) California chards have been showing their winemakers’ restraint in the use of wood, and the result has been wines that show more respect for the chardonnay grape’s natural flavors, which, as those “freedom” winemakers proved long ago, can be quite charming. Case in point: **Raymond 2000 Napa Valley Chardonnay Reserve**, a knockout wine – delicious, flawlessly balanced in flavors, acidity, texture, and a bargain even at this price (\$18). Put this with some grilled (ha-ha) halibut and brighten up your spring (sunless) evening.

Sun comes in colors. In the garden we had a rose called Taboo, also known as the Black Rose, though it was really a red so deep and dark we had to hold it up in bright sun to penetrate to its center. Lor’, it was beautiful — until the wet rotted its roots.

But that rose was the deep, rich color of a deep, rich wine: **Ken Wright Cellars 2001 Canary Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$37.50). Sure the ticket is heavy; split it with friends, and put into your mouth a glassful of deep purple velvet — silk velvet, not the phony stuff — soft but with the tensile strength of steel. And the flavors: juicy, ripe, echoing currants, black cherries and raspberries and an elusive hint of violets. Seamless in texture, mouthfilling, lust-inspiring, this is the stuff of memories, among the best that Oregon can offer.

Also among the very best, in fact a near-landmark wine, **King Estate 1999 Oregon Pinot Noir Domaine**. When Ed King and family bought their property in the Lorane Valley, some Oregon wine pros sniggered that the area was too cold, too wet, got too little sun, had the wrong soil, wrong exposure, yadda-yadda, would never yield any but mediocre wines. This wine puts to rest a raftful of carp and carping. The color is deep garnet, the texture is satin, aromas fill the air above the glass, and flavors fill the mouth: dark fruits, currants, hints of pepper. I could spend a lot of superlatives here; the wine is worthy of carrying the names of winemakers Bill Kremer and Ray Walsh, vineyard manager Brad Biehl and owners Ed Kings’ (Sr. & Jr.) signatures, a wine that can define the property and deliver its promise. Yep, the bite is \$50, the price of limiting yield to a mere two tons/acre. Again – find friends, share the ride. Call it a bonding experience.

Or call it finding the soul of summer while waiting for the sun. **EW**



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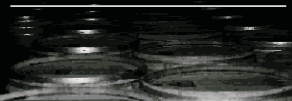
- May 3 : Foris - Southern Oregon star.
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