

Da Lingo d'Vino

Sometimes the descriptions get outta hand.

I was slip-sliding around, tracking Cheapo Vino in all the usual haunts — PC, Sheldon's, Broadway Market, Kiva, Cornucopia, Jiffy, Grape & Grain, even Big Boxes — checking for bargains, post-offs, close-outs, under-priced jewels located through researches in wine mags, newsletters, colleagues' columns, word of mouth from wine chums. Got to Sundance, was lurking in back corners, eyeballing Chilean, Portuguese, Argentinean, South African, other sources still sporting cheapo tickets despite big recent jumps in quality of grapes and winemaking. Just snagged a likely candidate to match Asian stir fry upcoming, felt tug on my jacket, spun around, fight or flee?

Lanky dude, casual duds, longish hair, friendly eyes, sez to me, "Dude, I read yer columns, y'know, 'n, like, I gotta question." I get ready for possible source, possible attack, possible (rare) praise, might necessitate sudden aw-shucks; try to fix a face to meet his face. "Like, y'know when ya write, like, that some wine's got, like, cherries 'n blackberries 'n stuff, well, like, dey don't put that stuff into the wine, do they?"

Sigh of relief; shoulda seen this coming years ago: "Nar, mate," I come back to him, "dat's all jes' vino lingo. See, when ya try ta describe aroma or flavor, ya gotta go to metaphor. Like when you say 'like,' right? Like dat. Wines got good flavors 'n bad flavors, 'n wine biz pros gotta know dat, say, pinot noir's supposed ta smell 'n taste like strawberries or cherries, sometimes wit' mebbe a whiff o' violets, so descriptors 're like code, see? Black cherries in pinot noir, dat's good, right? OK, usually, unless some scammer dosed da vintage wid some other grape but di'n't let on, get it? It happens, but rarely, but then we gotta call it, clue in the punters. Sure, wines're made from grapes — unless they're wines made from other fruit, which is possible, see, 'cause ya can make wine from lotsa fruits, even flowers like dandelions, OK, but winepros also get deep with chemistry, know that, say, cabernet sauvignon, gets a nice zing of chocolate, say, or butterscotch, 'cause of mebbe this one particular ether or ester or mebbe the oak — American or French, toasted a lot or not — that was used, or"

Dude breaks in, I'm just gettin' warmed up, ready to plunge down to the dark soul of wine, comes in, "So, like, it's jez grapes, huh? Not stuff throw'n in, like cherries, t' make wine taste good, yeah?"

"Yeah, grapes only."

"Awesome, dude! Glad ya, like, cleared that up." He fades. Takes me a while to close my jaw.

So (some of) the rest of the story is that wine gumshoes and writers speak this pretty common lingo to each other and to readers, assuming that everybody's hip to the code,



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knows the wine words straight up. Pro wine tasters and winemakers even go through rigorous nose and palate training, actually sniffing aroma and flavor components, mints, flowers, fruits, spices, even stuff like petroleum, licorice, in fact almost anything, so they build aroma and flavor memories, what's good, what's not. And mostly it works and is a sorta more sensible jargon than was used back in the old days (still see it some), like: "This wine is vigorous but not overly aggressive, innocent yet agile, forward without being presumptuous, might emerge from its youthful immaturity ..." and ad babbling nauseam. Helpful? Naw, except maybe for folk geeked on wine for many years. Most folk want info on scents, flavors, acid/alcohol balance, viscosity, like that.

Take this **Gini 2002 Soave Classico**: Retail at \$14.50, so we want to know is it gonna taste real good with that Asian stir fry we're gonna cook up, with fresh crab, baby bok choy, baby zucs and such. Now, the Italians used to give short shrift to white wines, considered them, yeah, better than water but not red so not really wine. For decades soaves were OK, little bit of citrusy fruit, sometimes a little almond note, OK for picnics. But Marc de Grazia at Gini apparently decided that Soave could be really tasty, so put together a bone-dry vino that bursts open with pretty aromas of flowers and citrus tanginess, goes smoothly into the mouth and just erupts with pretty flavors of lime and limestone, some orange blossom, yellow Jujubes, silky-textured balance of acid and alcohol, in a word, wowzers. Dynamite with that crab. Or chicken. Or cheeses. Whatever. Get it? Gottahaveit.

While we're on dry whites, let's linger on **Villa Maria 2002 Sauvignon Blanc** (\$12) from the Marlborough region, New Zealand. Sauvignon blancs can be really nice with seafoods, veggy dishes, sometimes chicken. In France, they're usually white Bordeaux and blended with a little (or a lot) semillon to add fruit and heft. Some of sauvignon blancs can be really thin, acidic, really grassy, not much fun. But this Kiwi wine is beautiful, dry but mouth-filling, flavors of pineapple, banana, melon, tingle of eucalyptus, lemon. YUM, DAMMIT!

OK, sometimes the descriptor lingo also gets outta hand. Paging through wine words from one of the recognized oracles (no names), caught him on a (really good) Australian shiraz, with flavors "like roasted, scorched earth." Check. Sure, I'm a pro, think I've tasted dirt enough to know the flavor, but never had it roasted, much less scorched — is that over-roasted? Clue card is blank.

So, all clear? Unless otherwise noted, WINE IS GRAPES. Flavors, aroma notes are all figures of speech, tropes, metaphor, appeals to analogues, and NOT MY FAULT. And thanks for listenin'.

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