

Circling Hyenas

We need honest wines in insane times.

While the world burns, floods, gets blown up or blown away, I'm here writing about wine. This fact sometimes drives me nuts, makes me feel like I'm playing marimbas in the orchestra of the Titanic.

But it helps, in times of madness and corruption on a biblical scale, to recall that wine is, generally, a simple and honest product that brings pleasure to millions of lives every day. In fact, grape growers and wine makers are among the most sensitive cultivators of the earth; many practice growing techniques that are more extremely careful (e.g., bio-dynamics) than the strictest organic stan-

Bordeaux-like. What a goof. Want an honest zin? Find **Big Ass Zin 2002 Napa Valley** (\$13); it's rowdy, cowboy zin, mebbe not the type to take home to Mom, but it jumps in the mouth with flavors of blackberries, black currants, sandalwood, spice, pepper. Probably best served with sautéed gila monster or raw jackal.

Maybe it's just their attitude, but I really like the line-up from Portland's Hip Chicks Do Wine. Coupla bad girls — Laurie Lewis, bills herself as Wine Goddess, and Renée Neely, Wine Maven — who think wine oughta reach



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dards. And in Oregon especially, many of the growers take special pains to provide their employees — whether permanent or migrant — with fair and livable wages, safe housing and access to medical care. In short, it feels OK to support this business.

Of course, as in any business, wine gets its occasional crook or fraud. Some greedhead will package nasty schlock and market it as the real deal, but such behavior is fairly rare, and the industry watchdogs can impose severe sanctions when they find such malfeasance. In the wine world, we've never seen anything like Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Halliburton or the last presidential election (OK, I'll concede the white zinfandel scam). In wine, we might get the rare weasel but not the hyenas we encountered at Enron. Far as I'm concerned, anyone who heard the recordings of Enron sales reps laughing about ripping off poor California grandmas and did NOT feel outraged oughta get out of the human gene pool. I hope such folks, next time we get a tsunami warning, will rush to the beach to watch the wave.

Being the victim of fraud feels nasty. Consider some of the terms we use: cheated, shucked, punked, conned, foxed, gouged, bilked, finagled and so many more. Part of the nasty feeling derives not only from having been ripped off but also from feeling like a fool (greenhorn, dupe, dope, pushover, mark, gull, sucker). Feels worst when we find we've been japed by someone we trusted, or at least wanted to trust, a friend, a pal, a family member, a priest or pastor. Unfamiliar with the feeling? Been hiding? Well, over the next few months, follow the 50 billion federal tax dollars going to the recovery of New Orleans. The hustle has already begun, and the hyenas are circling the weak and wounded city.

We're gonna need some honest wines. Luckily, some are available:

The zinfandel grape is big, dark, juicy, related to some old European grapes like the Italian primitivo, but transformed into a distinctly American wine grape — robust, kinda raw, sometimes awkwardly exuberant, high in alcohol, explosive in flavors and spice, the wine equivalent of bull-riding. Some years ago, some wily marketers tried to tame the big red, dress it in a new suit, call it

even jaded Gen X'ers, produce a line wearing labels like Wine Bunny Blanc, Drop Dead Red, Sweet Wine. Fun-loving chic, seriously good juice, like **Riot Girl Rosé 2004 Oregon** (\$14); it's 100 percent pinot noir and a case study in effects of temperature. Most folks will chill rosés to near death, losing flavor in the process. Served too cold, Riot Girl Rosé seems sorta blah; well — duh! — let it warm up and suddenly it's a light-bodied pinot noir with complex cherry/raspberry flavors and good balance, really delish with casual foods like cheesy pizza. Check out their site at www.hipchicksdowine.com Find some honest fun.

I admit to a serious weakness for pinot noir; no, to be honest, I'm a documented pinotphiliac, but my tastes often exceed my budget: I'd like me a Ferrari, but I drives an old Toyota. But some Oregon producers are releasing good, slurpable pinots priced for normal people and everyday drinking. **Rachel's Cellars 2003 Willamette Pinot Noir** (\$11) is affordable and the genuine article, with nice cherry flavors, with tinges of spice, smooth but structured enough for service with lighter meats and full-flavored fish. Same goes for **Sheppard Vineyards 2003 Oregon Willamette Valley Pinot Noir** (\$11.50) — true varietal flavors, well-made, honest pricing.

Russ Rainey is one of Oregon's most respected winemakers, guy who prides himself on being able to make what he calls a "pure" wine. By that he means a wine that delivers aromas and flavors distinctive of the grapes and of the place where they're grown. Rainey bottles wines for a range of budgets, but whatever the price they're all straight-ahead, no-jive. **Evesham Wood 2004 Blanc de Puits Sec** (\$11) is a dry white, blended of organically grown pinot gris and gewürztraminer; its pale-old color is deceptive only in the sense that the ripe flavors and aromas (floral, citrus, melon) are so up-front. Marry this to some spicy Asian fish dish, oh my.

About had enough of Tom DeLay, Karl Rove and that whole herd of double-dealing, two-faced hypocrites and humbugs? Pop a cork or twist a cap on an honest vino, raise a glass with friends. We've been punked, sure, but only some of the people and not all the time. We're going to get through this. Honest. **EW**

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