

Sippery Slope

White wine and fighting words

Contrary to however it might appear, maintaining an active surveillance of the wine milieu is no easy task. Besides tapping out this humble monthly column for the occasional bag of peanuts tossed my way by the *EW*, I'm compelled to sustain alternate identities just to help pay our bills. Among other roles, I teach composition and creative writing at Lane and Linn-Benton community colleges, lovely job, constantly inspiring, largely because the students are so often avid and inventive, many of them stunningly talented. You'll be seeing their bylines in the near future; in fact, you may have seen some already (I give extra credit for actually getting published, letters to editors included).

Actually, this column provides interesting lessons, especially when we're studying rhetoric and the essential skills of constructive argument. I can almost always raise a giggle in the classroom when I scribble Latin on the whiteboard: *De gustibus non est disputandum*. "There's no arguing with taste," I translate. Sometimes I follow up with the French version: *Chaque'un a son gout*. "To each his own taste." Another wave of titters usually follows.

The point, of course, is that in matters of personal preference we really cannot argue with the hope of changing someone else's taste: I like the fruity roundness of New Zealand sauvignon blanc but you prefer the steely austerity found in the French version of that grape in white Bordeaux. OK. We can agree to disagree, each buy our own, go our separate ways, or we can fight. Most people, of course, prefer to fight, usually opening with some preliminary name-calling: Idiot. Boor. Jerk, ad-escalating nauseam.

Now name-calling is one of those strategies of argument almost guaranteed to short-circuit constructive discourse. I try to show students that it's a form of personal attack, the fallacy (flaw in argument) called *ad hominem* (Latin again — titter), sometimes called smearing, mudslinging, labeling, or (when it crosses certain legal lines) slander. Nasty stuff, but, sadly, sometimes effective (e.g., "flip-flopper" or "shrub").

Lately, examples abound. I can hardly wait to get back to class and let students examine Jonah Goldberg's recent smudging of Helen Thomas. Goldberg, you probably know, is an editor of the right-wing *National Review* and a syndicated columnist worshipful of the Bush/Cheney axis of incompetence, except when Bush/Cheney wax too liberal. Helen Thomas was UPI's White House correspondent for more than 50 years, since the JFK presidency, and is usually called the "First Lady of the Press." Goldberg called her a "thespian carbuncle of bile," largely because she had the temerity to suggest that Bush misled the American people in his run-up to the Iraq invasion.

But "thespian carbuncle of bile"? Whew. That's a throwback to the Nixon/Agnew era when war critics were labeled "nattering nabobs of negativism." Can anyone expect polite, well-reasoned response to "carbuncle of bile"? Suppose, I ask students, someone

were to come back and smack Goldberg with the sticker "festering pustule of puke" or "posturing panderer of flatulence"? How about "hanging hemorrhoid of half-assed harangues"? Clearly, we agree, that would be wrong, wrong, wrong. Nobody should jump up and brand him "suppurating sycophant of fascist drool," or "whining weasel for wimp-hearted warmongers."

Instead, we should elevate the discourse and politely inform him that his smear of a respected colleague was not very nice and certainly avoid any sort of Cheney-like response, like "Fuck you, Goldberg," or a shotgun blast in the face. America's democracy, surely, deserves better.

Of course, in matters of taste, the gloves come off. Which brings us to this month's wines:

In the next week or two, stores will be fronting first releases of 2005 whites and rosés. The wines will be lively and bright, inviting exploration and discovery. I'll be on the job, but for now you can rely on your favorite wine clerks.

But keep your eye out for Australian rieslings, sometimes found in odd places and at very affordable prices. For instance, we stumbled on **Banrock Station 2004 Riesling** (\$6!) at Fisherman's Market. We worried it might be schlocky sweet; instead, we sipped on a slightly off-dry white with crisp flavors of citrus, fresh pear and some mineral notes that made music with fresh seafood.

Already on the shelves at many stores is **Monkey Bay 2005 Sauvignon Blanc** (\$9), from the Marlborough region of New Zealand. I just can't get enough of these pretty whites from Kiwi-land. The flavors are tropical — pineapple, lychee, lime notes — and they leap in the mouth, just begging for fresh crab salad or baby bay shrimp or oysters or — in a word, gimmesum.

Tickles my tender parts when I can recommend wines from our homies. I especially like **Territorial 2005 Pinot Gris** (\$14.50); the flavors are round and rich, with notes of ripe pears and hints of peach, lime and white flowers. Makes a fine sipper but has enough acidity to stand up to cheeses and oily fish (salmon, yum).

Many domestic winemakers have been experimenting with the syrah grape, mainstay of France's southern Rhone Valley. The results have been uneven (of course) but sometimes spectacular — and expensive. A good, drinkable, affordable and widely available version is **Smoking Loon 2004 Syrah** (\$8): got the deep, dark color, almost black; got the black currants, black pepper, dash of eucalyptus; got the full body, the mouth-friendly attitude.

One more, a quickie: **Maddalena 2002 Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$14), not just another boring Calcab — rich, full-bodied, bursting with black fruits and toasty oak, worth every penny.

Don't agree with my choices? Don't like my taste? OK, tell me about it, love to hear from you. But use nice words. **EW**



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