

A Beautiful Night

Sipping into the New Year

I stared out my grimy office window, watching the drizzly drift of tiny flakes of snow mixed with rain, which froze as they hit the streets, turning pavement into a glistening mirror. On the sidewalks, post-holiday stragglers slipped and slid, clutching at air, anything. I rubbed the scruff on my chin, tugged at my glasses, let my paw buzz the thin stubble on my scalp. I was trying to keep the top of my head from flying off, and the way I felt had nothing to do with a close encounter with great poetry (sorry, Emily Dickinson).



Actually, I was just trying to shake free from an image: Our annual New Year's party, whole crew and assorted guests, house still festooned in Christmas frippery (Kat goes bonkers with lights and decorations), tables sagging with foodstuffs, glasses afroth in bubbies (testing, testing, onerous work),

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clocks ticking down to midnight, Mole suddenly appears, round and pinkly cherubic, wearing a laurel wreath on his dome, red satin sash emblazoned with 2008 across the expanse of bare chest and belly, outfit finished with large-size Depends. He bounds across the room, hugging everyone in sight, lands in front of me, shouts "Happy New Year, Sleut," wraps me in his arms and plants a wet smack on my cheek. I'm not sure how much stemware was broken in the event.

Even now, I can't erase the scene, like a song I can't get out of my head. Wine, try to think wine:

OK, Ray splashed the party with swell bottles of bubbles: **Wolfberger Brut Rosé Crémant d'Alsace**. It was nice pale pink, smooth and delish, with swell raspberry notes. The term "crémant" means slightly lower carbonation, hence a bit creamier in the glass. Alsace is that region in the northeast corner of France which is either French, German or independent, depending on who won the latest war (currently French), so this is not Champagne, but it sure was satisfying, and a bargain at \$15.

Then we raised flutes of **Argyle Brut 1999 Knudsen Vineyard** (\$25), which took us up several notches: A blend of pinot noir (80 percent) and chardonnay (20 percent), color was pale but the flavors were round, toasty and rich, the bubbles tiny and active. Not much of this is left on the shelves (though the 2002, the next vintage, is very good), so smarties should watch for it, and snag all they can afford.

Kat sent out plates of light cheeses, cold meats, shrimp and crab, assorted breads and crackers. Now, let's be clear about two matters: One, good sparkling wines match well with a wide array of foods, and we could, in the spirit of celebration, keep pouring the bubbies and be confident of tickling noses

and palates, but we're also workin' here, so we transition to still wines; two, our continuing theme is affordability, wines for folks with middlin' budgets — yes, there are better wines and, yes, they cost more and, yes again, there are gobs of wine writers in a host of websites and publications who'll gladly steer buyers to the top shelves. We happen to think we can have good quality (flavor, balance, some complexity) and good value (\$\$), so, that said, our appetizer whites:

La Yunta 2006 Torrontes

(\$9): This grape originates in Argentina, yielding a dry white that is tasty, with tropical fruit notes and crisp acidity, and versatile, matching foods from white cheeses to spicy light meats. It's also a lesson in proper serving temperature: too cold, the wine seems just woody and stiff; served cool, though, the fruit emerges and plays nice with the grub.

Benton Lane 2006 Pinot Gris

(\$14): Our neighbors in Monroe have been on a roll lately, and this is easy to sip, slides down just fine with shellfish and other seafood. Just a touch of sweetness rounds out the flavors of ripe pears and quince: good gris.

Kungfu Girl 2006 Riesling, Washington State (\$12.50): Grayson at Sundance swore this silly name covered a "Mosel-like" Riesling, so we looked for bright apple-y flavors with a whiff of mineral notes, sweetness backed by zippy acids. Skeptics, we tested: day-um, lad knows his Rieslings. Be warned for the near future: Our crew plans to contribute our voices to the revival of this noble grape. Too many folks associate Riesling with schlocky-sweet, flabby wines — mainly because that's what was in the market, except for pricy beauties from Alsace and Germany. Well, some serious wine folks, like Harry Peterson-Nedry at Chehalem (Newberg), are turning that around. Let it begin; we'll all be a little happier.

We were just about to lash into the nosh when Mole rolled up in Dionysan drag: "Sleut"! Look who I brung!" Behind him stood Bob Sogge, tall, slender, smiling, looking great as ever, the very guy who's had, as much as anyone, such an impact on wine in Eugene, now a prof of vineyard management in Chemeketa CC's winemaking program. We yakked, then I tapped the tipster in him. He whispered back, "Pfeiffer has fine viognier from Del Rio Vineyard grapes." (Tried to score it — couldn't get a more inside word than Sogge's — but will have to report later.)

Roast beast came out, with two wines: **Protocolo 2005** (\$7), simple but quaffable Spanish red, consistently good value, fine match for beast. **Lumos 2004 Pinot Noir Wren Vineyard** (\$23) was a find, from a fine year, nice price, flavors of dark berries with distinct spiciness, shines with food. Find it, grab it.

What a beautiful night, though begun with a terrible sight. What a way to launch an ominous year. We hope you and yours are safe and happy. I'll be OK if I can just rewind the film, delete some frames.

ew



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