

Palates and Pallets

Tales of fine wine and missing moolah

Outside my grimy office window, rain, in rolling wind-driven waves, blessed the misty landscape of the south Willamette Valley. Despite the pervasive gray, spots of color burst through: early pink rhodies, golden crocus, the pale purple flush of Japanese maples, clumps of daffodils in that ghastly happy-face yellow. No denying it, Oregonians, some time just after Valentine's Day, spring sprang, and there's just no finer time for wine. The lingering cold encourages indulgence of big reds; the first blush of warmth raises paeans to pinot noir; early garden greens crave bright young whites — first-release Rieslings, Gewürztraminer, sauvignon blanc, and, oh my, we should prepare ourselves for the first of the 2006 Oregon pinot gris: Some of these promise to be among the best wines this state ever produced and will send us weeping like walruses to find fresh crab.

I savored these thoughts while I watched rivulets track erratically through the window grit. Then, with a rush of stale air, the office door blew open. Mole, my partner and sidekick, rode the rush. He wore full leprechaun green, up to the pointy hat, down to the curly booties, but he wasn't dancing some happy Gaelic jig; instead, he gestured furiously at the op/ed pages of *The Oregonian*. His eyes bulged, his jaw worked, but no sounds emerged until he managed to squeak, "Sleut", has youse seen dis?!" He thrust the crumpled pages into my hands. I smoothed them. Yup, I'd seen it, Joseph Galloway's Feb. 11 piece. I'd read it, of course, then seen the story disappear like smoke in a gale. I had envied Galloway his chance to write these sentences: "We've now been treated to the spectacle of former U.S. civilian overlord of Iraq, Ambassador L. Paul Bremmer, squirming in the hot seat at a congressional hearing as he attempted, with little success, to explain what he did with 363 tons of newly printed, shrink-wrapped \$100 bills he had flown to Baghdad. That's \$12 billion in cold cash, and no one, especially Bremmer, seems to know where it went." Wow, what a scene.

Mole hopped from foot to foot; imagine a bouncing garden gnome. "Sleut," he began again, "dat's 12 b-b-billion dollahs, shrink-wrapped b-b-bills stacked on palletes, 363 t-t-tons. See, our pal Cheryl sez ya gets 'bout a ton uv papeh per palette, so dat's 363 palletes uv hunnerd dollah bills, andandand he jes' gave it away ta folks! Den da Bush gaves 'im a medal!" Poor little guy, I tried to comfort him, like telling a kid it was just a bad dream, it would all go away. Maybe my voice didn't

have enough conviction. Took hours before we could talk wine.

Finally, I hooked poor Mole with torrantes: "Yeh, yeh, strange grape from Argentina ..." He blinked himself into our tasting lab, went to work, still mumbling: "T-t-tons! C-c-cash!"



We stumbled on the torrantes grape wearing the Lurton label. Jacques and brother Francois Lurton make wine all over the world, and if you see their name on a label you can usually be confident that the wine will be well made and usually quite affordable. **Lurton 2005 Torrantes** (\$8), from Argentina's prime growing region, Mendoza, is aromatic — orange blossoms and peaches — and yields nicely complex flavors with those florals, plus notes of citrus (tangerine) and a whisper of butterscotch. Even better is **Crios de Susana Balbo 2006 Torrantes** (\$15) with even more floral notes and zippy, seafood-friendly acidity. Our research indicates that the torrantes grape is probably distinctively Argentinian, a cross with an obscure white grape and muscat. Seek them out. We think pairing with shellfish might be the ticket for a new sensation.

Weird news and weird wines seem a natural match. We tripped over another surprising white, **Grego 2004 Malvar**, from, of all places, the Madrid region of Spain, not usually a source for memorable white wines, but wine-making is improving almost everywhere, and that's gotta be a good thing. This is not a big wine, but the malvar grape is rare and offers pretty flavors of tropical fruits with a charming, spicy zing that could complement a wide range of foods but especially Asian curries.

Our old pal Beppe Macchi (Beppe and Gianni's Trattoria) steered us toward this palate-pleaser. Now, nobody wants to be visited by angry Sicilians, but it's a fact that for a long time (centuries) Sicilian wines were known as — to use the flattering term — "rustic" (except for Marsala), meaning good if drunk with the local food, in a local restaurant, on a local day of a local trip. Beppe swore, though, that **Lamuri 2003 Nero d'Avola** (\$20) would prove tasty. Maybe after thirty years in the biz he knows something; the wine is dark, deep, rich in flavors of black fruits accented with plums and pepper, but all well integrated, just begging for meat dishes or savory pastas.

OK, gotta go console the Mole. He's still shuffling around the lab, grouching about how if he "coulda just broke off a corner of one palette" he could save LCC, eliminate the Lane County income tax, turn all trans fats into ethanol, muffle mumble. I'm not good on hugs, but I'll try. This gloom's gotta lift, right? **EW**

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