

Hatless and Whimsical

Reflecting on 10 years of advice and good pours

Last weekend, Kat and I attended the annual midsummer night's salon, hosted by pals Sandy and Peter (whose birthday we celebrated). Evening ambiance was nearly flawless: warm but not stifling, dry but not sere (rain blessed the city later that night), air sweetened with scents of herbs and roses.

I laded a plate with grilled salmon, Thai meatballs and various salads and grabbed a purpled glass of pinot noir, strolled garden paths to a table, sat next to an unfamiliar couple. Introductions ensued, and somebody mentioned that I wrote *EW*'s wine column. Couple came back with two responses, first familiar, second startling. First was common: "Oh, I didn't recognize you without your hat," referring, of course, to that old fedora I wear in the column pic. I chuckled, wondered at how I could disguise myself by being myself. The second comment left me agape: "You're Eugene's most whimsical writer."

Whimsical? I thought I grasped meanings: fanciful, somewhat erratic, given to sudden changes. "Whimsical" rattled in my cortex for hours, until I could get home and consult dictionaries. Final results: Maybe whimsical's weirdly right.

Well, today the hat's off, although I owe a lot to that hat; in a way, it's been the muse of my persona as wine sleuth. I wear it most often when I'm writing — seems to have ethereal powers, maybe channels the spirit, if not the talent, of the late, great Raymond Chandler. But no hat today, just me and a waft of whimsy.

Could be I deserve some whimsy for this, my 120th column, 10th anniversary with *EW*. Maybe I should bring out the crew for bows: Mole, Molly, Mouse, the entire Kat Pack, Janus, Edgar Allen Poe and, of course, lovely Kat herself, without whom none of this could happen. The fictional characters have become almost real to me. The real people always were and will remain precious.

Compared to the people of my columns, the characters who have animated our history for the last 10 years seem almost fantastical. Over the last decade we have seen America, our beloved nation, sink deeper into an apparently endless war and fathomless debt. I try to maintain a realistic sense of the world and am not much given to conspiracy theories, though a reading of history reveals that conspiracies have been so common that most of the deepest decisions ever made were and will remain secret, none more than those concocted by the Bush/Cheney cabal of weasels. Still, I find myself wondering if the next election will actually rid this sweet country of the festering canker of corruption that now afflicts her. Doubt nags me: Will Cheney/Bush and gang just surrender their offices and walk away simply because it's the will of the American people?

Maybe I should write more about politics and government — war, famine, pestilence and death. Certainly I never expected to

write so much about wine and food and the personalities who create those aspects of our culture. Sure, I savor wine and fine cuisine, and I know that an awful lot of economic activity is driven by people's pursuit of pleasure in those domains, but aren't there

more critical issues on which a fairly serious writer should spend his/her talent? On the other

hand — and here's some whimsy — maybe this is the real stuff, and all that political claptrap, the smog of greed and power, is just more detritus for daily compost.

I always intended this column for common people trying to manage the basics of civilized living: tasty, healthful

grub on the table with good, affordable wine in the glasses, family and friends huddled together for conversation, maybe some giggles, the essentials of getting through days/nights in peace and modest prosperity. Maybe there's more to life than that — art, sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, fast cars and hard science — but I've put in enough years now that I've come to believe that most of the rest is largely dressing. I could be wrong, but for now I'm stuck in thinking that simplest pleasures are still best. Reports will, I'm sure, keep coming.

On that note, our monthly wine report:

Last issue, we listed some favorite rosés, but, sure enough, we missed assorted beauties. Among those was **Abacela 2006 Rosado** (\$15), a blend of tempranillo (93 percent) and Grenache (7 percent) grapes, yielding a pretty ruby color, aromas of red berries with a twist of citrus zest and, most important, a mouthful of berry flavors — the full Monty of strawberries, cherries, raspberries, even a touch of cran — for perhaps the tastiest rosé we encountered this year, about as good as rosé gets.

Somewhere in this burg, we oughta be able to find **Banyan 2006 Gewürztraminer** (\$12). The wine is produced in Monterey County by a Thai father/son team, Somchai and Kenny Likitprakong, and they must've been striving for wine to match with their favorite foods. Their Gewürztraminer should be on the wine list of any fine Thai restaurant. With Thai cuisine, the wine shines, delivering flavors of fresh grapefruit with a smidgen of residual sugar (2 percent), just enough to refresh the palate, and a tangy, zesty dash of spice that marries with Thai peppers. Can't find it? Try Banyan Wines online.

Want proof Oregon can produce top-shelf cabernet sauvignon? Find **Spangler Vineyards 2004 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$30). At this price, this is special-occasion wine for most folks, but it's worth every cent and rivals Cali cabs going for twice the ticket. Spangler's cab bursts in the mouth, distinct chocolate notes underlying rich dark-berry flavors carried on silky tannins for rich mouthfeel and long finish. Outstanding.

OK, that's all the whimsy I can manage. Special closing anniversary thanks to *EW* staff, editors and publishers, and, of course, our readers: Both you guys have been great. **EW**



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