

PRIZE IN THE BOTTLE

Savor the experience, and the love

Wine is just fermented grape juice. So what's all the fuss and chatter?

There's a prize in every bottle of good wine. And the prize can be very special, one that connects to memory, one that draws friends closer, one that opens experience. There's often synergy with food: Wine makes food taste better, food makes wine taste better.

Now, add time in the bottle. A minor miracle ensues. Horizons expand. Sweet tastes sweeter.

My old *podjo* John Sheridan is moving from Portland to New York City to live nearer his grandbabies. John has scads of pals in Portland; for nearly 20 years he waited tables at the iconic Jake's, earning the nickname Sultan of Lunch. To celebrate his move, one pal gifted him a bottle of **1989 Chateau Pichon-Longueville Bordeaux**; naturally, the hugely generous Sultan summoned friends to taste this landmark wine from a classic vintage.

It's worth noting that in 1855 the French officially classified the wines of Bordeaux into "first growths," "second growths" and so on. The primary basis of the placements was price, and the five "firsts" were (and still are) the most expensive, currently fetching a thousand bux/bottle, more for older vintages.

Pichon-Longueville was and is classified as a "second," though there were (and are) protests that P-L deserved better, yadda-yadda. Among many wine-pros, P-L is often considered among the very best. Current price is around \$300, distinctly outta my range, so tasting '89 P-L is likely once in my lifetime, a huge gift.

Naturally, we gave the bottle all due respect: It stood up for days, letting sediments settle to the bottom. We handled the bottle tenderly during opening; cut the cap top slowly, washed off (in warm water) the accumulated detritus under the cap so no poured

wine would ever touch the guck. The wine had been carefully stored, the bottle almost full. The cork was in excellent condition. We poured into Riedel glasses, sniffed frequently, sipped slowly. The flavors were superb — cassis, black cherry, earthy, woody, very satisfying, a benchmark wine that still showed its youth and still promised more years of healthy maturation. This was a rare experience, savored in friendship, laying down a lasting, poignant memory, the prize in the bottle.

Just a week before the Pichon-Longueville tasting, our dear chums Phil Getty and Mariko Sasaki dropped by the house to share dinner of steaks and Kat's famous pasta carbonara. They brought a bottle of **Broadley 2003 Estate Pinot Noir** which we had given to Phil 10 years ago, on his 27th birthday. Since then, the wine had crossed the U.S. twice while Phil completed his doctorate at Lehigh in Pennsylvania, then returned to Oregon; since then, too, Phil and Mariko added two sons, Lucas, 5, and Quinn, 3 months.

I didn't know at the time of the gifting that Craig Broadley had deemed 2003 one of his "least favorite" vintages ("too warm at harvest," "green tannins"), but good wines begin, first, in the vineyard then with "skill in the winemaking," and the 2003s had emerged as fine wines, "very surprising."

For years, the rap on Oregon pinot noir has been that it will not age gracefully. Many notable Oregon vintners, including the late, great David Lett (Eyrie Vineyards), have presented counter evidence. But the rumor persists (as rumors so often do).

So we opened the old pinot with some trepidation (and great care), finally pouring into Riedel glassware; the wine was exceptional, round and fully ripe red fruits with earthy notes, mouth-filling, lively. Again, we shared a priceless prize, a memory we'll carry to the end of our memories.

These sorts of experiences add value to wine and induce all the chatter. So trust your favorite winemakers to put the prize in the bottle. Savor the experiences, and the love. ■



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