

The Hanes Wine Review, March 2006 Edition

The three of you who actually read Hanes's tasting notes may have noticed that he is no fan of the 2003 vintage in Europe. While, of course, there are exceptions the main flaw which troubles Hanes is that the unusually hot summer created an imbalance in the grapes. The heat caused incredible ripeness, particularly in terms of sugar accumulation. However, this sugar accumulation occurred at such an accelerated rate that the rest of the grape could not "keep up." That is, the other chemical components in too many cases were not fully mature when the grapes had to be picked before the sugars got too high. Why did the grapes have to be picked? Because sugar converts to alcohol and the higher the sugar the higher the potential alcohol of the finished wine, sometimes much higher than desired. This immaturity was particularly true of the tannins in the red wine grapes grown in Europe in 2003, making the wine sweet and juicy as it enters the mouth but bitter and harsh as you swallow. Because of all this, Hanes thought this was a good time to discuss the topic of the physiological ripeness of grapes, "green" tannins and just what this all means.

Again, the foundational issues and problems. Sugars are converted into alcohol during the fermentation process. There are *lots* of things a winemaker can do both in the vineyard and in the winery to manage sugar levels. A LOT. We will go into some of these things but not all (Hanes's fingers get tired, after all). To achieve a wine that avoids too high of an alcohol level the winemaker may choose to stop the fermentation. This will leave some sugar unconverted into alcohol and make the wine sweeter. Sometimes this sweetness is desired. Sometimes it is just unavoidable given the need to control the alcohol. For our purposes here, we shall assume that the issue for the winemaker is alcohol management and not the desire to produce a sweeter wine.

OK, here we are back in the vineyard. The grapes are turning color, maturing, becoming ever so delicious and delightful. Here's where things start to get complicated amidst all this innocence and beauty. Ripe equals flavor equals more marketable wine these days. Concentration is good. Big is always better. What's a winemaker to do?

First, things like pulling leaves off the vines to get more direct sunshine on the grapes (direct UV light has a clear effect on the physiological ripening of grapes). Then cutting selected grape bunches off the vines to increase the amount of energy focused on the remaining bunches and allow for more even ripening among grapes and grape bunches. Cutting off bunches will result in less total wine in the end but the hope is that what is produced will be better and will fetch a high enough price to more than offset the lost income represented in the grape bunches rotting on the ground (hey, free fertilizer!). Another thing to do is push back the harvest to later dates so the "hang time" of the grapes are maximized, creating even more ripeness. Indeed, as the grapes hang longer and longer they will begin to dehydrate, this concentrating the sugars and flavors even more (but the grapes weigh less, which sucks for grape farmers who get paid by the grapes' weight!).

These techniques are employed mainly during what one could call "normal" weather (this said with the understanding that there are warmer and cooler climates where grapes are grown). No great rains, no hail, no weeks of 100 degree temperature days. But, ahh, what if the weather is not normal? What if there is a heat wave as there was during the European summer of 2003? If this occurs then all these techniques could cause problems, as they will contribute to an accelerated pace of ripening that is *not* desired. Now, usually people *know* there is a heat wave going on or expected. Duh. So they wouldn't pull leaves or such. You want sunlight to directly hit to grapes but if the nights are not cool enough to give the grapes a "rest" then some shading may be required. In the event of a major, prolonged heat wave there's little vineyard managers can do but closely monitor the grapes as the heat wave continues and try to ensure some kind of even ripening among the grape bunches. The game now is to try and watch things closely enough to hit the "sweet spot" when sugars are maximally in balance with physiological ripeness. Now, describing the latter is what interests us here.

As we've alluded to, the measurement of sugar levels was the primary factor in deciding when to pick the grapes. Over the past decades more attention has been paid to assessing the physiological ripeness of the pits and skins to achieve greater balance in the wine without sacrificing structure. This has been particularly true of hotter regions where the sugars elevate more quickly and haphazardly. The change in the phenolics (the name for the chemical compounds which account for color and tannins) as the skins, seeds and stems mature is difficult to measure. Compounding this is the variety of berry sizes among the different grape types, changing the ratio of skins-to-pulp and not allowing for a "one size fits all" approach to understanding phenolic maturity.

When discussing the physiological ripeness of grapes it is important to note that the "green" flavors and textures may come from external sources. The primary source is oak barrels, which can contribute up to 18 different phenolic compounds to wine. Different types of oak impart different flavors. And the seasoning of the oak can play a strong role in how much "wood tannins" effect the wine. Whether the oak is air-dried, dried in a kiln, or toasted with a flame will change both the kind of tannins left in the wood as well as their flavor. As will exposure of the oak wood to the sun, rain or wind during the seasoning. So there are some variables to consider beyond sucking on grape seeds when explaining green tannins. That said, the utilization of oak remains but one of the many external influences, with the majority of the human handprint on the wine exercised in the winery in order to manage the level and types of tannins left in the finished wine.

Grape skins do indeed contribute to tannins but their primary role is in producing color. Stems have lots of tannin in them but these days they rarely play a large role in the fermentation process [*because* they have tannins]. So, it's the seeds we need to discuss. In some grape types the seeds can have up to ten times the amount of tannins than the skins. Seeds usually represent 3% to 5% of the grape berry weight yet possess 49% to 69% of the total phenolic content. If the seeds do not reach full maturity there will be an increase in astringent tannins. The term for the tissue change in ripe seeds

which crack when crushed is lignification. This bit of knowledge will never help you again. Physiological ripeness helps add "complex" tannins. If you could magically remove all the seeds from the grapes before crushing (be the seeds ripe or unripe) you would definitely have a fruitier, softer wine. But also a less complex wine and one less likely to age long enough to develop mature tertiary flavors (should those be desired). Complex tannins are good. Thus, the answer is not necessarily to get rid of seeds, stems, skins or any other possible source of "green" tannins but to strive to pick grapes with complete ripeness, both physiological as well as technological (the latter term describing the potential alcohol level and the acidity or the pH, especially as these relate to grape sugars).

After picking (out of necessity or desire), the relative physiological maturity of the grapes can be adjusted during the fermentation process. Extending or limiting the maceration period as well as controlling the temperature of the grape must before fermentation is a first step here. The process called "cold soak" maceration changes the ratio of anthocyanins (the compounds which effect depth of color) and tannins. Because skins have greater contact with the liquid during a cold soak there's more color extracted from the skins. The whole berries here, however, block the extraction of seed tannin because they remain trapped inside the berry with little if any liquid contact. All the winemaker needs to do is artificially lower the temperature of the room the grape must is in, low enough to inhibit the onset of fermentation. This can be for hours, days or weeks.

Once fermentation does begin and the solids rise to the top of the bubbling grape must, the winemaker can choose to "punch down" the solids back into the liquid to increase solid-to-liquid contact or instead "pump over" the liquid on top of the solids, letting it slowly seep downwards back through. Either technique has pros and cons for tannin management. It should be noted that higher alcohol content in the wine helps to dissolve the bitter seed tannins. This can be bad because these tannins are not like dissolved into thin air, they are dissolved into the wine adding bitterness to said wine.

Some people *do* like to remove as many seeds as possible before fermentation. The process of using whole fermenter racking eliminates many of these pesky seeds and their nasty old tannins. This fairly new process can make the concentration of tannins in a wine up to three time lower than without removing the seeds.

The lack of physiological maturity in grapes can become more evident if whole cluster fermentation is employed. This means the grapes are not destemmed and when the grape bunches are put in the fermentation tank so are the stems, maybe some leaves, all the grape skins and pits, the presence of all these adding to the potential tannin level in the wine. This approach adds structure but makes it harder to control the tannins. Especially if they be green. As a result, it is practiced mainly in cooler climate regions when overripeness is less of a regular issue and alcohol levels are generally lower.

A newer winemaking technique which effects tannins is called micro-oxygenation. This process is employed after fermentation and before malolactic fermentation and involves releasing a controlled amount of oxygen through wine (usually in the fermentation tank) at a rate at which the wine's phenolics absorb the oxygen without developing an undesired oxidative (flat) character. It introduces many changes to the wine, two primary changes being the softening of tannins and the bonding of anthocyanins to tannins which helps stabilize color. These changes might have occurred on their own naturally over time. We'll never know because winemakers are impatient cusses. Anyway, because grapes which have not achieved physiological ripeness are more astringent many winemakers want to change this aspect into a softer, rounder texture and mouthfeel. People who buy wine seem to like this (see, Hanes can spread the blame around!). "Micro" does this pretty well, accelerating the maturation process that, again, may have softened the tannins more naturally over years. An unresolved question remains how effective micro-oxygenation is with "green" tannins versus more mature yet still "hard" tannins. Hanes ain't no stinkin' winemaker so he don't know.

Then there are the two big bugaboos of contemporary winemaking, the "spinning cone" process and the "reverse osmosis" process. This screed is long enough so let's just cut to the chase and say these are two cutting edge technologies to adjust alcohol and water levels in post-fermentation wine, either by removing or adding alcohol or water. Whether this is "natural" or not, who is to say. But, speaking to the topic being discussed here, when grapes get super-ripe due to heat and/or longer hang time, to achieve more physiological ripeness one can reduce the resultant higher alcohol level through such technologies. Hence, less green tannins and, after some "massaging," less alcohol too. All this without having to make a sweeter wine by leaving sugars unconverted to alcohol during fermentation. The gods have indeed blessed us all.

The major upshots of all this is that in order to achieve a holistically balanced grape which will then translate into a harmonious, structured wine there's a zillion things to consider. Immature or "green" tannins have plagued winemaking since time immemorial. Each vintage will have its own unique character, a reflection of that year's weather and related circumstances. Should we just accept this as a poetic expression of the "will of nature"? Or, particularly as wine is a multi-billion dollar business, should we mess with the wine to make it as agreeable as possible? Ask your shrink, not Hanes. What Hanes will say is that one should never assume that warmer weather making riper grapes means better wine. But, hey, with the way global warming is going, one suspects that winemakers are intentionally raising the alcohol percentages in their wines to get you so drunk you'll ignore this inconvenient fact...

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This month's big winners... Hanes has been working the night shift lately meaning a lot less vino consumed and then captured for posterity in his tasting note database. Hard to pop the cork at 2:00 AM after work. Not impossible, mind you.

Just hard. In any event, if you like basic little Bordeaux wines with a good measure of traditional character the 2002 from Château d'Armailhac in the Pauillac commune should hit the spot for about \$30. Failla's first vintage of their "Estate Vineyard" Syrah from the Sonoma Coast was really good and reminds Hanes of this winery's original vision of doing only Rhône varietals and not a bunch of Pinot Noirs. Thelema put good wood on the ball with their 2005 Sauvignon Blanc from Stellenbosch, South Africa and the price is decent at \$18 or so. Hanes had Château Pradeaux's regular 2001 Bandol wine a few months ago and was suitably impressed. Their higher end wine, the "Cuvée Longue Garde," may be even better but will need a lot of time before reaching its optimal drinking window. Had been awhile since Hanes had a wine from Prager in the Wachau, Austria but the 2004 Kaiserberg vineyard Riesling Smaragd reminds him he should drink more (note to self: get someone else to pay).

The best \$15 and under picks... Hanes thinks the winery name is officially "Simmetry" but you will see the big letters "Sur" on the blue label indicating a very nice, unoaky Argentinean Malbec for about \$11. The Heron Pinot Noir blended from different regions and labeled as "California" is a decent swill for \$12, especially for this grape which can be notoriously bad at such low price points (hell, even at four times this price). Muscadet lovers luv Pépière and to the delight of all the 2004 "Cuvée Eden" is out and *almost* ready to play for \$12.

And the disappointments... Hanes is unabashedly a fan of Outpost on Napa's Howell Mountain. Even so, their 2003 Zinfandel was below the high standards they have set since the winery's inception in 1998. 2001 was such a great year in Rioja, Spain that Hanes thought just about any purchase would be a no-brainer making the Finca Allende a perplexing drinking experience, particularly as Hanes remembers liking this bottling in the past. Jadot's Beaune "Clos des Ursules" wine is a steady winner but, sigh, it suffers in the 2003 vintage from overripeness and thus a lack of clarity in its presentation. Over the years Hanes has enjoyed the wines of Château de Valcombe from Costières de Nîmes in France but their 2004 "Tradition" blend of Syrah and Grenache was ho-hum. Hard to tell if it is this particular wine or if Hanes has just lost that loving feeling. Even though the prices keep spiraling upwards Hanes still has to get his Chablis fix. With regret, 2004 brought two semi-clunkers from the Vaillons Premier Cru vineyard, one from Louis Michel and one from Verget. Ohh, the humanity! Araujo's second label wine "Altagracia" is simply not that good of a wine but it is a tribute to branding and trading on "exclusivity" that it sells for \$85 or so. Bravo, my capitalist friends!

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Unlike *those other* professional reviews, Hanes only will share what he likes if it is *currently available* in stores for immediate purchase. If these wines are not to be found in some of your local stores, they suck and that's not Hanes's fault.

The challenge. Each month Hanes will try out a new "tagline" for *The Hanes Wine Review* empire. The goal is to sum up and represent The Hanes Brand. This month's entry is...

Tagline #19: "Do they need a wine reviewer in debtor's prison?"

Here's the order in which Hanes humbly provides the wine review information:

Winery/Producer Name
Region of Origin, Appellation, Brand Name/Wine Style, Single Vineyard (if any applicable)
Grape Varietal
Vintage Year, Price Hanes Paid (if available), Alcohol Percentage (if available)
Tasting Notes, Hanes's Numeric Score (on the traditional, yet inane, 100 point scale (which for Hanes truly begins at around 80 points and more or less ends around 94 points))

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And here's Hanes's wine reviews for March!

CALIFORNIA RED

Failla
Sonoma County, Sonoma Coast, Estate Vineyard
Syrah
2003, \$48.00, 14.9%
Opaquely glowing purple core, wide, if more sedate, red-ruby rims, no lack of color here. At first there's a molasses, mesquite smokiness in the nose but this gives way to more white grapefruit, lavender and beef jerky notes, the chunkiness of the currant, blackberry scents broken up some by an underlying sour appeal, overall quite agreeable. In the mouth it's firmness yields a medium body

that while possessing distinct outlines does not suffer from fluidity as a result. Plenty of white grapefruit zest, dried flowers, minerals and leather, strong varietal character. The alcoholic heat does stick out at moments, most disturbs the sweetness in the black cherry, plum, currant fruit. The tannins sneak up on you, fairly suavely constructed. Prolonged, savory finish, lip-smacking good. 92

Pax Wine Cellars
Russian River Valley, Kobler Family Vineyard
Syrah
2004, \$60.00, 14.6%
Deep and strongly glowing purple core, stops just short of opaque, very vivid magenta-violet rims, color not a problem here. In the nose the coffee and butterscotch scents ably matched by beef jerky, salt and florality, angular enough

that the blackberry, black cherry scents never fully accrete and blossom. Full-bodied, if tightly packed so as to feel not quite that expansive. Reveals a nice acidic spine to get your mouth watering for the beef blood, leather, minerally black earth and bark flavors. A bit too fat in the cherry, blackberry currant fruit department to be rustic but the more sauvage Syrah flavors are there for the parsing. Grapefruit and orange citrus much more present here than in the nose. Lower florality, though. The oak a tick lower but a steady sidekick throughout, caramel, butterscotch and coffee ice cream. Turns a tad herbal on the finish which suits this palate just fine. 92% Syrah, 8% Viognier. 90

Ridge

Sonoma County, Geyserville

Zinfandel

2003, \$29.99, 14.6%

Good richness in the ruby-purple color without pushing it too far, stays fully saturated through dark ruby rims but not impenetrable. Plummy nose, not sugary but seems to be no lack of ripeness in the cherry, blackberry scents, initially very toasty but this fades into vanilla cream, blends in eucalyptus, orange peel and some wet leather but too plump for much complexity, handles its alcohol level well. In the mouth it's full-bodied and comes off at first as blockish, plops in there and takes two guys to lift it off the couch. Sweet citrus, eucalyptus and vaguer mint give it some perfume, the oak as in the nose starts crisper but then tends towards the lower end of the spectrum, anchors things. The cherry, blackberry, black raspberry fruit not overly sweet but feels like it was reduced to a concentrate or something. Some tannic grip, especially on the back end. Would like a little more clarity in the components but the bottle didn't last long neither. 76% Zinfandel, 18% Carignane, 6% Petite Sirah. 89

Outpost

Napa Valley, Howell Mountain

Zinfandel

2003, \$42.00, 16.2%

While light enough to see through, a certain filminess runs through the red-purple color, minimal shine, hue remains full throughout. Sugary, juicy nose of cherry, blackberry fruit with a strong prune edge, provides caramel, eucalyptus and light pine and earth notes, ends with a cleansing menthol flourish. Medium to full-bodied, throws its shoulder into you on the entry, not out to be all pals. A bit peppery, more herbal and earthy with even a loamy texture. The sour bite in the cherry, raspberry, red blackberry fruit gives it spring and stops it from soaking into your tongue. Less prune or raisin in the mouth but the concentration is there. The florality is most prevalent as residue on the finish. Wears its alcohol well, only simmering heat. Excellent but needs an extra pinch of something. 89

Outpost

Napa Valley, Howell Mountain

Grenache

2003, \$35.00, 15.5%

Moderate cloudiness add more darkness to the ruby color, more red than purple accents, fully hued all the way to the rims. Cocoa powder, lavender, orange spice and herbs give the nose composure and mesh well with the raspberry, strawberry scents, offers more contour than juiciness, a bonus. Medium-bodied, firm and lean but not as a lack, more a natural expression. Peppery with a touch

of fluffiness from the wild flower element. Strong tannic frame, not much perceptible acidity albeit does present a suitable level of lemon to orange citrus. While not the smoothest of wines, evens out as the raspberry, strawberry, blackberry fruit spreads across your tongue. Clean finish, not punishingly long but that would have been out of character. Fresh and youthful enough, complexity not a concern. 89

Loring Wine Company

Monterey County, Santa Lucia Highlands, Garys' Vineyard

Pinot Noir

2004, \$53.99, 14.8%

Just pure, clear ruby throughout, more primary red at the rims, no lack of color anywhere. Hyper-sweet nose, lots of raspberry and strawberry juice, sweet smoke, some lemon juice, fat and satisfying, even if without deviating from the narrow, predetermined path, hits you with one big flourish before dissolving. Medium-bodied, not overly oaky but as with all the other flavors the toast, vanilla and caramel is huge upfront and then the alcoholic heat sweeps everything aside for the bodacious raspberry, cherry, strawberry fruit. Even the lemon citrus has lemonade grade sweetness. Spicy, no noticeable acidity nor tannins. A fruit bomb that will do what these usually do, polarize drinkers. 88

Luddite Vineyards

Russian River Valley

Syrah

2002, \$29.99, 14.9%

The deep purple color easily reaches opacity, does a slow fade to broad crimson red rims with a tinge of ruby for brightness. The toast in the nose is high-toned and crisp, comes on first but drifts off upwards leaving the bacon bits, leather, white citrus, the light crushed flowers blows some air into the plum, currant fruit scents. Medium-bodied, while densely packed it lacks weighty bottom and thus fuller body. The burnt toast, mint, caramel. mocha oak flavorings last longer here but by the same token the white grapefruit citrus and gaminess are higher too. The acidity is strong enough to fairly run amok, doesn't quite but makes you think it might. The plum, red cherry, red currant fruit gets pulled and stretched like taffy, impairs concentration. For all of its flavors, finishes short. 87

Heron

Regional Blend, California

Pinot Noir

2003, \$11.99, 13.0%

Red-ruby to violet of medium intensity, lots of clarity, even throughout. The nose is herbaceous at first before settling into coffee/chocolate notes, attenuated florality, serves up a measured portion of strawberry, red cherry, raspberry fruit scents, lemon citrus, there's a good deal of physical/textural lift but not quite filled out with scents. Light to medium-bodied, smooth enough presentation, doesn't sink in but covers. Light spray of warm caramel on that strawberry, raspberry fruit, even as it adds in some tannic and acidic structure takes pains to remain user friendly and bright. Develops a pleasingly full bottom, anchors it well. Holds its own in the ever dangerous sub-\$15 Pinot category. Grapes sourced from Mendocino County, Carneros. 87

Araujo
Napa Valley, Altagracia
Blend
2002, \$85.00, 14.8%

More black-red than violet in the core, solid brick red rims, not particularly lively. Super-sweet nose of caramel, coffee, mocha and concentrated, sugary cherry, blackberry, raspberry fruit, maybe a floral swipe but nothing really else there. Full-bodied, just about an exact replica here in the mouth, nothing but oak-derived butterscotch, caramel, coffee, cocoa flavors and cherry, blackberry fruit that has been squeezed for juice to within an inch of its life. Now, these flavors are vivid but they are homogeneous to bore fairly swiftly. The tannins are uneven and prevent any fluidity in the mouth feel. Not much to do but finish your glass and hope for something better next time. Approximately two-thirds Cabernet Sauvignon, remainder Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Merlot. 87

FRANCE RED

Clos des Papes
Rhône, Châteauneuf-du-Pape
Blend
2003, \$83.99, 14.5%

Fairly light core of ruby-purple, transitions to the rims seamlessly, trading the purple for red. Very sweet nose but not jammy, more like pure raspberry, blackberry juice, some spice and game notes, the underlying florality and cocoa aspects too delicate and the alcoholic fumes obscure them. Medium-bodied, very supple and integrated, appears entirely as a single object in your mouth. That said, there is a coarseness underneath the sweetly ripe and polished raspberry, strawberry, red cherry fruit which does shorten it some, especially as it is not a big wine in terms of mouth weight. The flowers and chocolate fare better here albeit the spice and earthiness more subdued. A dried garden herb component appears and is welcome. Drinking very well out of the gate, the strong drying sensation on the finish brings up the need to consider the tannins which are not green or unripe but not quite even either. Whole lot of perfume lift as it ends. Can't imagine it making very old bones so why wait? 65% Grenache, 20% Mourvèdre, 10% Syrah, 5% Counoise. 91

Pradeaux, Château
Provence, Bandol, Cuvée Longue Garde
Mourvèdre
2001, \$52.99, 15.5%

Vivid purple core, very deep and inviting, bright red-magenta rims, broad without any loss of hue intensity. Wet wool and animal skin play a big part of the nose, wood smoke, wet wildflowers, leather as well as dense and compact currant, cherry fruit, has enough sheer power to convince you there's some complexity down the road. Full-bodied, the wet wool aspect prominent, clings tenaciously to your tongue like a wet towel. Mint, flower water, orange spice, vanilla cream, leather, layers and layers push down on the palate. Still, incredibly smooth for its weight with abundant currant, red plum, blackberry fruit. In the end a touch too inert today, a wine best enjoyed many years from now. 90

Armailhac, Château d'
Bordeaux, Pauillac
Blend
2002, \$29.99, 12.5%

Enough black in the purple core to take it over into opacity, heavy set crimson rims, quite dense. No lack of stuffing in the nose, voluptuous currant, cherry fruit, fresh cedar, coffee grinds, mocha chips, a brush of floral scrub, all but entirely unevolved. Medium-bodied, lean in the sense of little extraneous offered. The tannins have settled in for the long haul, do a very good job of focusing the richness in the currant, cherry fruit. Dryness in the palate restrains the oaky coffee and chocolate tones. The florality higher here, a curious partner for its stony earth foundation. Keeps its weight and forward momentum excellently through the finish. A nice "throwback" style claret, good roughness. 70% Cabernet Sauvignon, 22% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Franc, 3% Petit Verdot. 89

Paris, Domaine Vincent
Rhône, Saint-Joseph
Syrah
2004, \$22.99, 12.5%

Clear red-ruby to violet, color turns to magenta to make razor thin rims. Sulfur and peanut notes interfere with the nose's expressivity, however nicely floral and leather, grass and a laser beam of red cherry scents, no unnecessary complications. Medium-bodied, feels tacky if not particularly because of tannins. Has a big lemon/orange citrus bite, doles out grass and herbs like they're free. Has acidity in spades, none of that so-called feminine Saint-Joseph stuff here. Biting, never sinks into the tongue. Some florality but not going to thrive in this dog-eat-dog world. The minerality really comes through on the finish, you almost sense some mushroom notes too. Has a very distinct personality, sets itself apart from expectations. 88

Marcoux, Domaine
Rhône, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Cuvée Éphémère
Blend
2003, \$62.99, 15.0%

Dark garnet core, lots of clarity with average shine, minimal difference to the rims, maybe a bit more red-garnet. The nose definitely has its jammy strawberry, raspberry, red cherry side, still fairly light and flighty, simple but at least there's no green notes, nothing else to comment on beyond the fruit. In the mouth it is medium-bodied, seems almost embarrassed that anyone would find any complexities in it. Again, there's none of those green tannins nor herbaceousness in it, a distinct advantage, but not going to offer any intellectual stimulation. The tannins it does have are doused in sweetness, the acidity average. While it lacks natural flow, doesn't seem artificial either. Just blurry. 90% Grenache, 10% Syrah. 88

Mabileau, Frédéric
Loire, Saint-Nicolas de Bourgueil, Les Rouillières
Cabernet Franc
2004, \$15.99, 12.5%

Clear ruby-violet in color, full to the rims where magenta comes into the mix, bright surface shine. Brisk, penetrating nose of stone, pebbles, bell pepper, leather, smoke and some dried beef, the cherry, blackberry fruit a lean undercurrent. Medium-bodied, there's above average bite here without overplaying the herbaceousness, minor bell pepper displayed. Shale, crushed stone and dusty soil pair up with white grapefruit to keep it agile and in motion. The acidity is broad and deep and the prime mover, the tannins a distant second. Lots of snap in the cherry, red currant fruit, like the skin was just broken. Your mouth

continues to water through the finish, tar and tobacco residue its final calling cards. 88

Jadot, Domaine Louis
Burgundy, Beaune, Clos des Ursules
Pinot Noir
2003, \$54.99, 13.5%

Perfectly clear ruby-violet color, entirely consistent to the rims, dark and full. Plummy nose, happily overripe cherry and blackberry fruit, brawny milk chocolate element, mixes in orange spice and tea leaves, too overstuffed to provide any more clarity in its scents. Full-bodied, has a thick layer of tannins in there but not really enough to chain up the sweet juiciness in the cherry, plum, blackberry fruit. As in the nose, big enough that the other flavors get blurry. That said, there is some earth, orange peel, herbs and dried violets. The milk chocolate/cocoa thing going strong throughout, a tad toasty too. There's depth to the fruit, no overt greenness in the tannins yet little elegance, making it more of a simple quaff, albeit of a pedigree. 88

Pacalet, Christophe
Beaujolais, Côte de Brouilly
Gamay Noir
2004, \$21.99, 13.0%

Vague filminess in the pink magenta to ruby color, fades quite a bit near the rims. The nose overflows with dried herbs, licorice, cut green grass, lemon zest, dry earth, its overall dusty demeanor clips the red cherry, raspberry scents with authority. Medium-bodied, stern entry with guns of tannins and acidity 'a blazing. As in the nose this kind of wastes the ripe core of the cherry, raspberry, blackberry fruit, it can't spread out. Earthy and noticeably herbaceous, makes no apologies for its country roots. Momentary touch of cocoa, then unadorned lemon peel and stone. Rough hewn finish with no lack of bite. Tough love but love nonetheless. 87

Valcombe, Château de
Rhône, Costières de Nîmes, Tradition
Blend
2004, \$11.99, 14.0%

Very attractive clear and dark ruby-violet core, just lightens a few degrees to glowing magenta-tinged ruby rims. The 14% alcohol shows in the nose, herbal with well-massaged cherry, blackberry fruit and not much else to say for itself. Full-bodied but more focused and trim in the mouth, still herbaceous without getting green, tannins tend to cake tongue with a wet dust sensation. The primarily cherry fruit split between red currant and raspberry for the remaining half. Soft nuances of lemon, garrigues and earth. Square, semi-attenuated finish. What most interests you about it is how it tastes decent while remaining as non-descript as non-descript can get. 70% Syrah, 30% Grenache. 85

Soumade, Domaine la
Rhône, Vin de Pays de la Principauté d'Orange
Cabernet Sauvignon
2003, \$12.99, 14.0%

Excellent clarity, the violet color infused palpably by a brick red edge, turns to crimson at the rims. Mint and buttered toast break first into the nose, a swirl of menthol and flowers, cocoa powder, raw beef, orange marmalade, the smoked cherry, currant scents come with a prune touch, the alcohol shows through a little too much. Full-bodied, a bit off kilter, those 2003 unripe tannins in full force as is the exceedingly obvious high alcohol. Mocha/cocoa and

toast present most of the oak flavors, the cherry, blackberry fruit is sweet but not juicy enough to truly soothe the palate, ditto for the white grapefruit nuances. The rough hewn feel extends through the mid-palate and finish. Not an easy wine to chug. 84

FRANCE WHITE

Michel & Fils, Domaine Louis
Burgundy, Chablis, Montée de Tonnerre
Chardonnay
2004, \$49.99, 12.5%

Semi-translucent thickness to the yellow-brown hay color, turns clearer upon closer inspection, fades a good deal at the rims. Musky, not musty, nose of flower water, orange zest, mint and quieter stone, the pineapple, apricot, green apple scents stand erect, shows more flint and chalk as it warms. Medium-bodied and rock solid, figuratively and literally when you factor in the amount of stone, flint, chalk, metal accents it has. Real zesty and sour 'n' sweet lemon and tangerine citrus, big part of the show. Offers a layer cake of acidity, biting and dries in a way which helps to concentrate its weight. The earthiness contributes to growing smokiness and oiliness as it sits in your mouth. Given its overall feel, the apricot, peach, red apple, pineapple fruit come across as soft and pliant, in many regards a welcome turn of events. Wonderful grip through the finish. 91

Ecu (Guy Bossard), Domaine de l'
Loire, Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie, Expression
d'Orthogneiss
Muscadet
2004, \$16.99, 12.0%

Straightforward green-gold hay in color, on the whole clear if a touch dull. Big nose primarily of lemon/lime juice, plenty of stoniness without the chalky dust, the peach and apricot scents come through loud and clear emphasizing the sweetness, honeyed too, rolls on and on. Full-bodied, exceedingly strong in structure, feels immobile, this in contrast to the rich, deeply concentrated honey as well as tangerine, lime, lemon cavalcade. Didn't get cheated when they handed out the pear, peach, apricot, pineapple fruit, sweet and juicy. To its credit also has wicked strong acidity, throws one mean punch. The stone, oil elements remain cloaked and hidden in the background by all that primary juiciness. Extended finish. Quite approachable, will impress a broad selection of tasters but perhaps not the purists. 91

Pépière, Domaine de la
Loire, Muscadet de Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie, Cuvée Eden,
Cuvée Vieilles Vignes
Muscadet
2004, \$11.99, 12.0%

Has a deep brown-yellow hay color which inches towards amber and possesses a fair degree of translucency, strong rims. Heavy nose, semi-inert, evokes uncut lemons, a puddle of oil and seashells, sprig of mint laid across the subdued, pear, apple fruit scents. Full-bodied, broad yet with an airy denseness, like looking up at a skyscraper, it's big and THERE but also beyond one's grasp. The acidity clamps more than bites, little edge but no denying the dryness. The chalk, crushed seashell, stone thing leads the way, followed on by lemon peel and something like a light herbaceousness. The peach, pear, apple fruit not a major player, there almost by default. Pretty tight right now,

makes it tough to gauge its future development trajectory.
90

Villard, François
Rhône, Vin de Pays des Collines Rhodaniennes, Les
Contours de DePoncins
Viognier
2004, \$29.99, 13.5%
Washed out yellow straw color, dull but not quite filmy,
lighter at the rims. Honeysuckle, orange blossom and mint
infuse the nose, tangerine zest, touch of something toast-
like, fully ripe apricot and pear fruit scents. Medium to full-
bodied, lots of flesh but firm, not muscular per se. Very
spicy, perhaps too much so, creates an appearance of
heat. The orange to lime citrus is tart and more sharp
than juicy. More rose petal here, mixed in with the
honeysuckle. Compact apricot, peach, pear, melon fruit,
falls off near the finish, leaving the spice dominant.
Average acidity for the type, clings to the tongue more
than lifts. A mouthful, for sure. 89

Viking, Domaine du
Loire, Vouvray, Tendre
Chenin Blanc
2002, \$20.99, 12.0%
Just about zero color, fully transparent with only the
barest tinge of hay, decent shine though. Very smoky, oily
nose of chalk and schist-like tones, borderline salty with
salami notes, odd counterpoint to the sweet green melon,
pear, apricot scents, shifts around often. Medium-bodied,
in the mouth the honey and paste-like apricot, peach,
nectarine fruit is decisively ascendant. Strong foundation
of acidity prevents excessive sweetness and brightens
appreciably the tangerine, pink grapefruit citrus. Displays
none of the saltiness here but does present the stone and
chalk dust. Maintains clear contours throughout, good job
of letting you feel its superstructure. Still has some sparkle
left as it finishes. Well done. 89

Giachino, Frédéric
Savoie, Roussette de Savoie
Atesse
2004, \$14.99, 12.0%
Soft yellow color offered, if vastly transparent, nothing
unusual about the degree of shine. Easygoing nose, fluid in
spite of the attractive ripeness in the pear, peach, yellow
apple fruit and candied oranges, some wet slate and oil
tones. Medium-bodied, tart and crisp with a razor sharp
acidic bite. The latter brings out a certain herbaceous
leafiness but also plays up the orange, lemon citrus. More
earthy than stony, more like a bag of topsoil. Gets super-
dry so quickly that the apple, pear, apricot fruit never gets
to really shine. Momentary waft of rose water as it passes
through the mid-palate but it is the citrus which lingers
most. Quite lively and eager to turn up the lights. 88

Verget, Maison
Burgundy, Chablis, Vaillons
Chardonnay
2004, \$29.99, 13.0%
Light yellow color, not transparent due to its sparkling
clarity more so just lacks hue, especially around the rims.
Angular nose, an initial burst of toast dissipates swiftly into
lemon oil, wet stone, motor oil and a mutter of florality and
mint, the pear, apricot fruit is solid if unspectacular.
Medium-bodied, as in the nose it's toasty and spicy at first,
the lemon akin to lightly sweetened lemonade, some pink
grapefruit too. White minerals and chalk there but not

really enough to get dusty. Instead very vibrant, if in an
empty-minded way. Ripe but not overripe apricot, peach,
red apple fruit pushes getting sweet but has sufficient
acidity to hold things in check. Gathers itself for a big push
on the finish but by then may be too little too late, just lacks
tight weave in the fabric. 87

Michel & Fils, Domaine Louis
Burgundy, Chablis, Vaillons
Chardonnay
2004, \$46.99, 12.5%
Pale white to yellow straw color, quite reflective surface,
some green tinges in its core but the hue empties out at
the rims, mostly transparent. While there's some
creaminess in the nose, there's also freshness from the
stream water, white stone and lemon peel aspects, the
pear and peach scents mainly skin and pit, ends on a spicy
kick. In the mouth it's medium-bodied and the spiciness is
more upfront as is the creamy feel in the orange/lemon
citrus. The stoniness is solid in form, no real dustiness, not
an expressive element. Fair core of peach, apricot, pear
fruit but without a lot of juiciness. The acidity is strong but
doesn't contribute much to balance nor integration. Very
nice but that's it. 87

Meyer, Domaine Julien
Alsace, Heissenberg
Gewürztraminer
2000, \$17.99, 12.5%
Mild amber touch to the basic golden color, from the side
view lightens quite a bit, more layered than shiny, already
producing tartrate crystals. Honeyed nose but not to the
point of a poached feel in the apricot, peach scents, a
floral grazing, coconut too, light stoniness helps it develop
moderate cut. In the mouth it is medium-bodied, very firm
and surprisingly dry, strong contours keep the
concentration during the attack. Has apricot, peach,
melon fruit, but of a tenuous grip. The spiciness comes out
during the mid-palate. No real nuttiness nor florality, more
stones and orange pith. Although most of the flavors gone
by the finish, it has a vibrating mouth feel which extends it
some. 87

ITALY RED

Ca'ntele, Azienda Viticola
Puglia/Apulia, Salento
Primitivo
2003, \$9.99, 13.5%
Dark but mostly clear ruby-violet colored core, more of a
redder ruby around the rims. Interesting initial blast of
black pepper and white grapefruit in the nose, followed up
by minor broken stone and pressed flower notes,
adequately ripe cherry and blackberry scents, there's
something in there that smells like grandma's bedroom
closet. Medium-bodied, the acidity wastes little time in
framing things, welcome because you sense it could turn
awful sweet awful fast otherwise. Presents enough
intertwined earth, straw, stone flavors to lend gravity to
the black raspberry, cherry fruit. The lemon to white
grapefruit citrus acts as subtle accompaniment, perks it
up some. Offers a great deal more acidity than tannins, in
keeping with the citrus tip. Honest like a baguette,
enjoyable enough on its own but elevates appreciably with
something else. 87

Montevervine

Tuscany, Pian del Ciampolo

Blend

2002, \$20.99, 12.5%

Very light and crystal clear cough syrup red to rose petal in color, fades to transparency at the rims. Smoky nose of cracked leather, tar, roasted cherry and strawberry fruit, orange peel, light liqueur-like feel, very pure and clean. Light-bodied, very strong tannins, just about too much for the pale cherry, red raspberry fruit to support. Garden herbs, licorice, dried oranges, brown earth and some leather but this too suffers from the parching tannins. The citrus is the last thing you can taste, perhaps because the acidity becomes more evident at the end. Either clamps down or empties out, hard to tell which, but nothing left at the finish. Mostly Sangiovese, remainder Canniolo. 84

GERMANY WHITE

Wittmann, Weingut

Rheinhessen, QbA Trocken AP #6

Scheurebe

2004, \$22.99, 12.5%

Average yellow straw color, dense enough to effect its clarity, hue persists well to the rims. Soft vanilla cream plays with the more angular pineapple, papaya, peach notes in the nose, herbs and indistinct citrus follow next, waft of white smoke adds an extra embellishment. Medium-bodied, the acidity is not razor sharp, more like a machete that needs a second hack to get all the way through. Potently zesty pineapple, papaya, apricot, nectarine fruit, nothing soft about it. Matched well by pink grapefruit and tangerine citrus component, both sweet and sour. As in the nose, the stoniness is there but doesn't come close to matching the verve of the fruit. Compact, doesn't stretch out much on the finish but you would never call it short either. Has swagger. 91

AUSTRIA WHITE

Prager, Weingut

Wachau, Dürnsteiner, Kaiserberg, Smaragd

Riesling

2004, \$37.99, 13.0%

Sparkly green-gold color in the core, zero hue left at the rims, brightly reflective. Nose drips with pink grapefruit, lemon and tangerine, ably followed on by chalk and mineral dust, lightly floral with some apple, pear, peach fruit but the emphasis squarely on the citrus and soil. Medium-bodied, noticeably linear and tight, a laser beam through the mouth, big charge in the acidity. The lemon, lime citrus zest really intense, scrubs your mouth raw. More smoke and oil shades here, adds dimension to the stone, pebble, chalk element. The peach, pear, apricot fruit is understated while a constant presence. Lots of power under the hood, keeps it revving through an extended finish. This one bites back. 91

Knoll, Weingut Emmerich

Wachau, Loibner, Ried Kreutles, Smaragd

Grüner Veltliner

2004, \$33.99, 13.5%

Deep yellow brass color, just about devoid of shine but the hue is consistent to the rims. Well-stuffed and effusive nose of mint, floral oil, white stone and quartz in addition to the energetic pineapple, nectarine, peach fruit scents, forceful not pushy. Medium-bodied yet possesses great grip and traction on the tongue, derives a lot of extra

presence from this clinging ability. Spicy with a more subdued feel to the pineapple, green apple, peach, nectarine fruit. This allows the underlying earthiness and stoniness to become a bigger factor as well as not fight the strong, if bluntish, acidity. The lower florality in the mouth hurts any lift and leaves things close to the ground. Indistinct citrus but semi-sweet. Very full and extended finish. 89

SPAIN RED

Allende, Finca

Rioja, Allende

Tempranillo

2001, \$23.99, 13.5%

Unblemished dark crimson to purple in color, more of a gentle glowing magenta-ruby at the rims. The plumminess in the nose gives a jammy quality to the cherry, blackberry scents and makes it less complex, dashes of clove, orange spice and vanilla powder but not much else, sinks in well. Medium-bodied, here the fruit takes it a step further into prune, raisin territory, the remainder mostly plum and black cherry. The acidity tries to shave some fat away to no avail. Cinnamon, cedar, orange citrus and a light greens streak makes up the rest of the show. Not swiftly paced but consistent, gets to the finish without stumbling. Sour bite at the end freshens it slightly. Makes momentary movements towards respectable pedigree but in the end just a bit overpriced. Mostly Tempranillo with some Graciano, Mazuelo, Garnacha. 87

SPAIN WHITE

Muga, Bodegas

Rioja, Barrel Fermented

Blend

2004, \$12.99, 13.5%

Plain yellow straw in color but even and fully hued throughout, average shine. Floral, minty, bubblegum nose, they say "barrel fermented" on the label and they mean it, creamy lime pie feel to it, nothing wimpy in the pear, apple, peach scents but not fruity, florality lingers most. Medium-bodied and crisp, here the oak comes across as a sour influence, your mouth puckers which heightens the lime and lemon citrus. More toast than cream, burnt notes trump vanilla. Moments of herbaceousness but they don't persist. The pear, apple, pineapple, apricot fruit more sinew than juice. Lasts through the finish mostly as a sticky residue on your cheeks. While not altogether distinct not a bad wine at all there's no reason not to pull the cork. 90% Viura, 10% Malvasia. 87

SOUTH AFRICA RED

Observatory (Tom Lubbe), The

Swartland, Syrah/Carignan

Blend

2003, \$37.99, 12.5%

The reddish purple color caught between darkness and transparency, depends a lot on angle and lighting, more ruby to dark magenta along the rims. There's a fragility to the nose like the flowers are dried and could turn to powder, even the red earth, leather and garden herbs show a delicate reserve, this has the more robust cherry, black currant fruit to do most of the heavy lifting. Medium-bodied, while it keeps the subdued tenor in the mouth there's more richness and breadth. The florality in particular has a fluffier lavender, garrigues feel. Sweet

tangerine citrus combine with sweet grill smoke to give it added appeal. Very little oak influence, relies once more on the round openness of the raspberry, red cherry, blueberry fruit. Touch of acidity lends it needed tartness, soft tannins. Less earthiness here, maybe a slight lift in the stoniness. Admirable balance through the finish. 79% Syrah, 21% Carignan. 89

SOUTH AFRICA WHITE

Thelema Mountain Vineyards
Stellenbosch
Sauvignon Blanc
2005, \$17.99, 14.0%

Glassy yellow straw, has a bright surface with an attractive layering below, green flecks develop along the rims. Some creaminess in the nose, softens the grapefruit/lemon citrus, doles out saltwater, stone powder and dense apricot, peach, melon fruit scents, longlasting and gets your nose scrunched up. Full-bodied, firm mouth entry grabs strongly on the tongue. Dry peach, apricot, pear, yellow apple fruit, the acidity helps shape things well. Some prickle in the lemon/grapefruit citrus, combats the density. Almost some licorice notes too. Solid, uncut stone slabs, no powdery feel here. Light herbaceousness helps brighten the finish. 90

AUSTRALIA RED

Mitolo
South Australia, Barossa Valley, Reiver
Shiraz
2004, \$54.99, 15.0%

While it lacks clarity it's not necessarily cloudy, the red magenta to purple color dark but not opaque, full-set red-ruby rims. Mint and menthol accompany the earth, leather scents, suggests bell pepper as well, the cherry, black raspberry scents are sweet without being overblown. Medium to full-bodied, more sweetness in all of that cherry, blackberry, cranberry fruit but here the acidity can act to provide relief. Provides orange to grapefruit citrus, mint and the clove gives it a hint of baked glazed ham. Too compact to be considered a "fruit bomb" or at least it is a bomb that hasn't gone off. Much less herbaceousness here yet the bell pepper thing does pop in and out. Has a certain tartness which helps it stay lively, especially through the finish. Very solidly built, not natural per se but an homage to winemaking craft. 91

DogRidge Vineyard
South Australia, McLaren Vale, DCV
Petit Verdot
2004, \$24.99, 15.0%

Just about the darkest purple imaginable, completely opaque, the dense ruby-magenta rims glow warmly. Big blast of coffee, toffee, vanilla cream in the nose, ground violet powder, and heavy enough to be impenetrable plum and currant fruit scents, comes off semi-imperious. Full-bodied, same sense of lack of fluidity makes it appear standoffish when really it's probably just the nature of the beast — Petit Verdot is a grinder. The oak less prominent here but toasty, no paucity of coffee grind, burnt caramel flavors. The plum, cherry, black currant fruit is big, however the juice is kept behind inch thick plexiglass. Easy to respect the tannins even if they don't "frame" per se. Florality persists and just maybe there's some orange zest to discern. Finish is like hitting a brick wall at a full gallop. 88

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AUSTRALIA WHITE

Leeuwin Estate
Western Australia, Margaret River, Art Series
Riesling
2004, \$21.99, 12.0%

The white straw color is mostly transparent but can bend light, not quite translucent, takes on a pale green cast at some angles. Rubber, stream stones and strawberries bubble up first in the nose, round and rich and without much citric cut, some peach and apple fruit too but pared down to the basics. Medium-bodied, chalky in texture with plenty of powdery feel from the not-shy acidity. A bit of orange and lemon here but citrus still a special and not regular item on the menu. The rubber almost verges on tar. Apricot, green and red apple, pineapple, red cherry fruit remain fresh if not especially lively. More solid stone than chalk or mineral dust. Bit hard-nosed on the finish, in no way short but does clench up some. May be starting to close down already. 88

ARGENTINA RED

Simmetry
Mendoza, Luján de Cuyo, Sur
Malbec
2004, \$10.99, 13.5%

Unblemished ruby-violet in color, dark red magenta rims, saturated throughout. Sour nose with biting red currant, cherry fruit, lemon and stone, very clean and direct, no noticeable oak, more pure leather and earth. Medium-bodied, lots of acidity, less so tannins, brings out the brightness in that currant, blackberry, red cherry fruit and lemon zest. Nice depth, its purity and lack of oak keeps its outlines very clear. With game, leather, earth, stone touches, all the basics covered. Smoky tang enlivens the finish. Extremely compact and straightforward, nothing overripe about it. 88