

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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# Meritage at Twenty

**I**t was an obvious vacancy in the marketplace for fine wine. In the mid-1980s, many major wineries had begun to make blends with Cabernet Sauvignon as the lead grape; use of other grapes gave wine makers the flexibility to make a classic red wine in a Bordeaux style.

Such wines were a staple at many wineries. In some cases, blending in great Merlot added complexity. Or it could avoid the ruin of a bad vintage.

Such was the case in 1972 when Sterling wine maker Ric Forman made a Cabernet that was 40% Merlot and a Merlot that was 40% Cabernet since heavy rains that year ruined chances for a straight Cabernet to be great. This was before federal regulations required varietal wines to be at least 75% of the named grape.

After the rules changed, as good as many of these wines were, if a wine didn't have 75% of the named grape variety, it had to be sold as a "Red Table Wine."

And few wine merchants were willing to take something that said "Red Table Wine" with a suggested retail price above about \$10. They said most consumers would pass on such a wine unless it was explained that it had 70% Napa Cabernet in it, was aged in French oak barrels, etc.

That that calls for hand-selling, a costly tactic for some shop owners.

So a category was born that was mainly for premium reds from the Bordeaux varietals. (White wine made in the style of White Bordeaux was an afterthought; see Page 3.) The name

picked, after a contest, was Meritage.

Today the society supporting use of the name is approaching its 20th anniversary and it is assessing where it has been. There have been some definite positives, but a number of missed opportunities as well.

At the time, the fledgling group thought it would take perhaps two decades, or more, before consumers would instantly recognize the word Meritage for what it was. That goal was achieved well ahead of schedule.

Part of the reason it took hold as quickly as it did was that merchants and restaurateurs needed it. When a winery came out with a \$25 or \$50 red that represented the high art of blending, the name Meritage gave credence to it. Red Table Wine could contain lower-quality grapes and the purveyors of Cab-blended wines had to distance themselves from the other "lesser" wines.

Soon the name Meritage began to be used by a number of key wineries, including Benziger, St. Supery, Dry Creek, Cosentino, and Rosenthal. Then a few wine shop owners created sections devoted to Meritage wines, and some restaurants did the same with separate sections on their lists.

Here, however, came one of the early problems with the concept: it was embraced by some wineries that joined the group but didn't use the name directly on their labels.

Worse, however, were wineries that saw no benefit from connecting with the Meritage Assn. Among

(See *Meritage* on page 2)

## Pronunciation Guide

One minor problem for the Meritage Assn. since day one, and one that remains to this day, is how to say the word.

The man who won the national contest to come up with a name for this category, Neil Edgar of Newark, Calif., said the word should be pronounced to rhyme with heritage.

From the start, however, a number of people thought the term was from the French, and began to say it as if it were mehr-uh-TAHJ.

It may sound classier that way, but it's wrong. To set the record straight, members of the association often correct those who mispronounce it, a definite conversation-stopper.

Incidentally, my submission to the contest was Elevage, a French term from the rearing of horses. It was liked by the late Hack Wilson, the former owner of Chimney Rock in the Stag's Leap district. It was adopted for use on Chimney Rock's Meritage and is still being used.

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## Meritage

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these were already prestige projects like Opus One and Joseph Phelps. The latter made a wine that arguably was the first (and for a long time the best) Meritage of all, Insignia.

Without either winery in the Meritage group, or even emotionally committed to it, the Meritage idea was lacking one of its strongest marketing points.

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Twenty years after its founding, the Meritage Assn. remains a vital support group for red and white blends that emulate Bordeaux.

The idea clearly is valid, which was evident from the start when Agustin Huneeus of Franciscan Vineyards and the late Dick Graff of Chalone eagerly backed it. (Graff didn't even make such a wine, yet was hugely supportive.)

Huneeus, the first voice of the group, helped set the tone for these wines. He explained the logic of blending to achieve wines at least as good as Cabernet or Merlot are on their own, with more complexity.

Which justified some of the wines' higher prices.

After a period of euphoria, the group settled down to the mundane task of protecting the name from misuse, such as its use by those who weren't members. A dues structure, based on volume produced, wasn't very burdensome.

One reality: most of the key supporters of Meritage as a concept

didn't see the group as proactive or promotion-minded. And by contrast other wine-marketing ideas became far more visible.

For instance, the huge success of the nation's many charity wine auctions; *The Wine Spectator's* Wine Experience; the annual ZAP tasting in San Francisco; the Hospice de Rhone events in California's Central Coast, Pinot Noir celebrations around the world, and dozens of other major tasting events all had a way of eroding the visibility of what the Meritage Assn. stood for.

Since the group staged no major promotional events, and has been all but quiet in promoting the greatness of its wines, some people think it is no longer active.

After Huneeus stopped actively speaking on behalf of Meritage, St. Supery president Michaela Rodeno and Cosentino's Julie Weinstock picked up where he left off and have done a quality job keeping the Meritage name and idea active.

Still, Meritage's public image remains a tad murky. Newcomers to wine often don't understand the idea.

Another drawback: the group has done little to persuade the Opus Ones and the Insignias of the wine world to at least pay lip service to the concept.

To be sure, Opus One needs no image-building help, but considering the fact that an awful lot of pretty poor Opus One was sold in the

past, you'd think the current owners would realize its slightly tarnished image needs a bit of polishing.

Another problem for Meritage is that there simply aren't enough people who understand the wines. Some still think they should be aged longer than Cabernet Sauvignons.

Actually, the reds are usually a bit more approachable when they are young than are Cabernets that are 100% varietal. The act of blending in Merlot and other grapes usually softens the wine.

As a result, few Meritages are longer-lived than are straight Cabs. Those who believe that a Meritage from a particular winery should be aged longer than the same winery's Cabernet may be in for a shock when they age the wines too long.

And finally, one of the key points for most red Meritage wines: they often can be slightly more challenging in terms of aroma and taste than are straight Cabs, since they are blends that can include the racy blueberry-fruited Malbec, the red currant and/or herbal Cabernet Franc, and/or the pitch-black Petit Verdot.

Each variety can give a slightly different aroma component to a blend, and they are often treated differently in the vineyard, meaning that occasionally their use is based on a unique element that the wine maker loves (i.e., mint, pepper, olive or dried herbs) that call for more latitude than does a straight Cab.

## *Wine of the Week*

**2006 Morgan Cote de Crows, Monterey County (\$20):** A 55% Syrah, 45% Grenache blend with a closed aroma on opening, but with an hour in a decanter, opens to show blue and black fruit with hints of pepper, pomegranate, underbrush, and violets. Fairly rich (14.2% alcohol), with good acidity (3.53 pH). For those who find many Syrahs to be a bit one-dimensional, this wine is the antidote. Should be better in a year.

## Holiday Break

As you know, we publish 48 issues a year, and this year we have two "dark" weeks remaining.

Our traditional holiday break this year will be Dec. 20 and Dec. 27, which we hope you will spend joyously with great wine and family.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last five days.

## Exceptional

2005 **Morgan** Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands, "12 Clones" (\$30): Graceful aroma of cherry, berry, rose petal, dried herbs, and celery seed; silky; loaded with flavor. Half the wine is from the superb Double-L Vineyard. Limited. The equally great, fruitier 2006 version (\$31), just released, also is a bargain.

2006 **Villa Maria** Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough "Cellar Selection" (\$20): Wild spice of kiwi, lime, and minerals; a bit of gooseberry and a succulent yet dry finish. Fine rendition of New Zealand SB with more substance than the winery's Reserve Bin (\$13).

2006 **Forefathers** Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough (\$15): Dried herb, chamomile tea, and distinctive iodine-y notes add fascination to a bone dry version from wine maker

Nick Goldschmidt. See next wine.

2005 **Forefathers** Shiraz, McLaren Vale (\$22): Well-defined varietal aroma of black fruit, plum, and black pepper. Great balance.

2004 **Beringer** Alluvium (red), Knights Valley (\$30): Smoke, dried herbs, red cherry fruit, and a silky, rich mid-palate. A tad soft but with superb round, rewarding flavors. A delightful example of an early-drinking Meritage.

2000 **Handley** Brut, Anderson Valley (\$32): Late-disgorged bubbly with still-fresh fruit and faint spice, with hints of nuts/vanilla and a lot of acidity to balance near-perfect dosage. Best with seafood.

## Very Highly Recommended

2005 **Rancho Zabaco** Zinfandel, Sonoma Valley, Monte Rosso Vineyard "Toreador" (\$55): Ultra-ripe raspberry/pepper aroma

with huge weight and nice balance. Alcohol (15.5%) is a bit intrusive.

2005 **Chateau Maris** Old Vine Grenache, Minervois La Livinière (\$45): Violet/plum and blackberry fruit; faintly rustic, but will match well with roast meats, notably game. Imported by Portfolio Group, Manteca, Calif.

2006 **Bucklin** Gewurztraminer, Sonoma Valley, Compagni Portis Vineyard (\$21): Stone fruit, spice, and hints of roses. A bone-dry style of wine (think Alsace) that calls for a dish like cold smoked trout salad with arugula.

2004 **Rodney Strong** Symmetry, Sonoma County (\$55): Red Meritage with a spiced, briary sort of aroma; a bit earthy and rustic with depth and a fine finish.

## White Meritage

When a society was proposed to support red wine Bordeaux-style blends, some visionaries also saw the potential for a white wine that was parallel to White Bordeaux.

White Meritage would be optional for members, but some hoped they could finally get a decent price for a wine based on Semillon, the primary grape in White Bordeaux. When such wines are made properly, they can be as long-lived as any white.

Over the years, the production of white Meritage has been limited to few wineries, some of which have access to great Semillon.

On its own as a varietal, Semillon just doesn't sell very well. That's because the delicate and early-

ripening grape rarely shows much until it is in the bottle for a few years. Even decanting and a lot of aeration when it's young doesn't reveal its true charms.

Oddly, red Meritage needs less aging time than its varietal cousin, Cab, but the best white Meritages do best with more bottle age than typical Sauvignon Blanc, White Meritage's other primary blender.

In fact, the more Sauvignon Blanc in a blend, the less likely it is to age very well.

One of the finest white wines I ever tasted was a 1967 Haut-Brion Blanc, which a friend brought to a dinner in 1984. The 16 years from the vintage had given the wine a

tawny-bronze color, but a startling mature aroma of hay and tobacco that I'll never forget.

White Meritage is at least a valid a category as is red Meritage, but again few consumers know of the joys of this wine when it's properly aged.

### Bargain of the Week

2006 **Little Black Dress**, Syrah Rosé, California (\$10): Dramatic cherry/watermelon aroma with succulent fruit on the palate, just enough sugar (0.58%) to soften the impact of this startling dry wine. See story on page 4.

## Ink for Pink

Rosé is back, but most U.S. wine consumers have no clue the revolution is taking place.

We've reported on the rebirth of pink wine for the last four or five years. Now the underground movement has begun to surface in ways that don't (yet) show up on supermarket scanner-data charts.

Wine statisticians admit they've heard of the swing to dry pink wine, but have no scanner data to verify the scuttlebutt.

However, anecdotal evidence is so powerful it's hard to ignore: a wave of dry rosé wines are being bought by many wine lovers.

Evidence comes from a tale out of Fetzer Vineyards, which began making a pink wine for the British market nearly a decade ago.

Each year, wine maker Dennis Martin would say that his rosé was excellent, and that the U.K. market

was going gaga over it. Each year, he said he'd make enough so he could sell a small amount here.

But year after year, no matter how much he made, the Brits took it all! In 2006, Martin made more than 100,000 cases of Syrah Rosé.

Meanwhile dozens of California wineries (and many in other states) also are making dry rosés, many for tasting rooms. And wide consumer acceptance is only one reason.

Wholesalers and wineries say their initial optimism that Syrah would be a big seller was premature (or simply wrong), and that it's hard to sell any Syrah for more than \$20 a bottle. Some surmise that the success of \$10-\$15 Aussie Shiraz has a lot to do with this.

Thus we have a lot of Syrah planted in California that has to go somewhere, and when the vigorous variety is allowed to produce 8 to

10 tons per acre, it can make a fine pink wine (especially when a dollop of Zin is added for spice, Tannat for color, etc.).

Moreover, California has a lot more Merlot than is needed, and the demand for expensive wines is limited to high-image brands, meaning that even some Zin and Cabernet grapes didn't find buyers in 2007.

Add in all the Pinot Noir that's planted in the wrong areas, and you can see how many red wine grapes may be available in the coming years to make a pink wine that calls for no barrels and may be released to market in mere months.

Our Bargain of the Week, Little Black Dress, is the first rosé from Fetzer's British production to be sold in the United States. Only 1,000 cases were released and may sell quickly. *Caveat emptor.* ©2007

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