

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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## Pricing Great Wines

**T**he hardest thing to do in the world of wine isn't growing grapes, finding funding for a winery, or even making wine.

It is pricing it.

In the long history of wine, there have probably been as many strategies for pricing wine as there have been wines. It may have begun decades, or centuries, ago and based as much on volume as on quality. The reason is simple: when there's a lot of a thing, the price for it usually goes down.

As to the question of quality, it's a bit like ascribing a quality to things like art and music. It's more about our personal preferences. You may like Pollock more than I do, and I may like Manet more than you. Both of us are right—for us.

So putting a quality stamp on wine in an effort to justify its price depends on finding enough people willing to pay you for the quality you offer.

(See back page for a discussion of high-quality but under-rated wines.)

Thus the pricing of a wine is a huge issue with start-up brands. A decade ago, a new Napa winery was opened and released a Cab that it sold for \$75 a bottle. The wine came from a new vineyard with no track record. Nor did the winery have one. So what was the \$75 price based upon?

The volume of the wine that was made? The cost of grapes? A mere guess as to what the market would bear? Or was it simply that the owner wanted to be instantly "in the game," a player?

Whatever the rationale, it was clear

to me that the price had no reality.

It wasn't based on anything the winery had previously done; it was a start-up and had never made a wine before this first release.

You'd think there would be some resistance to the wine. I tasted it and was unimpressed. But a major wine magazine liked it, gave it a high score, and that was all it needed. Sales followed. So did subsequent vintages.

Move to 2010. What did Amy Aiken do when she began to make wines and had to price them?

Amy is the wife of Joel Aiken, who made BV wines for decades before leaving recently. Amy's project is aimed at locating superb vineyards, then hounding the owners of the vines to get some of their fruit. Prices for such fruit will be high, but great wine comes from great fruit.

One way to price a wine is by multiplying the price of a ton of fruit by .01 to get a suggested retail bottle price. So if you paid \$5,000 for a ton of Cabernet grapes, 1% is \$50 and that would be the suggested retail.

But all kinds of factors make this "formula" far too rudimentary in pricing a wine, and it doesn't take into consideration at least ten major factors that change that strategy.

In some cases, 1% is far too much; in others it's far too little.

When I evaluate wines about which I know nothing, I try to put them into the context of their category, and with Amy it was a fun project.

(See **Pricing** on page 2)

## Defining Quality

Defining quality in wine is difficult without solid examples and one of the best is a complex tale I'll truncate.

As a judge at an OIV wine competition in Ljubljana in the former Yugoslavia in 1990, I was involved in an odd episode.

In the sweepstakes round, a superb Italian Merlot was against a sweet red from Macedonia. Six judges voted for the Macedonian wine; the Italian Merlot, a great wine, got only four votes.

Then I noted that five of the judges were from Macedonia!

The wine was strange, sweet and lacking in acidity, and with no complexity at all. Yet one Macedonian judge said this wine would be a hit in Macedonia. To the Macedonians, this was a great wine.

As for the rest of the world? Well, we must be wrong to like Cabernet and Merlots.

It's 20 years since that event, which is still being staged—but with no recognition outside of locally.

The top wine may have been great in Macedonia, but how relevant is the event?

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## Pricing

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When I tasted the 2008 Pinot Noir, for example, I knew the label said Russian River Valley, and the wine was a prototype of the region. The fruit was superb (it came from DuNah, a great grower). And the structure of the wine was terrific.

About such wines, there are two appropriate price points, and more than likely the actual price would be between the two.

At the upper level, this would be nearly \$100 or thereabouts. In pure quality terms, it was as good as any Napa Cabernet I've had in decades, and many such wines are fetching at least \$100. And there are only 200 cases of this superb wine.

What's mitigating here is that the brand, Conspire, is so new it's

not yet on most people's radar. Moreover, there are plenty of great Russian River Pinot Noirs that are selling for \$55 to \$75 a bottle from prominent producers.

As a new, self-funded brand, Amy doesn't have the money to do advertising or massive support, so the price has to be fair.

And what's fair for Pinot Noir that says Russian River on the label and is wonderfully balanced? I'd say about \$40. Lower than that and few wine lovers would pay it much heed.

And \$50 or more might send the wrong message.

I then tried two Cabs from Amy's new brand Meander, the 2005 and 2006. The wines were terrific, despite a slightly higher alcohol level. Both are balanced and

display food compatibility.

The wines come mainly from two great heart-of-Rutherford vineyards, Morrisoli and Llewelling. Thus the fruit was expensive. And the aging regime was as well (new French oak).

I suspected the wines would be about \$65 to \$75. Above that and Amy would run into some serious marketing issues (such as \$100 wines that are deeply discounted and have a great image).

With the Meander wines, it's hard to get fruit of this caliber at less than \$7,000 a ton. See Tasting Notes for the real prices.

It's fascinating and encouraging to see new brands come along that are priced sanely.

## A Novel Taste

California wine makers can be rather inquisitive, so it was a pleasure last month for me to pour for them a number of wines they had never tasted.

After a trip to speak at a New York viticulture symposium, I arranged to bring back home a number of New York Rieslings, all from the Finger Lakes, and poured them blind for the Vintage Hills Tasting Group, which is mainly composed of Sonoma County wine makers.

What was fascinating was not

the position of the wines, but that the wine makers were really in love with most of them.

Very little Riesling is made in Sonoma County (a lot more by percentage comes from Mendocino County), yet the tasters gave superb tasting notes to all wines.

The winning wine was 2008 Anthony Road, a dry wine that still had a succulent finish. Descriptors included flinty, slate, peach, petrol, and a hint of geranium.

Second was '08 Dr. Konstantin Franc Semi-Dry that most tasters

believed would work nicely with crab or lobster. Descriptors included floral/terpene, peach, pear, and pumpkin.

Third was a sweeter wine from Columbia Crest in Washington (I ranked it 11th out of 12). The wine makers liked the way the residual sugar worked with the acid, and two believed the wine to be from Germany.

Fourth overall was 2007 Shel-drake Point Dry (lime, waxy, and complex) with superb acidity, a real food wine.

Fifth, and my first place wine, was 2008 Red Tail Ridge, a wine of immense spice, faintly waxy with an aroma of dried flowers, apricot and peach.

Others scoring high with the judges were '07 Fox Run, '08 Lam-oreaux Landing, '08 Dr. Frank Dry, and Lakewood.

Needless to say, Finger Lakes Riesling has arrived.

## Wine of the Week

2009 **Husch** Chenin Blanc, Mendocino (\$11): Ripe melons and traces of star anise and jasmine make this lilting, soft, slightly sweet (1.4% residual sugar) wine a winner every year. Only "problem: is that it is Chenin Blanc, which some people consider as declass . In fact, paired with spicy Indian curries or Thai dishes, the wine is a dramatic enhancement to a meal. Three cheers for Husch continuing to make this superb wine!

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open within the last week.

## Exceptional

2008 **Conspire** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley (\$42): Stylishly scented with smoke, spice, cherry fruit with penetrating berry notes, and a faint hint of forest floor and tobacco. Classic balanced structure. Great wine at a more than fair price.

2007 **LaZarre** Pinot Noir, Santa Barbara County (\$35): Dark cherries and dried and fresh herbs, like bay leaf and savory; mid-palate depth of forest floor and a slight Burgundian note. Complex and will be better in a few years.

2005 **Meander** Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$65): Dried and fresh cherry aroma with traces of herbs and great depth. Fairly rich wine (14.7% alcohol), but excellent balance. Best after three hours in a decanter. The '06 will be out soon.

2009 **Baily** Montage, Temecula

Valley (\$20): A Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon blend that offers a fine aroma of melon/pear and subtle spice, and huge aging potential. Always a fine wine from wine maker Phil Baily.

2009 **Robert Oatley** Sauvignon Blanc, Pemberton (\$16): Fresh floral fruit, traces of herbs and hay, and a handsome dry mid-palate with attractive depth. From a remote area of Western Australia with huge potential for this variety.

NV **Mashio** Prosecco, Veneto (\$13): A delightful floral bubbly with a hint of vanilla and just enough mid-palate depth to keep it fresh yet food-friendly as well. Imported by Banfi.

2008 **Ventana** Grenache Rosé, Arroyo Seco (\$13): This is the counterpart to the red Grenache we wrote about last week, fresh, lively, cherry-based, and basically dry. Yes,

it's a year old, but as a light red with steak tartare and appetizers, it's a winner.

2006 **Frogmore Creek** Chardonnay, Tasmania (\$19): A maturing, golden wine with green highlights; no malolactic, so fresh Chardonnay aromas come through cleanly. Imported by Hathaway Wines.

**Results of a blind tasting by Sonoma County wine makers of New Zealand Pinot Noirs, staged May 12. Prices are what was paid in Northern California retail shops:**

1. 2007 **Rippon**, Central Otago, \$50. 2. 2007 **The Tarras**, Central Otago, \$30. 3. 2008 **Boulder Bank**, Marlborough, \$17. 4. 2008 **The Crossings**, Marlborough, \$12. 5. 2007 **Peregrine**, Central Otago, \$29. 6. 2008 **Oyster Bay**, Marlborough, \$14. 7. 2008 **Sheerwood** Estate, Marlborough, \$14. **Note: Only one wine of 12 tasted exceeded 14% alcohol.**

## All About Balance

The Riverside International Wine Competition I run poses a dilemma each year: Who should be on each panel?

I use many wine makers as judges, but prefer to have no more than two on a panel, because now and then too many technicians at one table can get too tough, and the medals suffer.

Also, I seek experts on some wines (Riesling experts to judge Riesling, Italian wine experts to judge as many Italian wines as possible) and I prefer younger, less-experienced judges to be teamed with older, wiser judges.

This year, a shift in personnel gave us what wound up solving a number of problems that face wine judgments.

Besides the difficulty of judging

certain varieties (Pinot Noir and sparkling wines among them) is the issue of regional distinctiveness.

To deal with that issue, we began a new era with judge-directed revelation of regions. And I was pleased with how the judges responded.

Only a few judges asked where a wine was from. Far more vital, said three judges, was my pep-talk at the start that said *all wine styles* are valid. If a wine has the right style for the category, it deserves a hard look.

I asked one judge after the event what he thought of the regional revelations. He said he liked it.

"It was great that we knew ahead of time that we could always get the region from you," he said. But better

was his remark, "Everyone I spoke with was pleased that balance played the biggest part. When you spoke about that at the beginning, we all became aware that various styles of wine were valid."

Results of the event are at [www.RiversideWineCompetition.com](http://www.RiversideWineCompetition.com).

## Bargain of the Week

2009 **J. Lohr** Valdiguie, Monterey "Wildflower" (\$9): This startlingly fine wine (also known as Gamay Noir) is made like a Beaujolais and delivers juicy fruit and a lilting level of depth for a wine that's almost tannin-free and totally quaffable.

## Underrated Quality

Bryan and Matthew Bousquet, who own two excellent restaurants in Windsor, are in France today. During their trip, they'll tour the Loire Valley.

"I can't wait to taste the Chenin Blancs from Vouvray and Cab Franc from Chinon," said Bryan the day before the trip.

Obviously, her passion for wine doesn't end with high-end Cabernet and Chardonnay. She loves wines with great acidity.

But those of us who like underrated wines may be in the minority.

Most American wine lovers have a predilection for wines from popular varieties—even when they know nothing about them. Such people carry a prejudice against lesser-known wines.

I taste thousands of wines a year and see a far higher percentage of great wines from "lesser" grapes and regions than I do from known areas and recognized grapes.

The reason is obvious: Anyone willing to make wine from a lesser-known grape probably does so because an excellent wine can be made from it and sold for a more reasonable price because of less competition.

There are only a tiny handful of Colombards on the market. Most are terrific. I adore Silvaner from Germany. The '07 Grenache from Ventana, rated here as Exceptional last week, is about as fine a red wine as you can find. At \$28, it's a steal: a world-class wine from a grape that's far too underrated.

Clearly, not all wines made from lesser-known grapes are great, but one thing is obvious: Using a numerical rating scale for a wine from, say, Semillon is almost pointless (pun intended). Such wines are best compared only to their own kind.

The fact that an Asian pear may taste like an apple doesn't mean I

compare it to other apples. I simply enjoy the fruit for what it is. The same goes for Albariño from Spain, which is best compared with other Albariños.

Some people try to compare Carmenere with Merlot. Since they aren't at all the same grape, such a comparison is silly. I love cooler-climate Carmenere. Comparisons are unnecessary.

When I taste Beaujolais, I don't think of it as a lighter-styled red. It is what it is, and I cherish it for it being exactly that.

Topping the underrated red wine list may well be Petite Sirah, a red wine that can deliver as much verve as any rich, heavy wine and it will last longer than most.

Once underrated doesn't mean always dismissed. Sauvignon Blanc has come into its own in the last 20 years, and dry rosé and dry Riesling are on the comeback trail as well.

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