

Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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Green Wine

It was once the case that when you bought organic produce the fruits and veggies looked over-ripe, under-sized, bruised and discolored as often as not. Nowadays, sales of organic products rise year by year, acceptance by the public is widespread, and the taste, quality, and appearance usually match their conventional equivalents. Organic wines, however, have not been accepted quite so readily, in large part because for a long time they weren't very good and because they tended not to last very long. But the quality of so-called "green" wines is definitely improving, more and more grape growers are moving toward organic farming and there seems to be a growing public acceptance of, if not yet a great demand for, more earth-friendly wines. Consumers, however, are drinking more organic wines than they know. Many winemakers have "gone green" but not sought any certification for a variety of reasons: cost, not wishing to be relegated to a niche status, unwillingness to abide by all the many restrictions imposed by certifying entities, *et cetera*. Others simply prefer to be known for their product rather than for their practices. Nevertheless, the trend to sustainable agriculture, natural, organic, and/or bio-dynamic farming is strong and getting stronger in the world of wine. As just one example, we have selected for Jim Hiller's Wine Club more organic wines in the last two years than we did in the Club's first 6 years. None was picked because it was produced organically; the increase simply reflects a better level of quality among organics and that there are more of them on the market.

Some clarifications of often fuzzy terminology may be in order. "Natural" winemaking refers to wine made with as little technological intervention as possible. Chemical pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides are avoided. Cover crops for weed control, natural predators for pest control, and hand picking of fruit are preferred. The natural yeasts that cling to grape skins are used for fermentation rather than laboratory produced yeast strains.

Chaptalization (adding sugar to the fermentation to increase alcohol), adding acids or tannins to balance what may be lacking, or using other wine-making tools (tricks?) such as micro-oxygenation, the use of wood chips or staves as a substitute for barrel aging – all these are shunned. Most natural winemakers use as little sulfur dioxide as possible.

The term "organic" includes all of the above but also requires adherence to rules established by various certifying entities (there are many) and compliance with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program of 2002. Some of those rules are a major reason that many wine grape producers and wineries do not seek certification - in particular the mandate that sulfur dioxide cannot be added to organic wines. (Sulphur dioxide is the most effective and benign method of preventing oxidation and thus stabilizing wine and extending its shelf life.) For this reason wines may be labeled "made from organic grapes," a formulation that permits sulfur dioxide.

The term "sustainable" is loosely applied to those growers who adhere generally to organic, natural or biodynamic practices but who want the freedom to act otherwise in an emergency should they decide that chemical intervention is necessary. Alternatively, it may be that the

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grower simply doesn't want to undergo the rigorous certification processes and costs.

Biodynamic farming is organic farming on steroids. The entire farm is seen as an inter-connected and self sustaining ecosystem and the emphasis is on the holistic development and interrelationship of the soil, plants, and animals as a closed, self-nourishing system. Based on a series of lectures delivered in the 1920's by an Austrian philosopher named Rudolph Steiner (and thus pre-dating the organic movement by twenty some years), biodynamic farming has a weird side that smacks of magic and alchemy as much as farming. Steiner prescribed eight "preparations," two to prepare the fields and six pertaining to composting. These include odd practices such as filling a cow horn with dung and the skull of a domesticated animal with oak bark and burying these at a particular depths and moon phases, then digging them up to make homeopathic teas to be sprinkled on the fields or deposited into compost heaps at prescribed intervals. Pest and weed control can be equally peculiar. For example field mice are to be countered by deploying ashes prepared from field mice skin when Venus is in the Scorpius constellation. This can all get very strange indeed.

However, I hasten to add that on a trip to California last month I made a particular point of visiting the Benziger Winery in Sonoma, which estate may well be the purest practitioner of biodynamic principles in this country. Skeptical though I may have been of the "preparations" hocus-pocus, I readily admit that I have never seen healthier looking grapevines or richer soil. What's more, after touring the vineyards, caves, and winemaking facilities, I had the chance to do a side by side taste comparison of Benziger wines from the same vintage, the same varietals and the same winemaking techniques that were made from biodynamic and from non-biodynamic

grapes (Benziger makes both biodynamic and organic but not biodynamic wines.) In every case, the wine made from biodynamically grown fruit was brighter, more vibrant, expressive, richer, and more complex. The differences were not subtle at all, they were shockingly apparent. In Benziger's case, their biodynamic wines are not as widely distributed as the non-bio and they are significantly more expensive. Moreover, wines tasted at the point of production usually show at their best. With time, transport, and warehousing, the same taste comparison might not be so dramatic. Nevertheless, it was a most impressive demonstration. It should also be noted that the ranks of the biodynamically committed include some of the most highly regarded names in the wine world: Faively, Leroy, Zind Humbrecht, Chapoutier, Beaucastel, Grgich Hills, and Araujo, to name a few.

So for this release of Jim Hiller's Wine Club, we sample a variety of "green" wines, some certified and so labeled, others whose provenance is well camouflaged. See for yourself whether or not you detect significant differences from conventional wines.

Tasting Notes

Taster's Table Whites

2005 Martellozzo Paesaggi Pinot Grigio Friuli

This is a refreshing and lively Pinot Grigio, with mineral characters and the classic aromas of honey and flowers with a finish that is crisp and clean. 100% Pinot Grigio, the wine is nicely balanced and easy to drink.

2007 Crios de Susana Balbo Rosé of Malbec

This red wine in a rosé disguise shows a beautiful, deep, vibrant color. It has a surprising amount of glycerin and body for a rosé and beautiful aromas of fresh, ripe wild strawberries. On the palate, the flavors of strawberries and cherries dominate, accompanied by some

spice notes and a clean, dry finish. This is the wine to serve with warm-weather meals when there is a mix of traditional white & red wine foods. Keep one in the fridge at all times and you'll always have a delicious wine to enjoy with light snacks and cheeses.

2005 Benziger North Coast Sauvignon Blanc

Not one of Benziger's biodynamic wines sourced from the estate, this wine was made with grapes grown by sustainable farming methods. The "sustainable" philosophy promotes natural vineyard management, restoration of the land and biodiversity on the estate. "We believe these practices result in wines that reflect the authentic flavors, aromas and character of the vineyard." Stainless steel fermentation gives this wine a delicious crisp, cleanliness that enhances its' citrus flavors and floral aromas. The generous fruit is supported by the acidic structure and the impressive mouthfeel.

2006 Chateau de la Cariziere Muscadet de Sevre et Maine

"For me Muscadet wines have the taste of its soil through its minerality. Our vineyard is rich and original thanks to its geological and microclimatic diversity. The organic tilling of the soil and the respect of the vine allow us to express the complete expression of the wine. We use organic farming methods which means that all chemicals products are forbidden."— Joseph Landron, owner and winemaker.

2005 Manzanita Canyon Sauvignon Blanc

The second label of Cartlidge and Brown, Manzanita Canyon is, like C&B, one of the perennial "best value" brands out there. Here you have the classic profile of California Sauvignon Blanc: freshly mown hay and citrus notes tending toward grapefruit in the nose, a crisp, zingy acidity and a snappy finish.

2006 Girasole Redwood Valley Chardonnay

This Chardonnay is light golden straw in color with bright aromas of red apple, pear, lemon zest, and a hint of clove and vanilla. Medium weight with flavors of baked green apple, pear, vanilla, citrus and hints of tropical fruit, the mouthfeel is rich and creamy, yet balanced with medium acidity followed by a long lingering finish.

Taster's Table Reds

2005 Crios de Susana Balbo Malbec

The wine has a beautiful reddish/purple color as most good Malbecs do. The aromas are a mix of fresh crushed cherries and toasty/smoky oak—just enough to frame the exuberant fruit. On the palate, the flavors of cherries and spice are obvious, and the jammy fruit quality persists, with hints of spice lurking in the background. Crios, like Girasole, is a brand that we have selected for the Wine Club previously without regard to their being organic, simply in recognition of their being very good.

2006 Castano Organic Monastrel Yecla

The 2005 vintage of this wine was a 90 pointer and a top 100 wine selection. It remains an insanely great bargain and shows richly fragrant aromas of blue fruits, plums, and prunes. Ripe, layered, and full-flavored, this lush and hedonistic wine is perfectly accessible right now, but can also develop over the next two to four years.

2005 Perrin Nature

The Perrin family has lived and farmed in their native Provence for five generations and from father to son have devoted their lives to producing wines worthy of that region. At Château de Beaucastel, Château du Grand Prébois, La Vieille Ferme and Domaines Perrin, there is no embellishment, no imitation, no excess, just genuine wines with the real character and taste of the

Provencal region. The Perrin philosophy: "We try to place the vine in its universe, that is to say relate it to the earth, the animal life and the stars, by which it is influenced".

2004 Girasole Mendocino Sangiovese

This is 100% Sangiovese and shows all the vivacity, zip, and food-friendly acidity that the grape is famous for in its Tuscan manifestations. Dark garnet color, with clean, slightly candied red plum and berry notes over a subtle earthy base, the Girasole Sangiovese shows good structure and a long finish; it is altogether a pleasant and enjoyable quaff.

2002 Huntington California Merlot

Purple-black intensity defines the 2002 Huntington California Merlot. The nose shows bright plum and cherry aromas with cedar and chocolate notes. The plump fruit flavors on the palate are balanced by a nice streak of supportive acidity softly blanketed by subtle tannins. A well-crafted and richly flavored wine that is solidly fruity from front to back.

2006 Cono Sur Organic Cabernet/Carmenere

This wine shows a beautifully deep, ruby red color and a robust nose of plum, cherry, raspberry, and strawberry. Hints of smoke, spice and vanilla result from its ageing in French oak. On the palate, it is earthy, flavorful and robust with a long finish, an excellent pairing for all kinds of red meats or game. Also goes well with strongly flavored cheeses such as Brie, Gorgonzola, or Camembert.

Collector's Club Whites

2005 Picket Fence Russian River Chardonnay

Picket Fence Chardonnay is made from fruit grown in the Russian River Valley whose unique microclimate provides some of the world's best conditions for growing the Burgundian varieties: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. During the evening

the valley is blanketed by a thick fog that can often drop the temperature 40 degrees from its daytime high. The fog steadily retreats to the coast by mid-morning and the afternoons are warm and sunny allowing grapes to ripen slowly and evenly. The long hang time creates full, rich flavors. Moreover, the yearly flooding of the Russian River renews the land with river bottom soils that continually re-nourish vine growth. "This richly textured wine displays the backbone and balance one associates with Russian River Chardonnays," says Winemaker Don Van Staaveren. "Flavors of Meyer lemon and Bosc pear mingle with the toasted oak components of caramelized brown spices, resulting in a luxurious, sensuous wine with a silky, long finish."

2005 Sincerity Casablanca Chardonnay

Sincerity Chardonnay has a pale straw color with green hues. It shows intense aromas of ripe white fruits, vanilla, and mineral notes. On the palate it has good volume and balance, with lots of green apple and melon flavor and a soft, long mineral-driven finish. Pair with pasta with sauteed vegetables, spinach and Roquefort salad or grilled chicken with rosemary.

NV Sokol Blosser Evolution

One of my favorite and one of the more unusual multi-grape white wines, Evolution is a blend of nine white varieties, including Pinot Gris, Muller Thurgau, White Riesling, Semillon, Muscat Canelli, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay and Sylvaner. Pair this with any spicy cuisine: Caribbean, Asian, Thai, Tex-Mex. The Sokol Blosser mantra is worth committing to memory: "Chill. Pour. Sip. Chill. Think about how you might evolve."

2005 Mont' Albano Pinot Grigio

This vegan wine (meaning no animal products were used for filtration or fining) is a quality Pinot Grigio from the Marche/ Friuli region of Italy where the long, warm summers with

cool evenings make for an extended growing season resulting in a fragrant, well-balanced wine with pleasant acidity and a lively finish. With floral and white orchard fruit flavors on the nose and a decent weighty feel on the palate, this pairs beautifully with any fish dish.

2005 Bonterra North Coast Viognier

Powerful aromas of fresh cut nectarines and white peaches, laced with floral notes of orange blossom and honeysuckle lead into complex fruit flavors of apricot and peach, overlaid with notes of oak vanilla in the mouth. The wine is crisp, yet creamy, an elegant alternative to your everyday whites. Marsanne and Roussanne are blended with the Viognier, adding a dimension of complexity. Marsanne provides a rich texture and green apple flavor, while Roussanne contributes pear and floral notes.

2005 Lolonis Redwood Valley Chardonnay

Although rich and full bodied, this Chardonnay packs lots of classic varietal fruit aromas of pear, apple and citrus, but also has complexities of melon, lychee, hints of vanilla, toasted oak and tropical notes. With its richness and fruit complexity the wine sips great on its own, but also pairs well with a great variety of dishes. Lolonis wines are created with Old World dry farming methods brought over from the family's village in Greece at the turn of the century. No pesticides or herbicides are used. Ladybugs by the millions control pests, naturally. "While the fruit is organic, notice the bottle is not labeled 'organic wine.' This is no accident. In our experience, the organic winemaking methodology makes a wine that is unstable, and its quality is often suspect." The quote is a good example of why many 'green' winemakers decline to identify themselves as such for fear of being associated with organic wine's less than stellar reputation.

2003 Benziger Sonoma County Merlot

Softly textured and rich in flavor, this Merlot is supple and full-bodied. Aromas evoke dark fruit and pepper with robust flavors of current, anise and overripe plum. It makes an excellent pairing alongside lamb risotto, pot roast, or roasted eggplant.

2005 Picket Fence Russian River Pinot Noir

The Pinot Noir grapes for this wine are hand harvested at night, a labor intensive process that helps retain the freshness and acidity so crucial to well balanced Pinot Noir. After the optimal short run to the winery, the grapes are sorted and pressed gently, the juice is fermented in small, open-top tanks then aged in new French oak. Elegant and fruit-forward with lots of Bing cherry and raspberry aromas and a velvety texture in the mouth, this is an excellent example of Russian River Pinot.

2001 Almagre Tempranillo Crianza Rioja

2001 was a particularly fine vintage in Rioja and this blend of 90% Tempranillo and 10% Graciano fermented in stainless steel and aged in American oak for approximately twelve months is a delightful example that has exuberant dark fruits and a super smooth, creamy finish.

2004 San Vito Chianti

This is 100% Sangiovese with a bright ruby-red color and lively full-fruited bouquet of raspberry. The flavor is dry, fresh, and harmoniously balanced between the sweet fruit flavors and the refreshing acidity. It was aged for eight months in oak and bottled 9 months after the harvest.

NV Sokol Blosser Meditrina

This is a marriage of Oregon Pinot Noir, Syrah, and Zinfandel that's rich, juicy, and velvety and that goes well with a wide variety of food including pizza, barbecue, and Mediterranean fare. Meditrina is a little known Roman goddess of wine and health.

2005 Loloni Redwood Valley Zinfandel

Here's a full and rich Zin with distinctive flavors of cassis, blackberry, plum, and black peppercorn and a background of spicy oak. A great wine for serving with barbecued meats, particularly ribs, with grilled salmon, or with vegetables such as portobello mushrooms or grilled eggplant.

The Cellar Master's Circle

Do you buy wine in advance of your immediate consumption? Do you have a few (or many) bottles stashed away in the basement, a special closet, or under the stairs? Have you been tempted to buy or build a refrigerated wine storage cabinet or cellar unit? If you already have a cellar, do you fear that you're not getting the most from your investment? Are you paying too much for the wines you put away?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, the Cellar Master's Circle is tailor made for you. Created by Eric Novak, the wine buyer for Hiller's Markets and Director of Jim Hiller's Wine Club, the Cellar Master's Circle will:

- * help you formulate a buying plan unique to your budget, lifestyle, entertaining needs, and objectives
- * give you entry to selected trade and private wine tasting events
- * provide you with the latest information on what is available on the market
- * insure that you get the lowest prices on your everyday and 'special' wine purchases.

If you think you might be interested, contact Eric at 248-355-2122 ext. 1033 or at eric.novak@hillers.com

Why would you buy wines anywhere else?

Let Hiller's help you buy wine the informed way!