

Jim Hiller's Wine Club

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Looking Back; Saying Goodbye

It may be a bit late for New Year's resolutions, year-end reviews and new year forecasts, but we are going to jump into those clichéd formats anyway as this is the swan song edition of Jim Hiller's Wine Club and therefore it seems an appropriate way to put a period to what has been a fun and challenging eleven year experiment.

Born in the last months of the twentieth century, back when the Y2K computer programming glitch was the catastrophe around the corner and beer and spirits outsold wine by quite a lot, Jim Hiller's Wine Club made its debut. Forty-six editions and 1104 Wine Club selections later, I can look back at the discussion topics in the Club and at the wines we picked over the years, and see therein a reflection of the world of wine in America in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

It was indeed a remarkable period of change and growth. Wine consumption in the U.S. grew in every single year of this century's first decade. In fact, the Wine Market Council just reported 17 years of consecutive growth in consumption, with excellent prospects for an eighteenth in 2011.

Two years ago America overtook Italy as the #2 wine-consuming country in the world and the projection is that France will concede the #1 spot to the U.S. sometime in the next two years, if not sooner. What's more, the profile of the American wine drinker has changed dramatically. Whereas the Baby Boomer generation didn't come to prefer wine over beer till they hit their late 40's and 50's, 64 per cent of Generation X (those who are now 35 to 46) are defined as core wine drinkers who drink wine at least once a week or more frequently. Five years ago, only 41% of that same demographic fell into the 'core wine drinker' category. The Millennial

generation (those who are now age 17 to 34) is even more oenophilic at an early age: 51% are in the core wine-drinking segment already vs. only 37% five years ago. Altogether, about 46 million Americans, or roughly 20% of the total adult population, are considered 'core wine drinkers.' But the truly astonishing figure is that these core wine drinkers consume 91% of all the wine sold in this country. So the potential for further growth is huge, as marginal wine drinkers inevitably increase their consumption.

What wines Americans drink and from where has evolved also. Although Cab, Chard, and Merlot were and remain the top three varieties, we saw a huge uptrend in the popularity of Pinot Noir and Pinot Grigio, and more recently, Malbec and Moscato. We've seen a decline in the popularity of white Zinfandel and other sweet blush wines and a distinct softening in the demand for Merlot. At the start of the century, lower end Australian wines were the very definition of value. Now that predominance has been successfully challenged by wines from Chile, Argentina, Spain, and others.

Boxed wines were strictly a low rent neighborhood back when we started, screw caps only for the cheapest plonk. Organic wines were few and far between and usually unstable and not very good. Second labels were for the juice that wasn't good enough to make the grade. All that has changed entirely.

The Black Box and the Bota Box brands demonstrated that alternative packaging (technically bag in a box packaging) could appeal to the premium wine consumer and to what the trade calls the 'fighting varietal' price segment. Then the 3 liter Octavin box versions of Big House Red and Big House White really threw the alternative packaging category into hyperdrive. We will see more and more of the bag in a box packages, not only because the wine can stay fresh for 3 to 4 weeks after opening, but because the costs of

shipping paper are so much lower than the cost of shipping glass.

There will be other eco-friendly developments in packaging and in viniculture. Natural winemaking has taken firm hold and a greater number of domestic and international producers are jumping on the bandwagon. Whether practicing organic, sustainable or biodynamic viticulture, winemakers are becoming much more conscious of how their agricultural, winemaking and packaging practices affect their environment and their product. Regulations around organic labeling are still foolishly restrictive, discouraging producers from touting their products as organic, but the movement toward chemical free wine-making is fully underway.

Screw caps are now the norm on wines from New Zealand and increasingly have gained ground as the closure of choice around the world, even in the old school bastions of France, Italy, and Germany. They have gained widespread acceptance from the public despite the trade's skepticism and forced belated but significant quality improvements from a cork industry that initially was very complacent in the face of the alternative closure movement. We'll surely see further innovation in closures. There is already a glass stopper on the market, rather like the plug in a fancy crystal decanter that might eventually be developed as an acceptable cork substitute for high-end bottlings where screw tops still seem too prole.

In wine marketing we will see more exploitation of alternative channels to market and pressures on the three tier distribution system as the consumer continues to search for value. The biggest effect of the Great Recession of 2008-2009 was not that consumers bought less wine. They didn't. But they bought at lower price points than was their prior habit. This put tremendous pressure on high end producers, who, loath to diminish the cachet of the top end brands, resisted price cuts and instead moved juice via second and third labels, increased their direct to consumer marketing, took advantage of internet avenues to quickly diminish inventory (Check out winestillsoldout.com for some eye-opening prices and a very

innovative wine sales channel), and moved product via generic labels (see the 90 Plus wines that we carry at Hillers which are the wine market equivalent of selling designer dresses with the labels removed.) In Michigan we are also likely to see far more wine sampling by retailers since the recently enacted Sunday sales law also included a provision allowing that.

Other things to look for in the coming year: Increased popularity of French wines as the excellent 2009 vintage comes to market, especially in perceived value appellations such as Cotes du Rhone. White and red blends will be the fastest growing category of domestic wines. Moscato's popularity will fade fast. New Zealand Pinot Noir will be hot. So will Portuguese red table wines. Lodi will soar as a sought after California AVA. So will Paso Robles. The Central Coast, generally, will gain the stature it deserves.

Sparkling wines will make a modest comeback, led by Proseccos and Cava. Chardonnay will have a renaissance (not that it ever died!) as more lightly oaked and unoaked versions are released.

Resolutions for 2011:

Go to a wine tasting at least once a month. You can register for free on localwineevents.com to find out what is happening in your area. Seek out wines from a country or region you don't know much about. Try a Washington state Syrah. Find Rhone varietals from California. Revisit wines you think you don't like. I hear "Riesling is too sweet" all the time, but Riesling can be bone-dry, super-sweet, and everything in between. Buy a new corkscrew. I'm partial to the hinged waiter's style screw pull, but many good ones are out there. You definitely need to treat yourself if all you have is one of those dreadful winged things.

Tasting Notes

Taster's Table Whites

2009 Albino Armani Pinot Grigio
A few years ago, one of our suppliers offered us a very attractive close-out price on the 2007 vintages of Armani's

Pinot Grigio and Soave. I bought all I could and sold through it at 8 bucks a bottle (the front-line retail was \$17). Some time later the wife of Albino visited Detroit on a U.S. sales trip to thank Hiller's as the top seller of Armani's wines in the mid-west. At a lunch with Egli, I first tried the 2009 vintage. Quite simply, it is the best Italian Pinot Grigio I've ever tasted. It has a wonderful purity of fruit expression with lovely floral and citrus notes, a creamy palate and an impeccable balance. Paired with an asparagus risotto, it was one of the most enjoyable white wines of any type that I've ever had and has been my house white since. Unfortunately, before Egli returned to Italy, she sold the entire production of the winery to a California wine shop chain, so the brand will no longer be available in Michigan.

2009 Lone Birch Yakima Valley White Blend

This lovely white blend is a good example of why we turn often turn to Washington when seeking value. Showing a light straw color, the wine has a nose of honeysuckle, white peach, candied green apple and citrus. The palate has a silky entry that leads to a medium bodied wine with a nice acidity and a lingering finish. It is a blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Semillon, Rousanne, and Marsanne.

2009 Hess Monterey Chardonnay

Every year Hess presents another version of affordable Central Coast chardonnay, chock full of bright and intense tropical fruit aromas and flavors – honeyed pineapple and passion fruit, peaches and kiwi in the 09– on a lightly oaked frame with a crisp acidity. It's a winning formula for an attractive everyday white.

2009 Coppola Votre Santé Sonoma Coast Chardonnay

Francis Ford Coppola made Votre Santé wines (there is also a Pinot Noir) in honor of his grandmother's standard toast. Made with a nod toward Burgundy using fruit from the Sonoma Coast these wines are refined and elegant in a very food friendly style. Whole-cluster pressed to retain freshness, the juice is

fermented primarily in stainless steel to preserve its natural acidity, and a portion is fermented and aged in French oak barrels to impart subtle nuances without overwhelming the purity of the fruit. The wine leads with aromas of green apple, lemon and orange blossoms. The palate offers delicate flavors of citrus with mineral highlights.

2008 Peltier Station Hybrid Lodi Pinot Grigio

The Hybrid line is Rodney Schatz's answer to the question he asked himself as the economy began to tank: "How can we compete in this market?" Quality wines at everyday prices was his answer. He figured the name "Hybrid" would be contemporary and catchy, as well as reflect his appreciation for both new technology and environmentally friendly sustainable-farming practices. The Pinot Grigio is actually a blend of Pinot Grigio and Vermentino and shows aromas of ripe citrus and mellow summer fruits, followed by a snappy mid palate and a bright vibrant acidic finish. Enjoy with shellfish, salads or light pasta dishes.

2010 Two Hands Lucky Country Barossa Chardonnay

The 'two hands' of Two Hands Wines are Michael Twelftree and Richard Mintz who formed a negociant wine company in 1999 with the objective of making the best possible shiraz based wines from the top shiraz producing regions within Australia. Now they have introduced a moderately priced Chardonnay and Shiraz under the Lucky Country label that are both spectacular values for the money. The Chard shows a light golden straw color and a lifted bouquet of lemon zest, melon, sherbet, pineapple, peach and musk. The palate starts out quite creamy with a lovely mouth-watering appeal. The soft acid is bountiful and gives the palate a citrus lemon burst that powers the fruit effortlessly to a nice round and soft finish.

Taster's Table Reds

2008 Peltier Station Hybrid Lodi Pinot Noir

A blend of Pinot Noir, Petite Sirah, and Alicante Bouschet, the wine shows deep color, black cherry and strawberry in the

nose and a firm tannic backbone to support the earthy fruit flavors of the palate. This has enough heft to pair beautifully with a winter stew and delicacy enough to be enjoyed by itself.

2009 Tortoise Creek Lodi Zinfandel 'The Chelonian'

The Lodi AVA has become quite a trendy appellation, in large part because of the enormous popularity of 337 Cabernet Sauvignon, but the region made its bones with Zinfandel. This example from Tortoise Creek is a splendid example. It has a spicy, cherry-like bouquet and is bursting with sweet flavors of blackcurrant and plums. Soft and rich in the mid-palate, the finish shows notes of vanilla and cinnamon toast. This elegant Zin would be a perfect accompaniment for any spicy food, game, beef, or especially, barbeque.

2009 Lone Birch Yakima Valley Red Blend

This blend shows a ruby red color of medium intensity with a spicy nose of nutmeg and anise along with a core of red fruit aromas and flavors of currant and jammy red cherry. The palate is medium-bodied with soft tannins, framed with good acidity and a spicy touch to the finish. It is a blend of Merlot, Grenache, Cabernet Sauvignon, Barbera, Sangiovese, Cabernet Franc, and Cinsault.

2006 Vale do Bomfim Douro Tinto

The great thing about Portuguese dry table reds is that you get all the terrific red fruit notes of Port in a dry, food-friendly, eminently drinkable red. The Bomfim shows ripe red berry and plum fruit, touched by vanilla, layered with dark tannins with currant and cherry notes lingering on the finish. It's packed with black jelly flavors, made more tense by acidity and smoothed with the hint of wood. A blend of Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca and Touriga Nacional.

2008 Tamas Central Coast Double Decker Red

Tamas is a second label of Wente Vineyards. The Double Decker Red is a proprietary blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, and Barbera sourced entirely

from Central Coast fruit. Cold fermented in stainless steel and aged in neutral oak and stainless tanks, the wine demonstrates a remarkable purity of fruit aromatics and flavors. Robust yet smooth, mouth-filling with a rich palate of blackberry, black cherry, and plum flavors, dry and silky with a smooth and spicy finish, the Double Decker Red is the perfect answer to "Have another glass?"

2009 Ruta 22 Patagonia Malbec

From one of the southernmost wine-growing regions of Argentina, where only one inch of rain per year, extreme thermal variation and strong winds offer ideal growing conditions for the fruit, leading to less intervention and a reduced use of agrochemicals. The cool climate and complex soils are perfect for Malbec, producing a deep ruby-colored wine with rich, smooth blackberry flavors on the palate and cassis and vanilla aromas in the nose. Highly recommended with grilled red meats, cheeses made from cow's milk and pastas with light sauces.

Collector's Club Whites

2009 Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio

The most popular imported wine, red or white, in American restaurants for the last 14 years, the Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio hales from Northern Italy's Alto Adige region, the premier area for growing Pinot Grigio. Crisp and fruit-forward with a lively acidity and freshness, the SMPG is more a story of marketing genius than it is a story of inspired wine-making, but you gotta give props where due. First introduced to the US in 1979 by Terlato wines, Pinot Grigio was essentially unknown in this country back then. Santa Margherita, more than any other brand, made Pinot Grigio into the monster success that it is today

NV Mumm's Napa Valley Brut

Sparkling wine sales were way down in 2009's holiday season as nobody felt much like celebrating a rotten economy. We sold plenty of Cava and Asti, but sales of Champagnes and high-end domestic sparklers were desultory at best. This year I thought things might be a bit perkier and, having tasted the Mumm's

and loved the quality, I thought I'd gamble on a more confident consumer in 2010. I confess that I was helped quite a bit by the release of *The Wine Spectator's* Top 100 list, which rated this higher than any other sparkling wine, but still – Hey, I made the call and hit it big. Wine Club members deserve a taste of the action.

2009 Qupe Santa Ynez Marsanne

From Stephen Tanzer's *International Wine Cellar*: "Greenish straw. Aromas of green apple, citrus peel and licorice. Juicy, easygoing flavors of orange, orchard fruits and spices, with a touch of sweetness giving it immediate appeal. A brisk note of lemongrass lingers on the dusty finish. Should be a very versatile wine at the table." Qupe has been making Marsanne since 1987 and has pretty much stayed with the same style--picked at the low end of ripeness while it still has plenty of acidity and refreshingly low alcohol. Marsanne in this style exhibits an enticing 'wet stone' minerality along with hints of almonds, honey, citrus and flowers.

2009 Domaine Des Nembrets Saint Veran

Some of the very best and most expensive Chardonnay in the world is white Burgundy, but appellations such as Meursault and Montrachet have become prohibitively dear. There are, however, many smaller regions, particularly toward the south that make splendid wines at still approachable prices. You can look for Macon-Villages, Macon-Lugny, Rully, Santenay or Saint Veran. This 2008 is vinified 50% in stainless and 50% in barrel from vines averaging 40 years old. It shows fine floral notes and clean fruit with restrained mineral nuances and a crisp citric backbone. It has excellent purity and depth.

2008 Sonoma-Cutrer Chardonnay

This wine has all the elements of a classic Sonoma chardonnay. The fruit aromas of fresh sliced apple and pear are complimented with citrus notes of lime, grapefruit and Meyer lemon and a floral touch of honeysuckle and orange blossom. In the mouth, it is lush, round and creamy with support from a firm acid structure that creates excellent balance.

Altogether a mouth-watering Chard of the first order.

2009 Txakoli Txomin Etxaniz

Coming from the smallest appellation in Spain, only 124 acres, Txomin Etxaniz (pronounced Cho min Ay cha neez in Basque) is the benchmark wine of the appellation. The wine is light straw-colored with an enticing bouquet of sea salt, mineral, baking spices, spring flowers and green apple, on the palate it is crisp, vibrant, impeccably balanced, and totally refreshing. It is ideal, as one might surmise, with fresh fish and shellfish. This earned a 90 rating from *The Wine Advocate*.

Collector's Club Reds

2006 Albino Armani Cassetta

Cassetta, called Foja Tonda in dialect, is a grape indigenous to the Alto Adige and cultivated since antiquity in the area. After having been abandoned since the market favored other more profitable, prolific and popular grape varieties, Foja Tonda seemed destined for extinction, until Albino Armani rediscovered it and in 2002 managed to have it approved among the varieties admitted by the authorities for cultivation. As of 2007 the grape has been recognized as D.O.C. Terra dei Forti. Unfortunately, as is the case with his Pinot Grigio (see notes above), it doesn't appear that any more of this unusual wine will be available to us in Michigan. I had the opportunity to try three successive vintages of this wine, each quite distinct from the others. The youngest was almost Pinot-like while the oldest had some characteristics of Amarone.

2007 Acacia Carneros Pinot Noir

Hand harvested fruit is de-stemmed and cold soaked. After about 3 weeks in fermentation tanks, the wine is pressed and transferred to oak barrels where it is aged for 7 months. The wine is full of ripe plum, raspberry and blackberry aromas. A perfume of roses adds delicate flower nuances while some oak influence leaves notes of nuttiness. The tart acidity on the palate nicely balances out the medium body and fine tannins, and leaves the mouth with a bright raspberry flourish of a finish.

2007 Clos du Val Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

The Wine Enthusiast's 90 point review: "A bit burly in tannins, with a dry, sandpapery mouthfeel. But that doesn't stop the blackberry, black cherry and currant fruit from shining through, or put a damper on the sweet, toasty oak notes. Doesn't feel like an ager, so the tannins are here to stay, but a good steak will wrestle them into submission."

2008 Sherwood Marlborough Pinot Noir

The Sherwood earned a score of 91 from *The Wine Advocate*: "The wonderful 2008 Pinot Noir has a lovely cranberry and raspberry leaf nose with superb definition. The palate is very well crafted with fine tannins, well judged acidity allowing the joyous fruit to really express themselves: raspberry, a touch of blueberry and dark cherry."

2008 Clos de los Siete Mendoza Red

A perennial collector's favorite, this tends to be tight and closed on first release. If you don't lay it down for a couple years cellaring, decant it and give it plenty of aeration before you pair it with a hearty beef dish. Ripe but focused and juicy, with blueberry and bramble notes laced with fruitcake and spice hints. A nice briary edge keeps the finish honest. Malbec, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Petit Verdot.

2007 Robert Hall Paso Robles Cabernet Sauvignon

A complex Cab with plum, black currant, and cocoa aromas echoed by rich persistent flavors of plush ripe fruit, dark chocolate and spice all supported by balancing rich velvety tannins. "Shows the fruity ripeness that Paso Robles so easily achieves, with waves of blackberries and cassis. Yet there's also good structure, with rich, fine tannins and a good spine of acidity. With a slightly sweet finish, it's an elegant Cabernet to drink now." 88 *The Wine Enthusiast*

So this is the end for Jim Hiller's Wine Club. Godspeed; take time to enjoy the wines and the people that you love.
Eric Novak