

Wine & Spirits Magazine's Top 100 Tasting Event



Though I like to think I'm not exactly a heathen, I have to admit that I've never promenaded along a red carpet, let alone ascend a long set of stone steps overlaid with one. But that's exactly how guests were welcomed to the recent *Wine & Spirits Magazine's Top 100 Tasting Event*.

Showcasing not only the best wines, as submitted to the publication over the last year, the evening was also a true cornucopia of fabulous food, all for the enjoyment of a throng of industry professionals and enthusiasts hobnobbing in the labyrinthine interior of the Old Mint Building where the event was held in San Francisco.

In the interest of acclimating before the crowd became unwieldy, I arrived on the early side of the media preview.

And though at this point, guests were only trickling in gradually, the lively and festive undertone of the event became immediately apparent: as I checked in, I was offered a glass of sparkling wine (Iron Horse Vineyards' Wedding Cuvee) and within a few steps was greeted by a generously appointed table of eats prepared by Bar Bambino, featuring roasted almonds and olives, Grana Padano cheese, a Salumi Selection of u'ndoui and wild fennel, and Baccala Mantecato, a pillowy puree of salt cod and potatoes. As I indulged in the nibbles, I took a few minutes to get a lay of the land, this being my first time to have ever set foot inside the landmark building. It became quickly evident that the Top 100 wines that evening were organized — a bit creatively, I thought — into separate rooms based on style or varietal. This made it easy not only to locate them in the seemingly winding floor plan, but perhaps more importantly, to taste numerous wines of a particular category without experiencing the sudden palate-shock likely if they'd been arranged in any other manner. After all, there were wines from nearly every conceivable region, representing varietals and styles that ran the gamut. Though I ultimately tasted wines from all but a few of the producers pouring that evening, as with every tasting event, I had my personal favorites — those I felt that for one reason or another stood out as extraordinary and unforgettable in my own mind.

In the courtyard that extended just beyond the center foyer were featured wines described as "Sparkling and Crisp".

First were the Champagnes, including vintage Blancs de Blancs by Diebolt-Vallois (1997, \$50) and Louis Roederer (2000, \$85), along with their effervescent cousins, highlighted by the 2003 Green Valley Classic Vintage Brut (\$35) from Sonoma's Iron Horse Vineyards. Alongside these were a number of lean, still wines made primarily from Sauvignon Blanc. Standouts among these hailed from Sancerre, with the surprisingly round, deep, and lush 2006 *Les Baronnes* by Henri Bourgeois (\$25), and Chile's Casa Marin with its herbaceous 2007 *San Antonio Cipreses*

Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc (\$30). Wonderful examples also hailed from New Zealand, with Saint Clair's fresh and grassy 2007 *Vicar's Choice* (\$18), and from Napa, with St. Supéry's delightful own 2007 vintage (\$20). Not to be overlooked, the up and coming region of Greece made a solid showing with not one, but two producers hailing from the volcanic island of Santorini: the 2007 Assytiko by Sigalas (\$15) and the 2006 *Kallisti Reserve* by Boutari (\$25). Offered as a savory pairing with these wines was the opulence of oysters-on-the-half-shell by Aquatic Culture, along with a sumptuous preparation from Sebo of yukon gold potato and mentaiko (raw, spicy cured cod roe) salad with scallions and kizami nori (fine shredded seaweed).

Naturally progressing from these wines were those that are known to be highly aromatic, as featured in the room of "Floral" whites, heavily represented by Riesling. Standouts from Germany were two vintage 2006 Beerenauslesen — one by August Kessler, the other by Dr. Loosen (\$25/187mL) — both with a shimmering acidity that beautifully balanced the flavors of sweet lemon marmalade. Garnering the attention of Ernst Loosen himself is Washington's Chateau Ste. Michelle, resulting in a collaboration on the production of *Eroica*, a Columbia Valley Riesling making a bold statement of its own and a memorable appearance at the event with its 2007 vintage (\$25). Another standout, both for its value-driven wines and its location in the relatively unknown but increasingly attention-grabbing region of New York's Finger Lakes, was Fox Run Vineyards with their 2006 Gewurtztraminer (\$22). As a perfect accompaniment to these wines, Fish & Farm featured Grilled, Marinated Monterey Bay Squid in Phillo Cups with Spiced Roasted Fall Squash — a delectable combination of flavors that had me coming back for more.

Page 2 of 3

The room of "Rich" wines, true to its name, featured fuller bodied whites heavily represented by Chardonnay and ranging from the leaner, minerally Chablis to more fruit-driven versions from the New World. Head and shoulders among these, and somewhere between the extremes in style, was the exquisite 2005 Puligny-Montrachet (Les Pucelles) by Domaine Leflaive (\$212). While I haven't a point of reference to indicate how it compares to other wines of that region — being that it's the first Premier Cru white Burgundy I've had the good fortune to taste — I can safely state that it was nothing short of sublime. In a very different style was the 2004 *Reeves Point* Chardonnay (\$30) by Jacob's Creek, a producer known for its value-priced wines, but which nevertheless demonstrates its ability to bring to the market a wine of unique character and quality. Additional standouts came in the form of other varietals, including Brundlmayer's 2002 *Kamptal Alte Reben* Gruner Veltliner (\$25) and Tahbilk's value-driven 2006 *Nagambie Lakes* Marsanne (\$15). Different styles of Pinot Gris were also showcased, with a fine example in Marcel Deiss's 2004 *Beblenheim* (\$33), hailing from Alsace, along with King Estate's unctuous 2006 Vin Glace (\$25/375mL) from Oregon, a region where the varietal has comfortably made a second home for itself. And finally, the standout deserving of very special mention was the extraordinarily seductive 2002 Venezia Giulia Bianco *Breg Anfora* by Gravner (\$110), a blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, and Riesling, whose innocuous start on the palate belies what ultimately amounts to a gorgeously balanced elixir of subtlety and power that just about knocked me off balance. To pair with these and the other rich white wines poured, Local Restaurant & Wine Merchant offered a few of their own delicious preparations: Roquefort Cheese with Caramalized Pear; Walnuts with a Black Pepper Gastric; Goat Cheese Profiteroles (Cheese Puffs); and Hard Boiled Egg and Shrimp Sandwich with a Cucumber, Lemon, Dill, & Mustard Aioli.

Presenting a fairly wide range in style, the "Pinot Noir" room featured wines from this varietal's most notable regions.

Leading the group were top examples hailing from Burgundy, many of which were produced from vineyards bearing the highest classification. Standouts for me among these were Albert Bichot's 2005 Domaine du Clos Frantin Grand Cru Echézeaux, with its assertively fruit-driven profile (uncommon among its peers) and a smooth, creamy finish; and Vincent Girardin's 2005 Chambertin Grand Cru, with its wild cherry flavors and streak of minerality. Top California wineries in this category hailed overwhelmingly from the Sonoma Coast, an AVA firmly entrenched as a region producing outstanding Pinots, often substantial in weight and lush in mouthfeel. Among them, the ones I found most notable were the 2006 McDougal Ranch by Drew, with its full dark cherry fruit and soft structure; and the 2005 Hirsch Vineyard by Williams Selyem, with its delightful wild berry and pomegranate flavors. And finally, coming from a region now widely considered significant in the world of Pinot Noir — so much so that more than a few Burgundy producers have taken notice — were wines from Oregon's Willamette Valley. Highlights among these were WillaKenzie Estate's 2004 Triple Black Slopes and the 2005 Dundee Hills Laurène by Domaine Drouhin (apropos, overseen by the daughter of one of the aforementioned Burgundy producers).

The room of "Austrian, Italian, Iberian" wines featured red and primarily full-bodied examples from those regions.

Presenting themselves as fine ambassadors of their Austrian homeland were Feiler-Artinger's delicious 2005

Burgenland Umriss Blaufrankisch (\$40) and the somewhat more value-driven 2005 Mittelburgenland

Hochacker Blaufrankisch (\$20) by Weninger.

Standing out among the handful of powerhouses from Italy were the breathtaking Super Tuscan 2005 Bolgheri Paleo by Le Macchiole (\$110), with its deep black fruit and olive flavors intermingled with chocolate, along with the 2004 Barbaresco *Sori Rio Sordo* by Ca' Rome' di Romano Marengo (\$65), with its earthy, ripe berry and plum flavors, and a texture softer than expected for a Nebbiolo-based wine. Alongside the Italian contingent was a strong showing of Iberian producers. Two downright sensual wines worthy of mention both hailed from Spain's Priorat region: Buil & Giné (2006, \$25) and Vall Llach (2005, \$35). But the star of the group, for me, was Viña Izadi's 2001 Rioja *Expresión* (\$50), a gorgeous wine of incredible depth, concentration, and length, made entirely of 100-year old vine Tempranillo and performing well above its retail value. Proudly representing Portugal was the luscious 2005 Douro Grande Reserva Tinto (\$40) by Carm, with its flavors of cherry jam, blackberries, chocolate, and coffee. Alongside these sensational wines, SPQR featured Fresh Ricotta with Winter Squash Sott'olio: small crostini, topped with fresh ricotta and a mix of roasted, marinated butternut squash, and red onion seasoned with red wine vinegar and chile flake.