

Cabernet Sauvignon

WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone

SUMMERS are usually much less hectic for me in wine terms. But not this one. The busy schedule of wine tastings and events continued right through the hot months, which I suppose is clear evidence of the ever growing interest in the subject.

One of the most interesting sessions that I organised or attended was an evening centred around the much-loved, well-known classic red grape variety, Cabernet Sauvignon. The idea was to show the versatility and adaptability of the variety to different regions, climates and wine-growing and wine-making cultures and more importantly to emphasise the importance of *terroir* in the general make-up of the finished wine.

To this end I chose six wines from different countries of more or less the same quality/value ratio, especially if you consider demand and availability. All were served with food and partially blind, meaning that the participants knew that the wines were based on the same grape variety (but not which one) and the producing countries, but not the order in which they were going to be served.

Favourite variety

Cabernet Sauvignon is a highly adaptable grape variety and, provided it is grown on dry soils and given enough sunshine, it can ripen and provide the raw material for good wine almost anywhere.

With its late flowering and resistance to rot and insects it has been favoured by growers wherever wine is produced, although the naturally low yields tend to put off the lower end producers.

One of the world's thickest skinned varieties, it generally produces full-bodied wines with a very high tannic content, which when balanced by good acidity, means the wine can age well. Certainly its most loved and revered expression is in the Medoc in France, which although always blended with Merlot or Cabernet Franc, has given the high quality reputation to Cabernet Sauvignon. Indeed one of the reasons why the variety has travelled so extensively is because winemakers hope to make a replica Latour or Lafite in South Africa or Chile!

As shown during the tasting, the styles and expressions of Cabernet Sauvignon vary enormously. When grown in hot climates with irrigation it can reach very high degrees of alcohol, sometimes 15.5 per cent or more, and can be dangerously dull and low in acidity, which at worst can strip off the characteristic austerity, blackcurrant flavours, introducing sweeter flavours that are more associated with Merlot.

Grown on Europe's high altitudes, with hot day-time temperatures as in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, Sicily or northern Spain, it can achieve great concentration and complexity and provide wines with a real sense of place. Some

regions and producers have made considerable contributions to the development of their local Cabernet plantings with in some cases dramatic, nearly revolutionary results. Of course I am talking about wines like Sassicaia, Solaia in Tuscany and even Vega Sicilia in Ribera.

In a decent Medoc vintage it can give great elegance and finesse, plus ageability, minerality and complexity at relatively lower alcohol (12-13 per cent). When grown in lesser quality soils (plains or wet) or poorly vinified, as many East European examples it can give weedy, green, tart wines.

For real fruit and direct flavours look out for Chile's output. At best they take on minty and sweeter characteristics with a thicker texture that even if sometimes they remind me of Merlot, they are great value wines. Try Torres's Manso de Valesco, or Los Vascos by the Rothschilds.

Origins

The origins of Cabernet Sauvignon are not clear but a recent book suggests that it is a direct descendant of an obscure Greek wine grape known as Volitsa. In *Desert Island Wines*, Miles Lambert-Gocs proposes that Cabernet Sauvignon made its way to Europe via the coastal region of what is now Albania. He believes this link has never been explored.

Lambert-Gocs became convinced that Volitsa was the modern name for an ancient grape called Balisca. He then found relevant references in the Roman classical texts of Pliny and Columella. When combined with visual comparisons to modern Cabernet Sauvignon, he believes this evidence is enough to merit exploring the DNA.

Decanter magazine however reports that certain wine scholars are not convinced. "I'm not convinced that there's a close connection at all," said grape geneticist Carole Meredith, Professor Emerita at the University of California Davis, who in 1996 discovered that Cabernet Sauvignon is a hybrid of Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc. She said comparisons of the DNA profiles of Volitsa Mavri and Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon did not reveal any notable similarity.

Replying to this, Lambert-Gocs

that Volitsa is not identical to Cabernet Sauvignon. Rather, it is one of Cabernet Sauvignon's ancestors, and definitely the one that can concretely tie the variety to Ancient Greece.

"If this does not motivate ampelographers and geneticists to visit the areas of Greece and Albania that are involved, I don't know what would" (for further reading see Jancis Robinson's *Oxford Companion to Wine*).

But let's return to the tasting.



Cabernet Sauvignon grape

Tasting

We started the evening with the very ripe Pedriel's Reserve 2000 from Argentina. Quite thick and chewy, slightly sweet and oak spicy. From just across the Andes, in Chile, I proposed the new Errazuris Cabernet Sauvignon Organico 2005. These are wines made from organic or nearly Bio Dynamic grown grapes in high altitudes. Closed and a bit shaken, this needs a few months, maybe even years, to start showing its charms but it has a very clean and natural aroma which although high in alcohol (around 14.5 per cent) has a good balancing acidity. It has quite a peppery aroma which, at this stage, threw some of those present into thinking that the variety was Syrah. A mistake I often make!

From Chile we returned back to Europe and on more familiar

grounds. Tasca D'Almerita's Cabernet Sauvignon from the not-so-spectacular Italian vintage of 2002 is showing beautifully at present, shedding off its austerity and harshness and bringing to the fore meaty, savoury flavours backed by a mineral complexity. Many eventually voted this the best wine of the evening. Deservedly, I would say.

Grand Puy Lacoste, as indeed all other Bordeaux wines, is of course a blend, with Cabernet Sauvignon representing around 75 per cent of the vineyard and quite possibly even a bit less in the wine produced in the 2001 vintage. Still, I wanted to show a Bordeaux, based on the grape that gives the Medoc its classical structure. Fine, fresh and elegant with classical pencil, tobacco, eucalyptus and mineral flavours holding its charm and breed among the other wines.

Cape Mentelle 2000 from Western Australia is a huge wine. At around 15.5 per cent alcohol it is not for the weak-hearted, neither for the consummate wine lover. Bombastic and in your face, tasting more of a rich chocolate and fruit cake. Port-like.

We finished the evening with Mondavi's Reserve 2002. Another taste bud numbing wine standing in at 14.5 per cent alcohol. Having tasted this wine on several occasions before, this was proof that wines have to be drunk before a definite conclusion on their pleasing abilities. Jammy and sticky. Dull and rather boring.

One of the greats

To finish off on a positive note, I am glad to report that I have added another wine to my book of great wines tasted. At a recent dinner in Bordeaux, Jacques Capdemourlin presented a carafe of wine for us to guess the vintage. The many experts present suggested quite a few years, ranging from 1982 to my own 1961.

If you are in any doubt about the ageability of well grown wine... take a deep breath. Burgundy red, still bright and clear. Lovely, mesmerising bouquet of incense and sweet almonds. Smooth and silky on the palate and astonishingly still there in the mouth with a lingering, long finish. Oh... it was Chateau Cap de Mourlin of 1928!

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