

A flavorful debate

Jon Bonné

Friday, February 19, 2010

Probably it was a throwaway tweet. Robert Parker (now in the Twitterverse at @robertmparkerjr) wrote last week that Australian Shiraz was being cold-shouldered by "the anti-flavor wine elite." Within two seconds, the winerati proudly assumed that mantle: a flavor-hating renegade band.

Once again, back to the battle over flavor: What do you like in your wine? Do you want a raft of fruit or the savory nuance of mineral and earth and spice?

The wines in question - and again, I'm thinking this was a quip in the spirit of the moment - aren't just about flavor, they're about fruit. In gobs and oodles.

Fruit is the typical barometer for flavor in wine, but should it be? Too often we wind up drawing lines in the fruit basket, but there's a world of flavor in wine for us to embrace. Fruit and non-fruit - big flavor and little flavor, if you prefer - should be able to live in harmony.

Good luck with that. Too often the New World uses fruit as an excuse for not controlling ripeness: It's the signature of place to be all about fruit, while those funky Old World wines have unfruited nuance as compensation for their struggles with ripeness. Flavor haters love 'em.

This has, for instance, long been the (mostly successful) argument for the difference in sparkling-wine styles between California and Champagne - California's ripe fruit versus Champagne's chalky rigor. Except ripe Champagne vintages and complex, yeasty California bottles are blurring those lines.

Back to those Aussie Shirazes: What of the biting, peppery Shirazes of the colder corners of Victoria? Try a Philip Shaw Shiraz and tell me that the flavor-hating elite wouldn't find charms in its peppery bite. For that matter, if fruit flavors are the preference of the masses, how has the grassy smack of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc come to such favor? Is it a Trojan horse for flavor haters to spread their fruitless message?

Yet there is a point to the flavor-hating harangue. Too often, wine skeptics simply dismiss the prospect that big, fruity wines can have charm. There are places I prefer my fruit in check - 2005's white Burgundies bask in ripe



Chardonnay flavors, but they're not necessarily showing off Burgundy's strength - but sometimes fruity is flat-out joyous. The laciest sweet German Rieslings still taste of the sweet brilliance of grapes amid all those stone and oil notes, while good cru Beaujolais can be a juicy, berry-filled blast.

Even size doesn't rule out happy fruit; whatever my own issues with brawny Barossa Shiraz, I'll always defend the transparent beauty of old-vine Grenache grown in the same places. Am I a traitor to the flavor-hating, funk-loving wild bunch?

Increasingly I'm convinced that we find in wine what we want to find. If you're a fan of minerality - which I am - then you'll locate those flavors in wines you adore. If you think you're a fruit lover, then ripe fruit flavors will probably appear in the bottles you enjoy.

Check out the language used to describe super-minerally Muscadet. In the same glass one taster could find a pile of rocks while another swoons over deep citrus flavors. Perhaps it's not so much hating flavor as viewing it through a different prism, no different from orange chicken that's either crazy sweet or just right.

We have to get past this New World = Big Flavor theory, partly because ever more wine lovers out there - and I'm on that roster - believe that flavor doesn't to come from impact. Also because it's a flawed argument. In the same way you can locate plenty of fruit in a Muscadet or a delicate Grignolino from Piedmont, it's equally unfair to paint all California wines with big-fruit brushstrokes.

Try tasting wines like Kevin Harvey's Pinots from Rhys Vineyards, with their almost shocking mineral definition, or Syrah from La Clarine Farm in the Sierra foothills, or one of many dry Rieslings, such as the 2008 Dashe from Potter Valley, and it's clear that we have far more to offer than unabashed fruit.

If insisting on more than fruit means we're flavor haters, so be it. But let's not make this about geography. Somewhere between bloody-knuckle Shiraz and wallflower Pinot is a happy place where a diversity of flavor can thrive.

From the notebook

2007 Mas des Dames La Dame Coteaux de Languedoc Rouge (\$18): You want fruit? The lashes of strawberry, edged with a rustic earthy note, are right up front. It's leathery and tannic, with dried thyme aromas and a dry mineral bite on the finish. Predominantly Grenache, with Carignan and Syrah. (Importer: Vintage '59)

2008 Dashe Cellars McFadden Farms Potter Valley Riesling (\$20): A beautiful intersection of chalky mineral, white floral scents and energetic, dry peach flavors. Fruit? Yes, of course, but amid the ripe peach and lemon confit are savory accents and a big, broad presence.

2008 Guy Bossard Domaine de l'Ecu Expression de Gneiss Muscadet Sevre et Maine (\$21): The exact thing for flavor haters. No mistaking a stony presence here, with a diesel-like hint and darker mineral presence, like being in a mossy, wet cave. There's fruit, on the biting side - lime pith, honeydew rind, and yet even here there are juicier notes to finish. (Importer: Kysela Pere et Fils)

Jon Bonné is The Chronicle's wine editor. E-mail him at jbonne@sfchronicle.com, go to sfgate.com/wine to read his blog and find him on Twitter at twitter.com/jbonne.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/02/19/FD3P1C24D1.DTL>

*This article appeared on page **K - 5** of the San Francisco Chronicle*

© 2010 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)