

# IN WINE COUNTRY

## March Madness and Other Joys

by Von Hurson

I walked a vineyard the other day and no buds are pushing yet ("bud break"), but unless winter decides to happen again, they will be soon. All those happy vines out there should be pruned by the end of the month, and many already have been. Once the buds push and the tender little leaves start to form, the growers can be seen doing anti-frost dances late at night. Spring seems to have set in firmly and early, but growers have learned never to count their clusters before they bloom.

### Mon Dieu!

Since we speak of grapes, now I've really done it. I was recently inducted into the San Francisco Chapter of "La Confrerie des Vignerons de Saint Vincent Macon". Hoity-toity and wine-snobby? Not on your life! The French know how to have fun, eat wonderfully decadent food, and drink incredible wine. Let's see now -- fun, food, wine? Oh yes, and did I mention fun? I bring this up to dispel the persistent rumors that the French take themselves and their wine way too seriously.

Why St. Vincent? Well, he's the patron saint of grape growers, and the prayer to him puts everything in perspective. It reads: "Great St. Vincent, our patron, bless the fruit of our vines and make the wine we are about to taste worthy of your name. Protect us from thirst, protect us from hail, protect us from the diseases of the vine, protect us from frost, protect us from birds, and above all, dear Lord, protect us from taxes. *Vinum bonum laetificat corum hominum!* (Latin scholars rejoice!). *A votre sante!*

But enough of frivolity

and on to more immediate and pressing issues. I've been nudging, cajoling, sometimes downright pushing you to break the surly bonds of wine indifference. I have this dream, you see. My dream is of freedom from wine boredom -- wine sameness.

You wouldn't believe the number of people I meet who tell me they like an occasional wine, but don't really know much of anything about it. Occasional? I thought a glass of wine was a "nightly with dinner" thing! To this day, I view each bottle I open with a certain level of anticipation, excitedly looking forward to hearing that cork's muted "pop" as it leaves the bottle on the urgings of a corkscrew. Even if I've had it before, how will it taste tonight with what I'm having for dinner? Call me naïve, but I thought everyone experienced this feeling, like a door opening to adventure and pleasure. I thought everyone poured a small amount from every newly opened bottle of wine, gave a quick swirl, took a thoughtful sniff and sip and nodded approvingly -- or not.

Yes, my dream is to see

someone with a big smile, dancing down the street with the exuberant joy of freedom, an empty glass in one hand and a bottle of newly discovered wine in the other.

So how does one become so enamored with the seductive grape? And why would you want to? Well, perhaps a story would best serve to illustrate, and I'll make it personal -- my story.

Numerous times I have been asked how I "got into" wine, so here's the short version. An unmentionable number of years ago, a charming gentleman I'd met while I was still in the Gallo Hearty Burgundy phase of my life (no, I won't apologize, we all had to start somewhere), asked me out for dinner. With dinner, he served up a bottle of 20-year old Chateau Lafite. Clearly I was no fine-wine connoisseur, but after a few sips of that nectar, I knew I would never look at wine the same way again. Needless to say, my date scored points -- big ones! To his chagrin, he would find that he'd created a monster who would arise years later to go in quest of fine wine, with a passion fed

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by each bottle, each glass, eventually leading to a life of -- yes, wine-writing and wine education! Motivated yet?

### Star Struck!

It takes a lot to impress me these days, but I'll make an exception. Care to play along? OK, what do the following names have in common? Dr. Ann Noble, Heidi Barrett, Amelia Ceja, Marketta Fourmeaux, Ramona Nicholson, and Remi Cohen. Answer: They're just six of the biggest movers and shakers in the California wine-world! OK, now let's see how many names you can match with their achievements: The now-famous Wine Aroma Wheel, winemaker of the \$1250+ bottle of Screaming Eagle, winemaker/owner of Chateau Potelle, winegrower and Vineyard Operations Manager for Merryvale Vineyards, owner of highly-rated and revered Ceja Vineyards and owner of

Nicholson Ranch. Any one of these names would have been a special treat, but all six together at one time and place? That's worth a pilgrimage. They were brought together by **Women For Winesense**, an organization worth looking into for the quality of their programs. And, yes, men are welcome, too.

If you missed last month's column, I'll again mention that I'm putting together what should turn out to be a fun and educational **tasting panel**, the results of which will reach publication. I've had some great responses and would welcome a few more. Again, wine expertise is not a prerequisite, but an email to me is -- [wynelady@sonic.net](mailto:wynelady@sonic.net) -- indicating your excitement to be a member of the panel. I expect the panel will be ready to rock and roll in a month or two.

## THE HAPPY TASTING PANEL TEST...

(see wine column this issue)

...TO ELIMINATE FEARS AND OBJECTIONS

QUESTION: What best describes your view of your wine tasting abilities?

1. I'm quite the expert -- really. You need me on the panel.
2. I don't know how to taste wines, I just like 'em.
3. Me? Aw, I don't know much about wines....

ANSWER: If you answered "that's me" to any of the above, you're tasting panel material!



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