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Wine: Freestyling in California with wine, not skateboards

By JOE APPEL, January 16, 2013

Finally, California wine is becoming American. With the prominent exception of boosting all-American Zinfandel, California was for decades overly (if understandably) preoccupied with proving it could make "world-class" wines. That meant French wines. And it brought a lot of scientific contortionism, with the University of California Davis holding the banner, as practice was bent to theory.

Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Pinot Noir led the earlier charges, as winemakers struggled to show that the western United States could produce wines to "compete" with the great wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy. The Rhone-inspired counter-reformation followed, as a younger generation discovered that much of California's climate and soil make-up were better suited to such varietals as Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre.

Welcome to the third (or so) wave, where any greatness California expresses will come from any place it wants, regardless of whether the grapes' pedigree is Grand Cru back in the old world. To be American is to freestyle.

Many of the more exciting wines coming from California these days are made in regions with less expensive real estate than Napa or Sonoma allow, using grapes from Albarino to Trousseau, Ribolla Gialla to Teroldego, vinified with more stylistic diversity than past generations.

In Maine, most of these wines are still quite difficult, though not impossible, to find. The Italianate offerings from Uvaggio, distributed here by Nappi, are an excellent introduction. Uvaggio is the brainchild of Jim Moore, a vintner with more than three decades of experience in California (making wine for Robert Mondavi and Randall Grahm, among others) who has settled in Lodi to develop his own label.

Lodi, an hour-and-a-half southeast of Napa Valley, is "not hotter'n-hell the way most people think of it," Moore told me over the phone. "That's east Paso Robles." Lodi does see less diurnal temperature fluctuation than most of Napa, and more climate and soil consistency, which has allowed Moore to experiment in a more controlled manner with different grape varietals and vinification approaches.

Overall, Uvaggio wines show lower alcohol, more acidity, more appreciation for harmony than California is usually given credit for. And they are almost shockingly "varietally correct." The Vermentino tastes like a wine from Sardegna or Corsica, the dry Moscato has true ties to Friuli, the Primitivo echoes Puglia with bell-like clarity.

Moore says Lodi is "great for early-season whites, and late-ripening reds."

This is borne out in Uvaggio's Vermentino (\$13). Moore loves Vermentino, which hails originally from Tuscany and Liguria though it's better known from Sardegna. In southern France it goes by

the name of Rolle, where it often takes on a more sun-baked, mineral, austere personality than the briny, caper-flecked Italian version presents.

"Vermentino is a wonderful grape," Moore said, "and not as appreciated as it should be. When it's made well, it's better than Pinot Grigio, and I theorized that if PG was doing well in Lodi, Vermentino would too. It's a very adaptable grape."

He added that the Uvaggio is a "weird synthesis of Corsica and Sardegna," though his characterization of the wine as a meeting between Pinot Grigio and the Austrian Gruner Veltliner is spot-on. Olive brine and under-ripe summer fruit flavors (especially melon) converge with bracing salinity, lime pith and a spicy kick. It's terrific with herb white fish preparations, as well as salads and cooked green vegetables. There's a silkiness, too, which reminds me more of the Rolle wines from the southern Rhone I've had.

It's exciting and suitable that Moore produces a Primitivo, the Puglia-bred close cousin of Zinfandel. The Uvaggio Primitivo (\$18) is terrific. I've always considered Primitivo as a slightly less brash version of Zin, and brought a Zin-based set of presumptions to my first taste of it. As delightful as the wine is, the closer associations are with Oregon Pinot Noir or Cru Beaujolais. (Moore drew this connection for me, and it's true).

The wine's yumminess factor is that high, an almost undeniable joyful deliciousness, but it doesn't stop there. Raspberry fruit and a touch of root beer come out at first, then a grippy bite and touch of spice, backed with great acidity. There is terrific harmony and integration, not words ordinarily associated with such a bold and (often overly) rustic varietal. The body is refreshingly even-keeled, the alcohol is a decidedly low 13.5 percent. It's a flat-out sexy wine, and the number of California wines thrice the price that don't deliver a third of this wine's sheer pleasure is offensively high.

There's a fantastic Moscato Secco from Uvaggio (\$15), though I have few illusions many of you will try it. (Why? Because people are scared of dry Moscato, a topic I hope to address soon enough.) The Uvaggio channels Friuli or Alto Adige, with that inimitable apricot nose, a great spicy bite with copious ginger notes. As with the Primitivo, I so appreciate this wine's texture: satin-smooth, supporting a lot of flesh with grace and ease.

My least favorite of the Uvaggio wines is the Barbera 2009 (\$18), a grape I love when it's good but is hard to bring to balanced ripeness on the vine and can be temperamental in the glass. The 2009 comes on bold and ripe with a lot of purple berry fruit, but about halfway through, something falls out of the bottom.

The 2010 vintage will come on the market later this year: Moore likes it, but he's ebullient about the 2012 vintage, which he said "is good the way a \$25 Barbera d'Alba is good. The 2012 is exceptional, one of the best Lodi wines I've ever crafted, in terms of intensity, balance, body. I want to make a real statement with that wine."

See, there's that American thing. We make statements. Jim Moore doesn't speak beyond what he knows, but he's unafraid to commingle old-world materials with an innovative attempt to introduce something new into the culture.

It's morning in America.

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