



With 18 years in the wine industry, Von is a wine judge and popular wine educator. She has co-authored a book, worked in vineyards and made wine. Have a question or comment? Email: wynelady@sonic.net

IN WINE COUNTRY

Vineyard Fever and a Bordeaux Tasting

by Von Hurson

Ah yes! Every year around this time I find myself fighting an irresistible urge to take an afternoon off, and head for Wine Country. It's the vineyards, with their rows upon rows of neatly pruned vines. Between the rows – the “cover crops” of pink and white clover and vibrant green grasses and legumes – custom mixes of grasses, legumes, flowers and more, planted to adjust soil nutrients and stop soil erosion.

There's yellow mustard everywhere too – an explosion of color, so bright and beautiful, sprouting up among the vines. It's a veritable feast for the eyes and the spirit.

I can't help myself. I find myself with an almost irresistible urge to go merrily skipping through the vines and the brilliant yellow mustard blooms.

But let's personalize it and make it your experience. Go ahead – visualize it. Then do it! There's something truly magical about the vines. You can run with gay abandon through the vineyard or you can stroll lazily among the vines, gazing at the breathtaking view around you. But above all, turn off your iTunes and take out your earbuds. It's the sounds of everything around you that make it so special – the soil under your feet, the rustle of the mustard or other cover crop, the sound of birds, and perhaps a soft whisper of a breeze through the vines.

This is a whole-body experience – sight, sound, smell – and even touch. There will likely be buds on the vines – “Budbreak” it's called. Those are your future grapes – your future wine that you're looking at. So go ahead and stroke a bud gently. It will probably produce a more perfect cluster of grapes – just for the attention you gave it.

You can take this stress-

reducing walk on your own –perhaps during a lunch break or at the end of the day when the sun is getting lower and the shadows of the vines have taken on a softness – touched by the slight golden-pink of a setting sun. But it can be even better to share this amazing experience with someone else – pausing often for an appreciation moment. Look at the vineyard you're in. It's beautiful, isn't it? Look all around you. You might see a sea of vines, with Mt. St. Helena peeking up on one side, the coastal mountains on the other. In every direction you face, you're looking at something that makes the wines that come from these vines something unique and special – the soil, the mountains, hills and bench lands.

So go ahead – treat yourself. It's free! And it's one of the most compelling reasons visitors from around the country, and around the world, dream of someday moving to a place like this. So go play in the vines one day soon and smile because we live here – it's all ours!

Changing subjects....

Earlier this year I again found myself at one of the media tastings I most look forward to – the Grands Crus de Bordeaux – a chance to taste the latest Bordeaux releases. This year was the 2010 vintage – Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot based blends for the reds and Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon for the whites. Wines from all over Bordeaux were here: Haut-Medoc, Pomerol, Saint-Emilion, Graves, Margaux, Saint-Julien, Pauillac, Saint-Estephe and more – 110 producers from some of the

finest French Grands Crus. Four hours wasn't enough time to taste and evaluate them all.

This is no “Sonoma casual” event. This is “French” in every glorious meaning of the word – held in the Plaza Hotel ballroom in San Francisco. First, the wineries are represented by the owners and winemakers of the various Châteaux – the men in suits and ties – the women beautifully attired, many with exquisite scarves – a delightful French couture signature.

Sound stuffy? Not on your life! These people are some of the most down-to-earth, gracious people you'll meet and they're happy to answer any questions you might have about their wines or vineyards. Do you hear French spoken around you? Mais oui! But most owners and winemakers also speak excellent English. They're not just justifiably proud of their wines, they're happy to show and explain why.

So what did I find? Well, I found more wineries that had drifted into producing a more “International Style”. Many wines were well-balanced but there were fewer that displayed that special uniqueness that I so much love in French and other European wines. Were more wines being made

to a formula that would hopefully earn high points from a few well-known wine critics? Oh, I hope not. I did find some stand-outs, of course. Château Grand Mayne, Château Brane-Cantenac and Château Rauzan-Ségla were amazing, though I discovered others that were close behind.

But where did I find the most exciting wines? In the wines from Sauternes and Barsac! These are the sweet, botrytised white wines that you taste when you're finished with the dry wines. Of the ten Châteaux that brought their wines, it was here that I found heaven in a bottle – something that makes your eyes widen with the thrill of having tasted something truly sublime. What was most exciting was how different they all were! Everything from citrus, to herbs, honey, cinnamon, clove, white peach, baked pear, and apricot! OMG! What makes these wines so incredible is the balance of acidity that keeps the sweetness from becoming cloying. Fabulous! I wrote about Château d'Yquem a few months ago and now have to add Château Coutet, Château de Fargues and the incredible Château Giraud!

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