

# *Amherst Wines & Spirits*

**January 2010**

## **WINE MARKET OUTLOOK – 2010**

Most of what we can expect in terms of prices this year is intimately connected to the state of the worldwide economy. Our crystal ball is a bit foggy here. It's hard to imagine any aggressive price increases in the near term. We also do not expect to see more of the price declines we saw in 2009 as much of the wine which was backing up in the trade inventories (and which was moved through via a series of fire sales) has been reduced to manageable levels. In general, it looks like a period of relative price stability for our products. The major concern, as we see it, seems to be the strength of the U.S. dollar. Any significant weakening would result in higher prices for imports. A quick look across the important winegrowing regions suggests . . .

U.S.: Domestic producers continue to struggle in the value department. This is particularly true in California and Oregon. We are seeing a few more well priced wines, but in general we're finding better value from Europe and South America. Do not expect lower prices on the super expensive "cult" wines, except as wholesalers adjust their inventories. Producers will cut production, hold prices, sell the excess juice on the bulk market and wait for a brighter day. On the plus side, we're seeing better quality as a few producers begin to move away from the overripe, high alcohol fruit bombs of the past to more balanced, food-friendly wines. The excessive use of oak is no longer a big problem.

EUROPE: The French have already begun beating the drums over the 2009 vintage, especially in Bordeaux. There is evidence that the "futures" market for Bordeaux has lost some luster in recent years, but a strong vintage could turn that around. These folks are PR masters. Italy and Spain should continue to be good sources for value reds and whites, especially if you're willing to venture off the beaten path. We look hard for these.

SOUTH AMERICA: We are most impressed by what we're tasting from Chile and, increasingly, Argentina. The French, Italian, and Spanish influence is felt here as much of the investment in \$ and know-how during the past 15-20 years has come from Europe. Stylistically, many of these wines hit a midpoint between the ripeness of California and the restraint of Europe. Malbecs from Argentina struggle for stylistic identity but in general offer sound value. In general, Chile and Argentina should continue to be a strong source of value wines, both in the <\$10 and \$15-\$20 range.

AUSTRALIA: The Aussies are reinventing themselves. Stung by criticism from the wine press over factory produced, cookie-cutter styles and lack of regional identity they have set about making changes. We're noticing it first in the whites (see January 16<sup>th</sup> tasting on page 2) which have become more lean and crisp. We look for lower alcohol on many reds arriving this year, a welcome change.

## **FRANCE'S RHONE VALLEY – 2 SMALL PRODUCERS**

The impressive run of strong vintages from the Rhône, the source of some of France's best reds, has emboldened a few small growers to produce their own wine instead of selling their grapes to large producers who incorporate them into their blends. Often the vineyard sites have superior location yielding grapes which, in the right hands, result in something quite fantastic. We have been fortunate to stumble onto two which are worthy of mention. The downside? Less than 15 cases of each were available in MA.

### **Rasteau, Domaine Grand Nicolet Vieilles Vignes 2007 . . \$22.99**

*A blend of 80% Grenache & 20% Syrah from very old vines in the appellation of Rasteau, one of the villages which, due to its superior vineyard sites, is allowed to use its name. This is a muscular red, dark inky purple in color, big tannins, and gobs of dark chocolate and blackcurrant.*

### **Cairanne "La Font d'Estévenas", Domaine Alary 2007 . . \$29.99**

*Cairanne is another of the small villages whose name has been granted appellation status. The Alary family have been growers for 11 generations in the Rhône Valley. This is another powerhouse red, showing hints of earth, cassis, and kirsch. The flavors come in layers and just keep coming. Will continue to improve for another year or so.*

## SATURDAY IN-STORE TASTINGS

There are five Saturdays in January and we've got a fun tasting lineup for each. From 2:00 – 5:00 we're popping corks and pouring interesting wines. Each tasting is built around a single theme in order to max out the learning potential. There's a tasting sheet with background information on what we're doing that day along with fresh baked baguettes to clear the palate. It's a terrific way to experience wines you might have missed, make new discoveries, and increase your wine smarts. Oh, did we say it's all compliments of the house? Turn up, drop in, sip down.

### January 2: Spain's Tempranillo Grape

*Tempranillo is Spain's most widely planted fine wine grape. From its home in the famous Rioja region it has spread to other winegrowing areas with remarkable success.*

### January 9: U.S. Proprietary Reds

*Many wineries are marketing blends under a proprietary name. Some are plonk. Some are really, really good. If you're adventurous enough to try without the familiarity of a grape on the label, you'll make some great discoveries.*

### January 16: Chardonnay, Australia Style

*Nowhere have changing consumer preferences impacted styles more than Australia. Gone are most of the too ripe, too alcoholic, palate numbing fruit bombs of the past. Prepare to be surprised.*

### January 23: Washington Reds

*Washington is becoming a world class red wine region with a style quite different from California. Come taste some terrific cabernets, merlots, and syrahs.*

### January 30: Italy's Islands

*The reds from Sicily and Sardinia are almost always good, sometimes terrific. Depending mostly on indigenous grapes these reds are a wonderful addition to the already heterogeneous Italian wine pallet.*

## WINTER WHITES

Each year at about this time we take stock of what we call "winter whites", by which we mean more robust styles. Well chosen, these can match up beautifully with hearty winter fare – veggie stews, roast chicken, even Laurie's meatless lasagna. So . . . if white is right, read on.

### **Malvasia, Conti Zecca 2009 (IT) . . . \$9.99**

*We wish more folks would get familiar with the Malvasia grape. Grown in several areas of Italy (this is from Puglia), they offer an exciting alternative – medium full, dry without being sharp or puckery, notes of toasted almond and vanilla.*

### **Coté Est, Domaine Lafage 2008 (FR) . . . \$10.99**

*From southern France's Mediterranean coast just by the Spanish border, a blend of Grenache Blanc, Chardonnay, and Marsanne. The flavors practically jump from the glass, showing a ripe/tart gooseberry take, full and lush. The finish is crisp & dry. This has style!!*

### **Chardonnay, Estancia 2008 (CA) . . . \$11.99**

*With its slightly cooler climate Monterey offers an ideal growing climate for Chardonnay and with land costs lower than Napa & Sonoma to the north there's lots of value. The flavors are bright, balancing ripe fruit flavors against natural acidity. Not a wimpy white, we find surprising concentration and flavor definition in this well made Monterey Chard.*

### **Côtes-du-Rhône, Chateau Trignon 2007 (FR) . . . \$14.99**

*About 3% of wine from Côtes-du-Rhône is white, often not worth messing with except for a very good year. 2007 was such a year. Made from 100% Viognier grape. Plump, full flavors of citrus peel, white peach, and a touch of earth. Boffo bouquet of wildflowers and honey. Pretty interesting stuff.*

### **Pfefferer, Colterenzio 2008 (IT) . . . \$15.99**

*We're always eager to explore the nooks & crannies of winedom in the hopes of stumbling on something really interesting. This is Italy's Moscato grape grown in the foothills of the Alps. Often sweet, this Moscato is not. You get the slightest suggestion of sweet upfront, but the full, silky soft flavors have a dried honey/citrus sense. Tired of the usual?*

## SOUTH AFRICA – OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

We have found a bunch of reds to like and wanted to bring a few to your attention. What we really enjoy about these South African reds is how they balance ripe fruit and natural acidity. The wines taste fresh, never heavy.

### **Porcupine Ridge Syrah 2008 . . . \$10.99**

*Black cherry & black tea notes with an intriguing mineral core. Whiffs of cracked pepper and smoke in the bouquet. Made by Boekenhoutskloof in South Africa's coastal region. Don't ask us to pronounce it.*

### **The Wolftrap 2008 . . . \$10.99**

*Also from Boekenhoutskloof, a wonderful blend of 68% Syrah, 30% Mourvedre, & 2% Viognier showing dark plum, anise, blackberry. Impressive concentration with a supple, toasty finish.*

### **Glen Carlou "Grand Classique" 2006**

*All five Bordeaux grapes present here – a symphony of black fruits, showing layered flavors of black fruits in a full frame.*

## MALBEC – ARGENTINA'S #1 RED

It comes as a surprise to most that Argentina is the largest wine producer in South America and the fifth largest in the world. Each month, it seems, we are presented with 10 new Malbecs, which are flooding in to the U.S. at an alarming rate. As with any winegrowing region there's good stuff and plonk. We carefully taste before adding to our collection. The prime vineyard areas are located just east of the Andes where the snow runoff provides adequate water and day-night temperature swings of 50 degrees are not uncommon. These temperature swings are thought to increase the intensity of flavors in wine grapes while taming scratchy tannins. Originally from France, Malbec has become Argentina's signature red grape. It produces deeply colored reds with big fruit and enough weight and structure (read "acidity") to benefit from barrel aging which adds extra layers of complexity.

### **Tierra de Luna 2009 . . . \$8.99**

*Really pretty aromas of violets & mint and flavors which show impressive size and freshness. A great "starter" Malbec made by French folks from Bordeaux who followed the grape to Argentina.*

### **Altos las Hormigas 2008 . . . \$10.99**

*Full bodied, lush, ripe showing raspberry and blackcurrant, a touch of spice, even some coffee notes. Throughout it all, this maintains its balance, never too much. A fine example, well priced.*

### **Punto Final 2008 . . . \$11.99**

*We love this one for its purity of style. Medium-full with lovely flavors of blackberry, anise, and plum. There's a freshness here that invites multiple sips. Carefull!!*

### **Trapiche "Broquel" 2007 . . . \$15.99**

*The flavors here show a vivid, bright style balancing ripe raspberry jam, fig, and vanilla notes against the grape's natural acidity. This is really fine.*

### **Catena 2007 . . . \$23.99**

*A solidly built heavyweight. Deep, firm style which slowly reveals its bounty – mocha, strawberry, plum. The dense flavors show polish, poise, and focus. Serious stuff.*

### **Mendel 2007 . . . \$29.99**

*Small production winery, a family affair, dedicated to pushing the envelope. A rare combination of power and complexity resulting from very old vines and 12 months aging in French oak. The texture is creamy, the flavors focused and deep.*

## OREGON'S PINOT GRIS

Pinot Gris is a mutation of the red Pinot Noir grape. In the vineyard they are often difficult to tell apart as the Pinot Gris grape skins can be brownish-pink in color. Native to France, the grape is best known for its Italian roots (pun intended) – Pinot Grigio. The grape was first planted in Oregon in the 1970's and today is it the state's most successful white yielding whites of depth and complexity. It's a white wine adventure we urge you to take.

### **Montinore Pinot Gris 2008 . . . \$13.99**

*From organically farmed vineyards in the Willamette Valley. Showing ripe pear in the expansive bouquet followed by melon, apple, & minerals in the medium-dry flavors.*

### **Rex Hill Pinot Gris 2006 . . . \$19.99**

*The soft, silky texture is oh-so pretty you could almost overlook the flavors of ripe pear and spice. Rather full-bodied, dry but not too. This is a dramatic white which can pair well with full flavored dishes.*

## REDS UNDER \$7<sup>00</sup> ??

We're constantly telling folks not be scared by these prices. It's easy to assume a very inexpensive wine is awful. Many are. But if you're willing to kiss a few frogs (we are), you will discover some little gems hidden among all the plonk. Maybe not for the most special occasions but everyone needs a Tuesday night pizza wine. It might as well be good.

### **Nero d'Avola, Palazzo 2007 (IT) . . . \$6.99**

*The Nero d'Avola grape is a big deal in southern Italy, often the carafe wine at trattorias. This is a charming example, showing the rustic, earthy side of the grape unpolished by expensive winemaking tricks.*

### **Notro 2008 (ARG) . . . \$6.99**

*The Italian influence is strong in Argentina, so it's no surprise that this red blends two grapes – Sangiovese & Bonarda – of Italian origin but grown in Argentina's Mendoza valley. Light, easy quaffing with lovely flavors of red fruits.*

### **Monte das Oliveiras 2006 (P'TGL) . . . \$6.99**

*Portugal's reds show a firm style and deep fruit. This lightens up a bit but still displays the backbone and dryness so typical of reds from this area. You may notice a light herbal undercurrent. We've had trouble keeping this in stock.*

### **Sangiovese, Monte Degli Angeli 2008 (IT) . . . \$6.99**

*It's the principal grape of Chianti, but instead of Tuscany this one is from Puglia in the south. It shows the wonderful earthy, red cherry, mineral flavors of Tuscany but is slightly lower in acidity, a bit rounder. The 12.5% alcohol is nice, too.*

# NEW ARRIVALS

## WHITE

### **Lugana, Zenato 2008 (IT) . . . \$13.99**

*From vineyards along the shore of northern Italy's Lake Garda. Crisp and clean, quite dry, showing hints of peach with mineral undertones. Fresh, vivid, the acidity really matches well with rich foods.*

### **Vouvray Sec "La Coulée d'Argent", Domaine Bourillon Dorleans 2007 (FR) . . . \$19.99**

*Every so often we come across a white which stops us cold. Here's one. France's Loire Valley is home to the vineyards of Vouvray near the city of Tours. These are often a bit sweet, but this is not. Made from 100% Chenin Blanc, the only grape permitted in the Vouvray appellation, it shows a clean, almost astonishing purity and elegance. The bouquet is a delicate note of fresh pear and understated flavors of white peach with a mineral wrap. Delicate, complex, big league.*

### **Chablis, Gueguen 2007 (FR) . . . \$21.99**

*Small Chablis producer we found last year. His 2007 is right on the money – full of fruit and acidity. The ripe/tart fruit flavors show stony notes and great energy. Long finish.*

### **Chardonnay "Sleepy Hollow Vyd.", Talbott 2006 (CA) . . . \$39.99**

*From a prized vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands of Monterey. The vines average 36 years of age and yield intensely flavored grapes. Fermented in French oak and aged 12 months in wood and another 11 months in bottle before release. Quintessential CA Chard, but with a level of quality which sets it apart. Lush and ripe, creamy texture, richly flavored – peach, apricot, toasty oak – but (here's the key) framed with natural acidity to pull it all together. Serious stuff.*

## RED

### **Chateau Jean de Pey 2007 (FR) . . . \$11.99**

*We're always on the lookout for good Bordeaux <\$15. Hard to find. We struck gold with this one. A blend of 70% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Franc, & 15% Cabernet Sauvignon. There's a purity of style here we really love. Flavors of blackcurrant and blackberry, medium-full, elegant and very fine.*

### **Cabernet Sauvignon, Fitch Mountain 2006 (CA) . . . \$16.99**

*Here's a Cabernet with both size and complexity. From the Alexander Valley just north of Napa. Lush, ripe flavors of dark fruits with notes of bell pepper and earth. Framed with dusty tannins. Soft, full, ready to go.*

### **Julienas, Domaine du Clos du Fief, Tête 2006 (FR) . . . \$19.99**

*Julienas is one of the "grand crus" of Beaujolais. We discovered this at Bistro Le Gras in Northampton where it was an absolute knockout with my duck dish. The flavors of black cherry and plum are offset with natural acidity. Never heavy or overpowering, accenting the food, exactly what great Beaujolais is meant to be. It's the real stuff.*

### **Zinfandel "The Biker", Four Vines 2007 (CA) . . . \$24.99**

*Zinfanatics – take note. Here's an all-star example from the Paso Robles region. Big, ripe, lusty red sporting wonderful aromas of wild berry with hints of pepper and spice. The flavors are a symphony of fruits accented with hints of anise and underlined with toasty, fine grained tannins. A beauty today, will continue to improve for another year or so.*

### **Chianti "Bucerchiale" Riserva, Selvapiana 2006 (IT) . . . \$32.99**

*Selvapiana is one of Tuscany's elite estates. Here's their best Chianti from a stunning vintage. Still a bit young, we can already experience the bouquet of mushroom and leather beginning to emerge. Flavors of dark chocolate, earth, and red cherry wrapped in a silky texture. Long finish. Chiantiheads – grab some while it's still available. You'll thank us later.*

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