



BY MICHAEL C. BELANGER

Owner/Founder of The Monte Lauro Vision
 michael@montelaurovineyards.com · 518.368.9300 · lusheslaments.com

Tasting Notes

In this inaugural issue of “Tasting Notes,” I want to talk about tasting. It may be a bit surprising, not to focus on wine, but I think the subject of tasting itself begs for a little context. I have been “tasting” wine for more than four decades now (although “tasting” might be a somewhat inflated word for my teenage wine drinking experiences). Indeed, even into my twenties, I think my “tasting” experiences had more to do with the beverage being a means to an end rather than being the end itself. In North America we have traditionally been driven to price and volume rather than quality when it comes to alcoholic beverages, and wine in particular, an experience that is often reversed in European countries.

But, in the world of wine there is always something new to learn. I recently met a young Canadian vintner in Provence named Julian Faulkner, who runs a small vineyard called le Grand Cros. He and some of his cronies have developed some software from their original concept, called “Taste Mapping,” which I believe is going to take the wine world by storm.

Taste Mapping is rooted in the idea that we each have a palate of our own and that palate knows what it likes. To “map” one’s tastes, then, is to document the tastes one knows or has experienced in order to predict which wines might reasonably fall in the “good” zone for any given individual. If I like grassiness, then I might be inclined towards wines that favor that flavor, but if I like fleshy, pit fruits (such as apricots or peaches) then wines that have those notes would be more appealing to me. The key is in finding out to which tastes your palate responds most positively. And, of course, the more you practice the more you’ll understand about your unique preferences.

Now into my sixth decade, I’m well on my way to

discovering that my own palate is actually quite a bit more sophisticated than I am. That knowledge comes from a wealth of happenstance experience. I’ve probably opened and sampled more than 12,000 bottles of wine. I’ve even gotten to the point where I believe there is a wine for every moment. If it’s Tuesday, 2:37 pm, 84 degrees, moderate humidity, some nice Gruyere in the fridge, no further work to do...I should have a Vernaccia. It is clear to me in that moment that this would be perfection. But where does this certainty come from?

I think it comes from taste bud memory—a linkage established in the brain between a positive experience and the wine’s distinctive flavors. And, what my palate and my brain have done after thousands of bottles of wine is now on the threshold of being done more quickly by this new field of taste mapping and the software that underpins it.

When it comes to wine, the American palate is young; I wouldn’t want to say that every bottle should come with a nipple, but the average middle aged American is simply outclassed in their wine appreciation acumen by the average twenty-something French person. Sure, we have developed our own cadre of “experts” and they pretty much stack up with the best in the world, but the tasting experience of the average “Joe” is somewhat limited. It’s certainly not our fault. Weaned as we are on beer and finished with bourbon, wine has never been the drink of choice in the mass market that is America. In this case, however, the past is not a predictor of the future. Wine consumption in North America has risen with double-digit annual growth for eighteen straight years, while beer and liquor consumption has leveled off or dropped. We are a long way from being the baguette chewing, “fromage” eating wine lovers that the French are (currently consuming about seven

times the wine of the average North American) but our appetites for wine are growing, and as they do our palates are becoming more educated and refined. The thirst for wine has precipitated a commensurate search for wine guidance. The uninformed palate demanded greater certainty with regards to what is “good.” Robert Parker, who stepped into the knowledge void with his Parker Ratings more than two decades ago, established the “wine gospel” in one fell swoop, and in doing so simplified an industry that had defied simplification for millennia. Perfect for the eager masses of wine drinkers who yearned for clarity along with their claret.

But I would contend that the American palate is coming of age, and when a palate comes of age and knows what it likes the ratings systems might better be thrown out the window. It has been said before; “drink what you like; there are no rules.” But today, I believe, there is greater currency to the notion that your palate’s taste can be mapped. You simply need to trust yourself, rely less on artificial guidance, get comfortable with going beyond the familiar, and embrace experimentation. There is so much wine out there and, in many ways, it’s all good.

An old Frenchman once told me (as he poked around his dusty 3,000 bottle cellar looking for something to impress my dad with) that “There is no bad wine”. Actually he said it in that quaint “Franglais,” more like “Zair ees no bed wine, zair ees only bed seerumstance.” He thought the best wine he ever had was a vinegary North African Alicante-Grenache blend he’d had with some fellow soldiers in a cellar during the Algerian War as his position was shelled by the Algerians. I take that advice to heart whenever I open a new bottle. Have I ever poured a bottle down the drain? You bet I have. But it most certainly was because I had another one sitting there ready to open. I think if I didn’t know whether I would survive the night, the thinnest, vinegar-iest wine I could lay my hands on might taste like Ambrosia to me. Pray I don’t ever have the occasion to find out.

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