



All That Sparkles Is Not Gold

And in fact, it is mostly dross. When I landed my first retail wine job at Jonathan's Market of La Jolla in 2000, I immediately began steering customers away from their automatic choices in Champagne, Veuve Clicquot, Moët & Chandon, Perrier Jouet, products we steadfastly carried, much like Coors, Cutty Sark or Coca-Cola. At the time, I didn't know why these products were so inherently bad, except that they tasted bad ("Burnt toast," was my note for the famous Yellow Label), I simply held onto the belief I wasn't going to support their multimillion dollar advertising campaigns, as much as I wasn't going to support the Mondavis, the Beringers, or the Kendall-Jacksons.

The big brands tried their damndest, coming in before lunch, pouring me their very expensive Tete de Cuvées, brandishing free Champagne stoppers, ice buckets, flutes and monogrammed scarves, for me, a lady, as I got blasted. "If you ever come up with the monogrammed G-string, maybe I'll reconsider."

It amazed me that Champagne was the only category of wine that held out their trinkets and tchotchkes, much like the flasks, night-cap sets and travel clocks I received for selling so much Johnny Walker and Jim Beam.

It was a sad and tired saw in the wine industry that Champagne, unlike many other wines, even forgiving Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay, that was brand driven. Customers only bought the product at most twice a year, and those few occasions were fret with making the right choice. I always thought "What a crying shame on two counts." There were better Champagnes out there for less or equivalent money and Champagne as a drink deserved more respect. It was not just a celebratory toast, or an aperitif, but it was the perfect drink to enjoy throughout a meal, the bubbles cleansing the palate better than any still wine, with those same bubbles lifting one's spirits and entering the blood stream much more quickly into the most carefree inebriation.

I don't recall where I was or what I was drinking, but a sympathetic wine retailer listening to my comments, handed me importer Terry Theise's 2003 catalog on Champagne. "You gotta read this guy."

And indeed I did. Mr. Theise spoke my long unspoken retailer's thoughts of mistrust, outrage and sheer desire for revolution in the category of Champagne. He actually could have been speaking about so many other types of abuses in wine production, but the fact that it was Champagne, that most abused, misunderstood, and fake luxury item, made his points all the more pungent, and made

me a quiet soldier for his cause of the real stuff, grower-producer Champagne, affectionately known as Farmer Fizz.

I have thrown out a lot of wine literature in recent years, but I have always kept this document in my office, like a talisman. Its tasting notes were less important to me than the spirit of the piece: one man's brave stance against an industry that was so completely corrupt and needed to be shamefully exposed.

So, what is wrong with most of Champagne? One could start with the chilling fact that the top 15 brands account for 87.5% of all Champagnes sold, the top three accounting for 62.2% of sales. We are talking about a mass-produced, industrial wine, with the base grapes handled almost like refuse, its growers treated like indentured servants, sourced from several hundred lots encompassing all of Champagne. From there, the soupy concoction is treated with cultured yeasts, enzymes and nitrogen, effectively denaturing it, denuding it of any of its original character, only then to be doctored with a dosage liqueur whose recipe could only be bested by the food chemists of McDonald's.

Champagne is one of those beverages we have taken for granted for many years, blinded by its very name and its effect. We have been lead to believe it must be a blender's art, a blend of grapes, vintages and sites, tasting the same year after year, regardless of mother nature's whims, regardless of terroir, and totally agreeing with consumer's tastes.

In France, where seemingly every proud product is under strict appellation control status, its meats, its cheeses, and especially its wines — what grapes, what alcohol levels, what vinification techniques — all in the name of respecting the terroirs, the identity, the taste, of say, Chablis, Chinon, or Chiroubles, why is so much of Champagne left on the dog pile of unforgiving manipulation and the complete erasure of all that meaning of the land?

I had the unparalleled opportunity to taste the grower-producer Champagnes of Terry Theise, last October, an occasion that allowed me to synthesize what one gets when one tastes terroir driven, grower-producer Champagne.

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1. You get the taste of the fruit. One forgets that Champagne is wine, and not some fizzy, nebulous concoction, flavored by toast, brioche, and other aged yeasty flavors, with little sense of identity of its originating grapes, be them Chardonnay, Pinot Noir or Pinot Meunier, or their site specificity, a difference as great as talking about a Burgundy from Savigny-Les-Beaune or Gevry-Chambertin.
2. You get delineation and character. One gets to taste the fruits, the soils, the minerals in popping layers that change on the palate from beginning to end; a featured, chiseled quality (more apparent in the Blanc de Blancs), that's matched by the stamp, the personality, of the vintner, like a fingerprint, making no mistake this is a hand-crafted product.
3. You get freshness, on many counts. You get the fresh taste, the transparent purity of the fruit. You get to have that fresh taste through its conscientious transport, and storage I might add, from producer to distributor in refrigerated reefers. And in the case of most of the non-vintage selections I have chosen, you get the freshness of youth; younger wines that are mostly a blend of two recent vintages, that never try to masquerade as a more mature mix of a stockpile of older vintages, like the big marquee houses (although that's a doctored dosage deception as well), showcasing those vintage's characteristics, and giving these wines a special energy and vivacity.

It requires a recalibration of one's former taste of Champagne to appreciate the taste of the very real, grower-producer stuff, a consecrating moment I can only compare to one's first taste of a real tomato, the heirloom type one picks up at the farmer's market at the height of summer, as one exclaims, "I never knew a tomato was a fruit!"

If we live in a generation, and more specifically in the Bay Area, an active community that cares about the source of its food products — where they're made, how they're made and really, who makes them — there is little reason to support the big brands with their high prices and fancy advertising campaigns who represent the very antithesis, the very antichrist of Champagne, the very mark of Two-Buck Chuck, braising itself in huge outdoor fermenting tanks ladled with oak chips in the name of varietally labeled California wine for a song, except in this case, several sawbucks higher, then you will support these grower-producer Champagnes and raise a glass high to the man who has done so much to support the families who live and survive by these wines, and not the greedy usurpers who want to make you believe they have the history, the pedigree, the secret recipe of what makes fine Champagne.

I am putting myself out on a limb this holiday season by only purchasing Champagnes from the Terry Theise collection. To make up for the poor dollar when these wines were purchased, I am offering my largest bearable discount, 15% off every bottle. Obviously, there will be no multiple-bottle or case discounts. In these tough economic times, an outlay of \$40-\$50 bucks on a bottle of bubbly without tasting it first would be an error on my part. **I am offering a very special tasting of these Champagnes, Thursday, December 11, 6-9 P.M.** for your ultimate deliberation and decision making, simply charging my wholesale cost, \$18 for six two-ounce tastes of the following Champagnes. In this economic climate, there is a lot of deal making going on by the larger distributors and their craftily organized tastings of the big names in NV Champagne, fatted by a lot of domestic bubbly for \$20. I guarantee you this is the real deal, and an educational and intensely pleasurable opportunity not to missed.

**René Geoffroy “Cuvée Expression” Brut, N.V.,
Vallee de la Marne ~ \$48**

39% Meunier, 37% Pinot Noir, 24% Chardonnay

There is an initial sweet-grassy flavor to the Champagne, like sucking on sugarcane, laced with ginger. The most openly fruity Champagne with the softest structure, and the most elegant, mineral finish.

**Chartogne-Taillet “Cuvée Ste.-Anne” Brut, N.V.,
Montagne de Reims ~ \$43.50**

50/50% Pinot Noir/Chardonnay, and often a little Meunier

The tangerine/apple notes of the Chardonnay get more play here, along with yellow plum, lending to the most light, fragrant and cleansing Champagne to its very long, smokey finish. A great match with sushi.

**Henri Billiot, Brut Réserve N.V.,
Montagne de Reims ~ \$52**

80% Pinot Noir, 20% Chardonnay

The most red fruit shining of the group, with beautiful aromatics of raspberry and strawberry, that follow through with lots of flesh and precision on the palate. A light, smooth, and fully integrated Champagne. Staff favorite.

L. Aubry Fils Brut, N.V., Montagne de Reims ~ \$40.50

40% Meunier, 20% Pinot Noir, 40% Chardonnay

Idiosyncratic producer who includes a small percentage of ancient Champagne varieties still legally permitted in Champagne, Arbanne, Fromenteau and Meslier, and whose dosage is concentrated must instead of sugar. The ancient grapes make their presence in an underlying herbaceous quality with forward fleshy red fruits in an intense and bracing body.

**Pierre Gimonnet et Fils 1er Cru Brut, N.V.,
Cote des Blancs ~ \$47**

100% Chardonnay

Full malolactic fermentation lends a Puligny-Montrachet character to this floral and spicy orchid fruit Champagne with its tart and chalky fruit flavors mellowed by a bit of butteriness. Broad, firm, yet filigreed in texture, a certain austerity at the finish could be due its recent disgorgement.

**Pierre Peters “Cuvée de Réserve” Brut, N.V.,
Cote des Blancs ~ \$47**

100% Chardonnay

Two-thirds Mesnil, and the most terrior driven Champagne, equivalent to the transparent purity of a German Riesling, this could be considered the Chablis counterpart to the Gimonnet, with earthy and ripe, sweet-tart flavors that are broad and chalky on the palate with a creamy, tight finish.

“[While] the drunkard is insolent and rude . . . on the other hand, the complete teetotaler is disagreeable and more fit for tending children than for presiding over a drinking-party.”

Plutarchus of Chaeronea, Table Talk 1.620.C

Yikes, It's Yelp!

When the first reviews for Alameda Wine Company appeared on Yelp!, mostly written by supportive friends, and of course, all positive, I thought, "Nice of them." When they were quickly followed by a clutch of excruciating negative reviews, mostly written by first-time Yelp! reviewers, I went into a downward spiral of anger, sorrow, worry, suspicion. How will this affect my business? My little nascent business of owner and employees alike, all trying their best to learn a system of actions and behaviors to best serve customers?

I contacted Yelp! to enter a formal complaint for the worst of the lot, only to find my claims unjustified. The reviews would remain, the stars counting backwards from five, like many a wine review, no longer a 100, no longer a 90, now going into grade "B" category, like the commercial death of a wine.

I knew I had shot my mouth off here and there. The 14-hour days, the imbibing of my own stock, and the contaminant bad feelings that remained for the City of Alameda, the pure hell my partner and I were put through, were enough to cause any amount of venting. The public should know, so I thought.

I have never been a professional person. I have never been one to suck it up and put a pollyannish face on any deep struggle I had been put through. The stress of suppressing that kind of shit was worse than any amount of corrosiveness I was to receive from Yelp! reviewers.

The meat on the bone came out once Yelp! contacted me to corral my advertising dollars. For \$250 a month, with a year commitment, my worst reviews would be hunkered towards the end, competitors advertisements would be absent from the main of my site, and a committee would take a second look at the worst reviews and consider their validity, and potentially expunge them.

"What kind of bullshit system is this!," I thought. People with way too much time on their hands and cell phones at the ready, had a soapbox for dishing out whatever they wanted about my joint, whether accurate or not, whether honest or not, which was tied in with a commercial enterprise of sucking my dollars to potentially erase those reviews, and really, dismiss the free speech of those reviewers, all in the good and fair name of helping to promote my business.

"You know who Yelp! reviewers are," one customer explained, "They are the kids who got beaten up in high school." And there was something adolescent about their petty complaints of one too many goat cheeses on the menu, or their cruel volleys towards the owner looking haggard, unsmiling, or who wore too revealing clothing once an evening.

As the business continued to generate great revenue Thursday through Sunday, with the other days following their weak path, and the economic crisis etching its wounds here and there into the gross, I thought how are these reviews affecting my business, if any? No one could tell. So, why should I worry? Why should I be concerned, like that scrawl written about me on a bathroom wall back in high school?

I have never Yelped, and I intend never to do so. Age, and my own experience of running a bar has taught me great sympathy for all those restaurant owners trying their best, day after day, to make it work. If I have a bad experience, I never return. I don't have time to write about it. I don't even have time to fold my laundry.

Yelp! is one of those corrupt institutions, like much of politics, or the television news, all to be taken with a grain of salt. With that attitude, my fears all but vanished, yet with continuing caution.

I'll have you know . . .

. . . I am probably going to rip out the wire display rack behind the bar retailing my wonderful artisanal olive oils, chutneys, glassware, and the several back issues now of two of the best food newsletters in America, *The Art of Eating* and *Simple Cooking*, all to make more room for seating. Granted I do not make a fortune selling them, and originally intended to carry them to garner more subscribers for Ed Behr and John Thorne.

If you're looking for a great, continuously giving gift for the foodie in your life, please consider a subscription to either one of these fine publications this holiday season. Sans of advertisements and pure labors of love, both these gentlemen care passionately about food, backed my impeccable research, full-face honesty, and felicitous writing.

Ed Behr has been producing *The Art of Eating* since 1986. Originally a one-man publication by a man who travels far and wide to do his onsite research into artisanal food products and wines and the long traditions that make them both great, he has expanded his newsletter to now include articles by many other superlative writers with great expertise on their subjects. Ed is involved with typography as much as food and it shows in the absolutely handsome, sophisticated packaging of his newsletter. \$48 for a one-year subscription, 4 issues, www.artofeating.com

I have never stopped being entranced by the down-to-earth, entertaining, and always very personal writing of John Thorne's newsletter, *Simple Cooking*, with much contribution from his wife, Matt. John writes from the perspective of the home cook, that you and I unsophisticated individual putting the meals on the table, with a well worn cutting board, a simple stove, and a lot of love. Cooking is a very personal act, and every recipe is a basic map for exploration to the limits of the personality of the cook. His ambulatory but assiduously researched forays into making even the basic of dishes — a Greek salad, scrambled eggs — will leave you charmed with their simplicity, but thinking hard about basic food preparation, yet all with a modesty that allows you to complete your own path. \$25 for a one-year subscription, five issues, www.outlawcook.com

Free Corkage at Zen Restaurant!

Bala Wong, owner/chef of Zen, has kindly extended free corkage for any bottle purchased at Alameda Wine Company. Bala and I met at the always fun Alameda Planning & Building Department last Spring, and opened our eating establishments about the same time. We are both always getting harassed by the Yelp! recruiters, and have a good laugh while I continue to enjoy her unique take to Asian fusion tapas. Her sweet potato and taro root fries are killer, and she has a special hand with sashimi.

Zen, 2315 Santa Clara Avenue, Alameda, 510-521-7070

Alameda Wine Company proudly supports employees of the wine industry by offering a 10% discount on all purchases.

More good news — from the independents —

—that is the guys who make the juice and sell it themselves without the middleman. Enter Louis de Coninck, owner and winemaker of **Beaucannon Estate**, in Napa Valley, who is continuing his father's Bordeaux heritage, producing new world Cabernets with a lot of old world styling. Single-vineyard, 100% Cabernet, from the 2004 vintage, there is plenty of concentrated black cherry ripeness with subtle side tones of tobacco, cedar and rosemary, buoyed by chalky tannins and rare giving acidity. I cannot recall in my now nearly nine years as a wine retailer ever selling a more structured, more flavorsome, more classy Cabernet for this price, which at the winery retails for \$29. It all may have to do with the nervous breakdown I had that day — bad personal news in the morning, meshed with a hangover from hell, tasting 40-plus wines from 7 representatives, and then more bad professional news as I tasted this wine. I left for the restroom to pound my head against the wall as my stalwart employee, Sal, helped broker the deal. "He really felt sorry for you. You ought to break down more often." The taste, less the drama, must concur with our customers as we blew through our first two cases in two days. \$18.

I was so impressed by the enthusiastic reception to Roland Ligart of **Amadea Vintners**, at his tasting event a few weeks back. Here is a guy who is totally off the radar, not even a website, producing his terroir-driven, single-vineyard California Syrahs since 2006. I could not have imagined the most powerful of the lot, the Mendocino Eaglepoint Ranch Vineyard 2005, would be the crowd-pleaser of the evening; mountain fruit grown at 1800 elevation - deceptively sweet blueberries, boysenberries, mint leaf and mocha notes, until the tannic, stony structure hits you. Powerful, pungent, the 15% alcohol holding its own, you don't get much play from this wine mid-palate to finish without extended airing to let out the biting minerality, and then its lovely, unfiltered self really lets go. \$18.

John Mason of **Emtu Estate Wines**, lowered his price due our larger reorder, now \$36, for this true to terroir, certified organic, Russian River Valley Pinot Noir 2006. All profits from this wine go towards the Labyrinth Foundation, an organization devoted towards improving the lives of others in developing countries.

Meet the Winemaker Nights

Glean firsthand knowledge of some of the unique, small production wines we carry from the makers themselves. A small fee will grant you access to tastes, tidbits, and discount bottle pricing during the evening.

Tuesday, December 9 ~ 6:00 - 8:00 PM

Mike Wanless, of Tate Dog Chardonnay
Our best-selling wine ever, additionally pouring his Cabernet Sauvignon.

Thursday, December 11 ~ 6:00 - 8:00 PM

Terry Theise, Grower-Producer Champagnes

Tuesday, December 16 ~ 6:00 - 8:00 PM

Charlie Dollbaum, Winemaker of Carica Wines
Sustainably farmed Sauvignon Blanc and Syrah from the famed Kick Ranch Vineyard of Sonoma County.

Remember!

ALAMEDA WINE COMPANY is your wine bar too! I count on your suggestions and comments to help make this business successful and continually pleasurable.

From The Cellar

Just before deadline once again, I was able to pick up three aged Rieslings from Ted Talley of German Wine Estates. There is really no wine, white or red, that ages more gracefully than Riesling; its transparent, grapey, sweet fruit flavors of youth turning drier, more concentrated and tropical with age. The price points of these wines continue to amaze me, often available for less money than current releases. The Schloss Schonborn Spatlese '98, from this ancient Rheingau estate, going back to 1349!, is especially amazing, showing hardly a lick of age; clear, vibrant and much drier than one would expect. **The following wines will be available for a special flight the week of December 15th. \$11.50**

Bollig-Lehnert Drobnhofberger Riesling Kabinett, 1999, \$16

Bollig-Lehnert Piesporter Goldtröpfchen Riesling Spatlese, 1996, \$20

Schloss Schonborn Hochheimer Domdechaney Riesling Spatlese 1998, \$22.50

Der Pollerhof Gruner Veltliner 2007 \$12, 1 Liter

It was with great pleasure I got the opportunity to finally make it to one of Bill Mayer's extraordinary annual German and Austrian tastings. For those of you unfamiliar, Bill is one of those speakeasy names in the specialized and still deeply underrepresented world of German and Austrian wines. He's an importer, distributor, and retailer to his clientele of fervent aficionados through his newsletter he publishes several times a year. He is also a published poet. His newsletter is a must for any interested party of these wines and just plain good reading, providing tender snapshots of the producers and the terroirs which makes their wines so special. His profusely written black and white print newsletter never allows enough room his lovely photographs and I recommend the awesome viewing at his website, www.theageofriesling.com. I could have highlighted any number of wines from that tasting, but I was immediately enamored with this Gruner Veltliner in its convenient and economical one-liter size bottle with the captivating label of the winemaker's grandfather or great-grandfather standing outside his weinstube. The floral and ripe honeydew melon and citrus flavors have more weight and persistence than many a Gruner Veltliner in this price category, and it serves great purpose as an all-around white that could stand ready in a refrigerator for many a cuisine. Erwin Pollerhof is on his way to becoming certified organic (currently sustainable), and is a young and energetic winemaker with plenty more to show by this offering.

Saturday Tastings

Don't let Saturday errand running wreck your right for pleasure. Pop on in for a well deserved break to taste the latest and greatest in stock. \$6 bucks buys you six one-ounce tastes. Let your taste dictate that well-deserved bottle of wine for your Saturday night meal, 12:00 to 5:00 P.M.

Buy in bulk, it's cheaper.

3 to 5 bottles, **5% off**

6 bottles or more, **10% off**

3 solid cases or more, **15% off**