

# TASTING NOTES

WINE OF THE TIMES

by Janna Marlies Santoro



Wine is intriguing yet simultaneously intimidating. When compared to beer or hard liquor, this sophisticated duality is often perceived as complex. Perhaps that's because wine has a culture all its own: a host of unknown terms, unrecognizable words, and unreasonable stereotypes. What then does it take to break into the culture's inner circle? A European accent? The accent, no; but a European mindset helps.

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## CULTURE

Europeans embrace and enjoy wine socially and with hearty meals shared between family and friends. It is also introduced slowly as part of a lifestyle to those of a tender age. This communal image is a stark contrast to that of uncontrolled alcohol consumption. The European attitude would take time to adopt in this country, even with a culture that supported it. The new mindset of wine tasters requires a healthy dose of undaunted curiosity, unbridled adventure and youthful exploration—traits inherent in a new generation of stateside winemakers and tasters.

Case in point: Scott Hardie, a 22-year-old film director and producer from El Dorado Hills, who recently completed a documentary called *Harvest Young*, which examines how the wine industry markets to its clientele—an approach that, according to Hardie's research, almost intentionally excludes people under the age of 30. He supports his argument with firsthand experiences in California's premier wine regions—Napa and Sonoma—and also cites restrictions of the Wine Institute, which imposes strict advertising guidelines, from the type of music permitted in commercials to the apparent age of actors and models.

"There is a problem with that," says Hardie, "because I listen to the same music that an 18-year-old would listen to." A naturally curious twenty-something, Hardie stumbled upon the wine industry while attending school at Sonoma State University in the heart of California's famous wine country, where campus buildings and even streets have wine-related names. His curiosity piqued, Hardie discovered that not only did he not know one wine from another, but neither did any of his friends. It was a quandary that begged the obvious question: why? Or, as Hardie asks, "Why does wine have to be a pedestal beverage? Why can't it be an everyday kind of thing?" A young wine enthusiast, Hardie says that wine can—and should—be an everyday beverage. And he's not the only one.

## EXPERIENCE

Wine enhances our experiences and becomes a tangible symbol of life. A slowly sipped honymoon chardonnay, for example, represents a once-in-a-lifetime experience. So shouldn't we always save special bottles for special occasions? Harry Fisher, a certified sommelier who has worked in a variety of industry capacities throughout Placer Valley, finds the occasion-only mindset passé and is more interested in demystifying wine for the masses. "It's not a mystery to be shrouded," he says. "I see myself

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as much more of a tour guide to share the spectrum [of wine], rather than to perpetuate some sort of myth about it."

Wine writes a story that begins on the vine; the plot is entirely up to tasters. So instead of grabbing a beer, opt to keep a bottle of white wine in the fridge for an end-of-the-day refresher, or bring one to share at the next barbecue. "If I feel like a glass of wine, I'll have a glass," says Hardie of his own tasting protocol. "If a friend gets engaged, I don't have to bring out the wine—it's already out. I have six bottles of wine waiting to be uncorked for the seventh game of the World Series or a Seinfeld rerun. I think making it a big deal makes people nervous."

## DEMYSTIFY

The wine mystique that Fisher refers to, and that many of us have experienced, can intimidate newbie tasters and perpetuate the misconception that to appreciate wine, one must be a member of its club—an elite group with superior knowledge and a secret password. As wine's popularity has increased, however, so has its appeal to a new generation of initially hesitant tasters. The younger set looking to solve the wine mystery can search for clues at a new star on the food and beverage stage: the wine bar.

Ian Smith, co-founder and vice president of 58 Degrees & Holding Co., a wine bar in Midtown, Sacramento, confirms that the past five years has seen an increase in younger tasters, and goes so far as to say that the industry is more accepting of them. But even a wine bar can still intimidate newbies. Smith, a young 30 himself, says that wine competes with beer, vodka and cocktails for a few different reasons. For one, it is both easier and less intimidating to walk into a bar and order a beer than it is to enter a wine bar and order a riesling, or another hard-to-pronounce varietal. "There are a lot of foreign words on a bottle, and you need to feel comfortable with what you're buying," says Smith, who hopes that 58 Degrees creates an atmosphere for tasters to ask questions and initiate a dialogue about wine—over a glass of wine, of course.

In some cases, demystification begins at the roots—literally. Justin Boeger, winemaker at Boeger Winery in Placerville, joined the family business in 1998, eventually taking over as head vintner in 2000. He admits that perceptions of industry exclusivity still exist in certain cases, but believes that the Sierra Foothill wine region offers a feeling of openness where tasters are free to ask questions without fear of ridicule.

"I feel that wine is something to be shared and enjoyed," Boeger says, echoing the sentiments of many other wine professionals. "It shouldn't be put so high on a pedestal that you have it only on three special occa-





*Limoux Rouge*

produce' de Languedoc region  
et Ville de Limoux



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sions a year.” Boeger even goes to extremes when necessary, and epitomizes demystifying wine’s so-called mystique through such unconventional methods as mixing red wine with soda as a means of introducing it to people who assume they don’t like wine. “If you want to take the pretension out of wine,” he says, “have a winemaker mix it 50/50 with Squirt.”

## MAKE

When it comes to making wine, new generations of vintners take a fresh approach with an old tradition. At 28, Ryan Taylor, winemaker at Mt. Vernon Winery in Auburn, has been making wine for 10 years. (Yes, since he was 18 and just out of high school.) Considering that Mt. Vernon’s wines sell out every year, he just may be on to something, especially since Mt. Vernon’s business likely wouldn’t be where it is today had Taylor not suggested to his father that they try their hand at wine-making rather than just selling grapes to their winery-owning friends in Napa.

The 34-year-old Boeger also approaches the wine business differently than his father who founded the winery – the first in post-prohibition El Dorado County – with his wife in 1972. When an eager Boeger joined the family business, fresh from UC Davis’ vintner program and winemaking tours in Germany, he did so with several ideas for change. “If my dad hadn’t tempered me, who knows what would have happened,” he says. “His desire to be consistent and follow tradition has been a good thing because I wanted to change everything.”

Change at Boeger Winery eventually came with time and coaxing from the family’s younger generation. For example, Boeger’s label for its ‘99 Nebbiolo was designed as a piece of masking tape, an idea inspired by the method Justin’s father, Greg Boeger, used to identify bottle content. The masking tape label, Boeger says, “takes any pretentiousness – real or imagined – out of [the wine]” and “allows us to target people our age or younger that may be rebellious or not accepting of traditional ways.”

## BUY

It’s true that a conventional industry has kept the process of making and selling wine some-

what exclusive, which, according to Julie Moreland of Wine Styles in Granite Bay, is a highbrow approach that has legitimized wine as a luxury item. Renee Bernard, a veteran of El Dorado County wine tasting rooms, agrees that some places have intentionally cultivated a sense of exclusivity as a means of generating more income, an approach that she says, “makes some tasters uncomfortable.” But while more expensive, and yes, exclusive labels fall into the luxury category, the pendulum has started to swing in the

the bottom line. Intimidation may be perpetuated simply because of wine’s essence, but pricing also factors into the equation. Smith says, “A lot of times consumers don’t know what’s in a bottle so to buy one is a big commitment.” Besides wine bars, where tasters make less of a monetary commitment by purchasing wine by the glass, tasting at most wineries in Placer and El Dorado Counties is free, which makes for an inexpensive outing for young people.

Similarly, purchasing wine doesn’t nec-



other direction. In addition to being instinctively curious, younger tasters also tend to be, as Boeger suggested, more rebellious and likely to turn their noses up at the Napa elite. Perhaps this is why labels like Two Buck Chuck (a.k.a. Charles Shaw), Screw Kappa Napa, and what Fisher calls “critter labels” (i.e. Yellow Tail), do so well.

But sometimes the bottom line is, well,

essarily have to break the bank. Boeger admits that he constantly combats the perception that good wine must be expensive. “We price our wine to where we think it is a great value,” he says. “We want our wine to be accessible. Instead of raising our prices, we are planting more vineyards. People can’t believe that our wine isn’t two or three times as much.”

# CRUSH COURSE

## Wine Tasting Terms



### TASTE

Despite financial constraints and the industry's exclusive nature (perceived or not) young people are wine tasting without much difficulty. Fisher says that in the last few years, those who fall within the 20- to 40-year-old demographic are more open to trying different varietals. While swirling, sniffing and sipping wine veterans have a propensity for maintaining the status quo, the under 40 crowd "is looking to try something different," Smith says, "something other than the norm that they can have fun with and learn about. Wine has a mix of geography and climate that you don't find in a bottle of vodka, making it more interesting to a younger demographic." Wine bars—largely a response to a new market demand—present a perfect opportunity for such exploration to occur, where twenty and thirty-somethings can comfortably receive guidance.

Bernard's observation in tasting rooms is that wine has become something of a right of passage for the newly legal, and she has witnessed a number of parents taking their young-adult children out for an inaugural wine tasting. "Instead of a huge bash for a 21st birthday, it's a wonderful family affair," she says. "It's neat to see empowered 21-year-olds asking for wine and broadening their horizons." To capitalize on and encourage this exploration, many local wineries host youth-oriented events like rock concerts, festivals, open houses, music, barbecues and comedy nights. "Wineries are doing everything they can to take [wine] beyond the glass, and make it more of an experience," says Bernard.

The new generation of wine tasters and makers just may hold the key to the industry's future. But age aside, enjoying wine is about embracing a lifestyle, enhancing memories, facilitating connections in a shared moment, and, as Fisher says, passion and experience. "It's one thing to have a positive experience from a \$4.99 bottle," he says, "and it's another experience to say, 'Hey, I just hung out with Justin Boeger.'" ●

*Paintings on pages 67 and 69 courtesy of local artist Fred Ekman. To see more of his artwork, visit him online at [fredekman.com](http://fredekman.com).*

### VISUAL

**Bright or Brilliant** – a clear appearance, without haziness or floating particles  
**Clear** – transparent  
**Dark** – opposed to light in color  
**Garnet/Ruby** – red in color, medium in shade  
**Straw** – a pale shade of yellow  
**Opaque** – dark in color; lacking transparency

### AROMA

**Bouquet** – wine's aroma  
**Complex** – harmonious aromas  
**Dark Fruits** – a complex aroma of fruits such as blackberries, marionberries and Santa Rosa plums  
**Earthy** – peat or forest floor  
**Jammy** – ripe berry  
**Nose** – the aroma itself, or its description  
**Peppery** – spicy, black or white peppered  
**Red Fruits** – complex aroma of fruits such as raspberries, cherries and red plums  
**Simple** – lacking complexity  
**Smokey** – charred oak  
**Spicy** – anise

### FLAVORS

**Attack** – initial flavors tasted  
**Acid** – tart or sour  
**Balance** – harmonious flavors

**Bitter** – sharp or disagreeable  
**Body** – weight or fullness in the mouth  
**Bright** – fresh sensation  
**Brooding** – weighty but undefined flavors  
**Buttery** – tastes like butter  
**Chewy** – puckery sensation with substantial tannins  
**Clean** – flawless  
**Crisp** – bright flavors with acidic balance  
**Complex** – layers of flavor  
**Dry** – an absence of sweetness  
**Flat** – lacking flavor or no longer bubbly  
**Forward** – noticeable fruit flavors  
**Full-bodied** – a mouth-filling sensation  
**Jammy** – tastes of ripe berries  
**Medium-bodied** – a moderate degree of fullness in the mouth  
**Racy** – bright tasting with acidic balance  
**Residual Sugar** – sweetness from unfermented sugar  
**Robust** – hearty and mouth-filling  
**Smooth** – balanced with tannin, acid and fruit  
**Tannins** – grape seeds, stems, and oak barrels responsible for a red wine's puckery sensation  
**Velvety** – a gentle, supple texture  
**Youthful** – bright, exuberant, and fruit forward

— Harry Fisher

## WINEMAKER Q&A

**Mari Wells, 30**

**David Girard Vineyards, Placerville**



**FEDHS:** How long have you been making wine, and why were you attracted to the profession?

**Wells:** I've been making wine for eight years. I was attracted to this profession because of the science behind winemaking. I love to use science as a parameter for artistry.

**FEDHS:** How does the wine you produce differ from someone who's been making wine for 10 or 20 years longer?

**Wells:** I have my own style that is most likely a combination of many styles. Being able to work on wines early in my career allows me to be innovative without shadowing another person's recipe.

**FEDHS:** What makes wines from the Sierra Foothills unique? Or, how does the region compare with Napa/Sonoma?

**Wells:** The diversity of microclimates in the foothills makes our region unique. There are many elevations and soil types

that suit a wide range of varieties.

**FEDHS:** Is there an air of exclusivity surrounding wine?

**Wells:** There has been an air of sophistication in the past and still to some degree, however, wine is more accessible than ever and I think that's beginning to break the ice for some consumers.

**FEDHS:** Is wine typically seen as an "older adult" beverage?

**Wells:** In the past, wine has been an investment that most young people couldn't afford. With new wines on the market that are approachable and market-ready, there isn't the same level of risk involved in trying new wines at competitive prices.

**FEDHS:** How do you attempt to dispel some of the stereotypes associated with your position?

**Wells:** Wine tasting is a great way to try a variety of wines and choose what you like. It's also a great way to

educate yourself as long as you have your brain engaged to note the references that will be built into your wine knowledge.

**FEDHS:** Did/do you have to overcome any challenges in the wine industry because of your age?

**Wells:** When I took my first wine-making position at age 24, there were more challenges. I really felt like I had to prove myself. Six years later, that work has paid off and I don't find there to be as much of an issue with my age. It still surprises people to see a young woman behind the tasting bar as the winemaker.

**FEDHS:** What makes an excellent bottle of wine?

**Wells:** An excellent bottle of wine is a true reflection of the grape source, reflects the nuances of the vineyard, and develops over time to uncover further complexities.

**FEDHS:** What would you say to your peers or those younger than you who think they don't like wine, or have yet to try it?

**Wells:** Experiment. Try a variety of wines. Try a particular style, like wines made from Rhone varieties. Grenache, mourvèdre and syrah are interesting and approachable for new wine drinkers, but keep connoisseurs engaged as well.

**FEDHS:** Where do you see the Sierra Foothill wine industry headed in the future?

**Wells:** The Sierra Foothill region is on the rise. There are so many fantastic wines from our region. Many winemakers are headed to the region because of the artistic freedom here. There are so many wonderful grape sources.

**FEDHS:** Where do you see yourself as a winemaker in the future?

**Wells:** In the future I would like to be part of the region's success. I would like to know that our wines are recognized worldwide.