

My Wines of the Year

Every wine lover ought to take stock of his or her wine year. Such an annual personal inventory reminds you of just how many different wines get sluiced down the gullet in a year's time.

This past year has been a major California moment, as I've been doing extensive research there. So I've discovered new (to me) wines and have come to appreciate yet again how quickly change occurs in California.

I've looked over my notes and concluded that the following bottles are my "wines of the year." For me, a wine has to deliver real originality—not just intellectually, but at some atavistic level where you sense that the earth speaks.

I'd be most interested, by the way, in seeing your list, and especially in learning what made one or another wine stand out for you.

Lunelli Vigneti delle Dolomiti Terre di Pietra 1999: The most surprising wine of the year for me. With just one taste my reaction was "Wow!" This Italian red had the kind of intense stoniness I usually associate with Burgundy, allied to the plum note characteristic of Cabernet. But what was it? The label said "red wine of Trento."

I contacted the winery and got the skinny: 20 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 20 percent Cabernet Franc, 10 percent Merlot and—here's the kicker—the balance is roughly equal parts Lagrein and Teroldego. It's the Lagrein, by the way, that imparts the mineral taste, as it's grown in limestone soil. An amazing wine—and a steal at \$15.

Tensley Syrah 2001: Joey Tensley is a 30-something winemaker in Santa Barbara County who's got a gift for creating single-vineyard Syrahs as seen through a Pinot Noir lens: elegant, characterful wines with the grace of a ballroom dancer. Two bottlings stand out: Purisima Mountain, from Santa Ynez Valley, and Thompson Vineyard, from Los Alamos.

Saxum Syrah Bone Rock 2001: This mind-boggling California Syrah comes from the tiny (1.5 acres) Bone Rock parcel of the James Berry Vineyard, west of Highway 101 in Paso Robles. The intense minerality of this wine, from chalky soil, has me utterly convinced that west-of-101 Paso Robles can become one of the world's great Syrah sites.

Reverie Roussanne 2001: I hesitate to mention this wine be-

cause Reverie Winery, in Napa Valley's Diamond Mountain district, made just 35 cases. But this 100 percent Roussanne was so exceptional in its yellow-gold color with a greenish cast (like a great Chablis), intense lemon, pineapple and lanolin scent and mouthfilling flavor that it reminded me there's a lot more to Diamond Mountain than just Cabernet—if anyone cares to try.

Marc Ollivier Muscadet Domaine de la Pépière Clos des

Briords Vieilles Vignes 2002: When will Muscadet get its due? Frankly, only when more wines such as this single-vineyard Muscadet from 70-year-old vines are made and tasted by serious white wine lovers. Give this wine 10 years' aging and I promise you a revelation. All that for just 12 bucks a bottle.

Ridge Chardonnay Monte Bello: If you say "Ridge" the automatic word association is "red." (Or, alternatively, "Zinfandel.") But one of Ridge's greatest wines is white, specifically its Monte Bello Chardonnay.

This year I had the chance to taste numerous bottles of Ridge Monte Bello Chardonnay going back to 1976. Anyone who says that California cannot make Chardonnays capable of rivaling *grand cru* white Burgundy has not been lucky enough to taste mature Ridge Monte Bello Chardonnay.

Smith-Madrone Dry Riesling:

Another vertical tasting opportunity.

California dry Riesling is nobody's idea of a cult wine. And few would think of Napa Valley's Spring Mountain district as a choice Riesling location. Yet brothers Stu and Charles Smith are believers. So much so that we tasted 17 vintages of their estate-grown Riesling, back to 1977. And the oldest ones were among the best—which isn't always the case in California winemaking. These are superb dry Rieslings, with a textural density and lip-smacking earthiness rarely seen outside of Alsace.

Stolpman Vineyards Limestone Hill Cuvée 2001: Santa Ynez Valley can create great—and I use that word advisedly—Bordeaux-type wine. The proof is this blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (38 percent), Cabernet Franc (21 percent), Merlot (35 percent), Malbec (3 percent) and Petit Verdot (3 percent). It's one of the best such blends I've tasted from anywhere—including France—this year.

Matt Kramer has contributed regularly to Wine Spectator since 1985.



A wine has to deliver real originality at a level where you sense that the earth speaks.