



A Nichols Worth of Wine

April 2007

In The Vineyard

In this month's issue, I want to share with you a note I recently received from fifth generation Australian winemaker, Hugh Hamilton. Hugh makes a number of terrific wines, many of which are available here in Naples. I first wrote last fall about one of my favorite wines from Hugh, his *Jim Jim Shiraz*. Named after his beloved dog of the same name, Hugh swears Jim-Jim is somewhat of a guiding light as to when the grapes are ripe. It seems (or according to Hugh), when Jim-Jim finally eats the fruit right from the vine, the grapes are ready to be picked. Now you know the Aussies, in particular the winemakers from down under, can be very tongue-in-cheek, but I'm not about to argue as long as Hugh and Jim-Jim continue to turn out such fabulous wines! Give Hugh's wines a try as he continues to rack up accolades, making some of the best juice from this part of the world. Look for his wines at Wild Oats and the Wine Merchant. If they already don't, ask your retailers to start carrying Hugh Hamilton's wines!

Here is Hugh's report (unedited) on his 2007 vintage. As you will read in this first hand account, Hugh is very optimistic about his wines this year.

Greetings from "down-under" McLaren Vale Bruce,

Following our discourse last year when I was in Florida I thought I'd up-date you on how the vintage went this year. Please don't talk about a wine glut. That problem is well and truly over so we won't need to discuss that for a few more years. Wine lake? Forget it, it's a wine puddle. Yields in McLaren Vale (and other Australian wine regions) were down at least 50% across the board and in many instances the drop was up to 75% on certain varieties. Sangiovese and Grenache seem to be the varieties that produced a nearly normal yield. We've had a pretty hot summer this year and with the low yields vintage started in early February which is the earliest anyone down here can recall. We also had some crazy schedules with Cabernet Sauvignon grapes coming in ahead of Shiraz. This is most unusual timing, as there's normally 10 to 15 days between them the other way. It's also finished much earlier. We would normally be picking the late varieties well into April, but it's as good as over throughout the district now. Who or what do we blame? The drought, the El Nino effect, global warming, Al Qaeda or maybe George Bush (he's got broad shoulders so he might as well cop this one as well!).

How'd the quality fare? Excellent I'd say. The whites have plenty of flavour, and they seemed to retain a lot of natural acidity, probably because we weren't waiting for the sugar levels to increase slowly. They matured very quickly and were off the vine before acids dropped. Our whites are produced without oak so we have some very bright fresh appealing 2007 Chardonnay, Verdelho and Viognier which will reach the market around the middle of the year.

The reds were tricky. Even at higher brix, the grapes took a long time reach physiological ripeness so we have some fairly solid wines in tank. This was one year when you needed to look very closely at the fruit and not be seduced by the level of sweetness showing on the refractometer. You know I rely on the assistance of Jim Jim for the right time to pick the Shiraz and I was fascinated to see him holding off eating the grapes even when they were quite sweet. He could tell they were sweet but still had that green character to them until quite late in the season. Smart dog. As they say in Australia, “there’s no flies on Jim Jim!”

The colors are very, very impressive. Deep, rich and robust is how I’d describe the wines. We have some batches of “The Rascal” Shiraz this year which look destined for a “Reserve” label. We managed the tannins to ensure they have a supple mouth feel by not pumping over the fermenting juice with any vigor. Gentle handling was critical this year. Rack and return fermentation was the regime we employed much more this year. Did we have any problems? Yes, a severe lack of fruit which will impact on our stocks into 2008. We’re optimists in this game Bruce so roll on a “normal” 2008 vintage and hopefully we’ll have some better yields. By the way, there’s no such thing as a “normal” vintage. There’s always a curve in the road. The longer you re in it the less you know. This senior citizen has long since stopped knowing the answers.

Cheers

Hugh

Around Town

Just a quick note on a few great dining experiences this past month and all under the same ownership. I’ve mentioned the wine list at the restaurant *Aura* in the Naples Grande before for its somewhat distinctive selection and the fabulous glassware. I enjoyed a great dinner there again recently and the wine list continues to offer a number of off the beaten path wines – both by the glass and the bottle- that you typically won’t find locally. *Aura* still serves one of my favorite wines, the Huber Gruner Veltliner, an Austrian white varietal, which is crisp, balanced and particularly suited to many of the creatively prepared seafood menu items.

I also dined at *Coast*, which is in the Edgewater Beach Hotel on Gulfshore Boulevard. Both restaurants are owned and managed by LXR Luxury Resorts & Hotel. The culinary architect behind the food program at both locations is Executive Chef Jeffrey Vigilla, who is a James Beard alumni and award winning chef, and who spent a number of years as Regional Executive Chef for Ritz Carlton. This is the most innovative food you’re going to get without crossing the alley to Miami. At a banquet event I attended this month at the Naples Grande, the food and service was far above any I’ve had on either coast and the drive is certainly less exhausting!

If I had one, actually two complaints about both restaurants, it is that they are situated in the hotel lobby where the noise can be distracting, and the wine list is too limited in the number of selections they offer. That however is easily overlooked once you pick up your fork!

Did You Know...

The first American Viticulture Area (AVA) was not in California, but Augusta, Missouri.