

## *A Nichols Worth of Wine Summer 2008*

1000 Wines and so little time.

Early in May, I attended the Wine Literary Awards held at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, where prolific writer and wine historian, Charles Sullivan, was honored for more than 40 years of service to the wine industry. The main topic of his address was the issue of high alcohol in wine and he attributed this rather recent phenomenon to one of three possible causes; God (natural weather cycles), global warming, or man.

Having just completing an 18 year study with UC Davis' Department of Viticulture & Enology, Sullivan and the group discovered that in the last nine years, California wine country temperatures actually decreased. The study group determined that high alcoholic wines were likely attributable to many winemakers quest for a highly extracted, fruit forward style of wine.



Preceding the evening banquet, a press-only tasting of 1000 American wines, mostly California, were assembled. I sniffed, sipped and spit my way through over 200 wines before suffering palate fatigue. While most writers in attendance hovered around the almost 100 pinot noirs on display, I opted instead to seek out something different in this vast lot. There were many incredible wines from every conceivable varietal grown from more than half of the country's wine growing states. If I had to identify a "personal" favorite, it was the 2002 cabernet sauvignon from *La Serenissima*, John Tizo's Family Vineyard, in San Diego - not exactly cabernet country.

California dreaming...

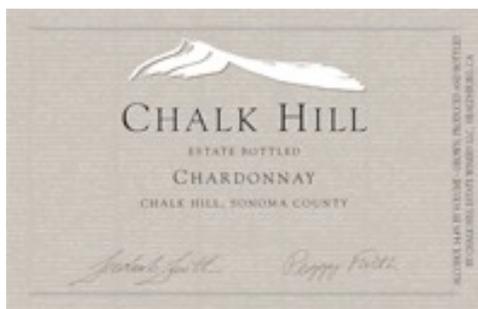


The following day, I headed north across the Golden Gate Bridge to wine country. A beautiful, sunny Sunday morning, a perfect entry into the Alexander Valley, where I stopped to have lunch under a tree in the vineyards with White Oak Vineyard owners, Dick and Erlene Ludwig, who make Naples their home part of the year. Sipping a crisp, clean and fruity, vintage White Oak chardonnay, and nibbling on Erlene's fabulous chicken salad, was quintessential Sonoma.

Midday had me headed south to check into the historic MacArthur Place Inn and Spa, just a few blocks off the Sonoma Plaza. Originally a prestigious 300 hundred-acre vineyard and working ranch with prized trotters, the lush 19th century estate has been transformed into a luxurious inn and spa set among seven acres of spectacular gardens filled with original sculpture and flagstone walkways.



After settling in and a walk through downtown Sonoma, I reversed direction back up the valley to Healdsburg for dinner with friends at Charlie Palmer's, *Dry Creek Kitchen*. We opted for the five-course *Tasting Menu* and accompanying wines, which included a delicious pinot noir from Hartford Court and a North Slope pinot gris from Chalk Hill, where I would be the following day.



Over the years, I have been fortunate to have visited many wineries and vineyards both here in the US and in Europe, but I really was unprepared for my experience at Chalk Hill. Sitting in a natural amphitheater between the cool Russian River region and the warm Alexander Valley, the estate sits on almost 1500 acres, 25% of which are planted to grapes. This is truly one of most beautiful properties I have ever seen.

In addition to the vertically planted hillside vineyards that follow the rise of the terrain rather than across it, owners Fred and Peggy Furth, and their team of land stewards, practice sustainable farming, including their own fabulous organic culinary gardens.



From these gardens, Estate Executive Chef, Didier Ageorges, prepared an incredible lunch that included a *Grilled Vegetable & Goat Cheese Terrine*, *Fillo-Wrapped Blue Nose Sea Bass*, and *Braised Thai-Style Pork*. Wines served with this spectacular meal included a later vintage (2005) of the pinot gris I had the previous evening at the *Dry Creek Kitchen*, the award winning 2005 Estate Bottled Chardonnay, and the 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon. Dessert was a deliciously rich Botryzied Semillon.



Dining at the Estate Pavilion at top of the largest hill on this beautiful property offers a panoramic view of the vineyards and Sonoma countryside. It also provides a view of the olympic-size Equestrian riding arena to watch Peggy Furth's magnificent horses put through their dressage routines.

Chalk Hill Winemaker, Steven Leveque, succeeded David Ramey in 2003, after more than a decade working at Mondavi. Steven is a master of balancing technology and experimentation while allowing Chalk Hill's 350 acres of vineyards to "make the wine." He works with a variety of clones, and employs a dry ice cold soak fermentation process to increase fruit flavor and soften the wines tannins.

If you have plans to travel to California wine country this summer, be sure to include this "must visit" winery. In the meantime, Chalk Hill wines are available at better wine merchants everywhere.



I woke early the next morning to learn that the overnight temperatures in many vineyards unexpectedly dropped to an unseasonable 29 degrees! This was after a day where bright sunshine and blue skies pushed temperatures into the mid-80's. There was frost on my windshield as I set out early through Knights Valley into Napa. After a stop at Greystone, the Culinary Institute's magnificent Victorian mansion, I headed for a meeting at St. Helena's, Revana Vineyards.

I wanted to taste the recently released 2005 Revana Cabernet Sauvignon, having fallen in love with the 2004 vintage, which was such a success at this past year's Naples Winter Wine Festival.

The 2005, produced by Heidi Peterson Barrett, is on target to be the best produced since Revana's first vintage in 2001. Still tight, although a double decanting recently softened the wine considerably, it revealed multiple layers of graceful cherry and spice flavors and a satiny, lingering finish.

This is a very highly allocated wine that has limited distribution, but I recommend you call the winery (707-967-8814) to get on the mailing list. This wine will provide many years of enjoyment.

I also got a look at Revana's new wines, the *Alexana* Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir, from the Dundee Hills in Oregon's Willamette Valley. The name combines owner Dr. Madaiah Revana's daughter, Alexandra, and the family's last name, and the wines are being made by renowned winemaker, Lynn Penner-Ash.

The biggest surprise while at Revana was meeting Tom Garrett, who has been assistant winemaker to Heidi for the last few years and who makes his own wines under his family's Detert Family Vineyards label. The family has been growing award-winning cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc in Oakville since 1953.



When Robert Mondavi started his own winery in 1966, he used Detert cabernet and cabernet franc grapes to launch his first reserve cabernet. Fourteen years later he again turned to Detert grapes to make Opus One.

Before joining Revana, Tom first worked writing and tasting wines for Wine Spectator and then at Mondavi, Phelps, and Turley.

Today, Tom produces less than a combined 500 cases of both wines from the family estate adjacent to the To Kalon vineyards and surrounded by Harlan, Far Niente and Paradigm wineries. The Detert wines are not yet distributed in Florida, but can be ordered direct from the winery by calling 877-817-0466, or by e-mail at [info@detert.com](mailto:info@detert.com).

Then it was off to Bistro Don Giovanni for lunch with Carissa Mondavi, who I first met earlier in the year, to talk more about the family's launch of *Continuum*.



This new venture has produced an alluring Bordeaux blend, cabernet-based wine (58%) characterizing Tim Mondavi's thirty plus years of impressive winemaking skills in producing powerful, yet elegant wines. This first year release of about 1500 cases, has quickly become a collector's item that saw only 100 six bottle cases come into the state of Florida.

I've been told that plans are under way for a new winery and that Tim and the family are actively looking for additional vineyard land, but *Continuum* is intended to be a limited-production, world-class single wine project. While production is slated to grow marginally, their wines will become increasingly coveted. You can contact Carissa at [carissa@continuumwine.com](mailto:carissa@continuumwine.com) or phone 707.944.8100 to join the *Continuum* mailing list.

*Eat, drink and be merry!*

*Bruce*