

A Nichols Worth of Wine
Winter 2008

A career in hospitality and marketing has taught me, if nothing else, the importance of value and listening to your customer. In my semi-retired role, I write about wine with a decided focus on value even though I constantly struggle with the term.

For the most part, that means I do my best to introduce my readers to wines of exceptional value for the money. Finding great bottles of wine under \$20, my benchmark, is doable, but increasingly difficult, thanks in great part to an unfavorable exchange rate that has skyrocketed imported wine prices, escalating costs to American producers, and sadly, the pervasiveness of mediocre wine in this price category. One has to search deep and hard to find “exceptional” value wines. But what about wines in the premium to super-premium range, the \$50 to \$100 price and beyond? Can value be found there? A growing number of readers have inquired asking whether certain higher priced wines represent good value?

Of course, they can. That’s not to say that I’ve never been disappointed drinking a bottle of wine that cost \$100 or more. I have. (Fortunately, it was more often than not that someone else paid for it!) But the fact is that, for the most part, the higher the price, the more enjoyable the wine. Notice I have yet to use the word “better”. That’s a term that over the years has cost me more than my share of embarrassment in blind tastings, as the *better* wine was often not the most expensive wine. Is a drive to the wine store in a Jaguar *better* than in a Ford? Not necessarily, they’ll both get you there; but it certainly is infinitely more enjoyable in the Jag!

This leads me to share with you what guests, sommeliers, and the trade were saying about three of the hundreds of different wines that were being poured at this year’s Naples Winter Wine Festival. Vintners and collectors the world over showcase their flagship wines at this event. There were reds, whites, rose’s, bubbly’s, ports, grappa, high-alcohol wines, low-alcohol wines, big bottles, little bottles, bigger bottles, enormous bottles (12 liters!), wines from most of the continents, wines from nearly every wine producing country in the world, wines from numerous states, and wines from almost as many appellations as there were attendees - over 600! But it was three of these wineries that generated the most excitement.

Overseeing the wine service for this year’s festival events gave me a unique opportunity to hear what the customer said about this pageant of wines. Somewhat surprising was that none of the three that captured the attention and sophisticated palates of the crowd were the cult wines, or the super- super premium wines, costing hundreds of dollars. Although given the attention the favored wineries garnered, that could change very soon.

All of the wines from this trio were reds, except for a single vineyard chardonnay, and all were from California. Revana Family Vineyards cabernet, the Mondavi’s newest venture, *Continuum*, and Figge Cellars three wines, a pinot noir, a syrah, and a chardonnay, were all in such demand that by the final event on Sunday, there was little of their wines left to pour. The one thing in common they all offered though, was tremendous quality - and value - for the price!



Revana, now in just their fourth vintage, makes only cabernet, but what a cabernet! And no wonder. When you start with a remarkable plot of land, employ Jim Barbour, one of Napa's most respected vineyard managers, and then hire world renowned winemaker, Heidi Peterson-Barrett, to make your wines, good things are bound to happen.

Dallas-based cardiologist, Dr. Madaiah Revana fulfilled a life-long dream when he purchased the land for his eponymous winery in 1997 and set out to craft world class cabernet from nine acres of vineyard. The wine is definitely enjoying increasing star status, but Dr. Revana has

kept the price of his wine at a reasonable \$100 a bottle. An absolute "value" when you consider the quality of the wine, the success it is enjoying, and the pedigree.

There are only about 1800 cases of Revana being produced. Given the response at the festival and the mid to high 90's scores by the critics for each of the first four vintages, one can only hope production increases.

A little further south in Napa, in Oakville, another cabernet is being produced that has California, and now Naples, all abuzz. No newcomer to winemaking or to producing world-class wines, the Mondavi family, now in it's fifth generation, is according to Tim Mondavi, "starting over" with the family's new venture, *Continuum*.

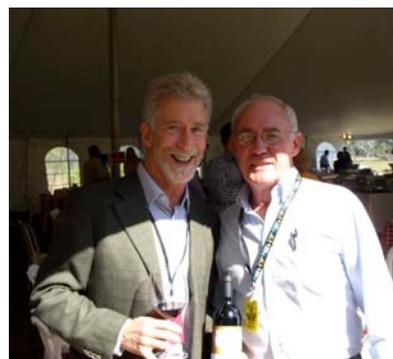
A corporate power struggle a few years back unfortunately led to the Mondavi's losing control over their own winery in what amounted to a battle of quality over bottom-line focused Wall Street. Thankfully, Tim and the family remained true to their roots and are again producing the kind of quality wine that first put them, and Napa, on the world wine map decades ago.

The inaugural vintage (2005) of *Continuum*, is from hand-picked grapes from the *Marjorie's Vineyard* (named after Tim's mother) and the famed *To-Kalon* site, which for decades, produced the Reserve cabs the Mondavi's have been revered for.

Tim, daughter Carissa, and Robert's wife, Margit, came to the festival to preview this cabernet sauvignon-based wine (60%) and equal parts petite verdot and cabernet franc. Considering the reaction of the audience, the 1300 cases of *Continuum*, due to be released next month, will sell out immediately.

Thankfully, Tim says plans are to grow the brand to 8000 cases.

Tim Mondavi and Naples Wine News' Bruce Nichols



Peter Figge, introduced festival goers last year to his first wines, a pinot noir, a syrah, and a chardonnay, which at the time had just been bottled. He returned this year with those same fabulous wines, along with his 2006 vintage of the same varietals. People jockeyed for position to get to his table where he dispensed his wines and his passion for producing those wines that, as Peter insists, "make themselves".



L-R: Hermes Ortiz of International Wine Imports, Peter Figge, Campiello Wine Director, Jeff Mitchell, Anne-Caroline Biancheri and Gerardo Cartellone of Argentina's, Antucura Vineyards and Naples Wine News' Bruce Nichols

That's Peter being modest. Yes, Peter has a hands-off winemaking style, and although fairly young, the years he spent working as a vineyard manager, first at Girgich and Beringer in Napa, then at Estancia, is where he learned to “read the land”. He not only identifies what plot of the vineyard might produce fruit to meet his uncompromising standards, but has developed a keen sense as to which of the row of vines will ultimately provide the absolute perfect grapes for his hand-crafted wines. This feel for the land has put Peter in high demand with the area's premier vineyard owners, and as a result he has gained access to the best grapes in Monterey County.

Peter defines himself as a “minimalist, not a chemist”, and he says he makes his wines without consideration for aging, making wines in a style he enjoys, with great balance and acidity. Which means wines that go with food. Judging by the demand at this year's festival for Figge wines, this is good news for wine enthusiasts in Florida, since Peter has just allocated a third of his wines to our state.

Value has been defined as “*the market or estimated worth*” of something. The huge popularity and demand for the wines of these three vintners at the Naples Winter Wine Festival this year would indicate that yes, while value is indeed a relative term, customers do, and always will, seek out quality. These wines clearly demonstrate that they are all well worth their price!

Did You Know....

Very little wine is ever laid down to age. In fact, 98% of the wine produced is consumed within the first week of purchase.

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce