

# West Coast fine tunes its wines

Had I a crystal ball some dozen years ago and been able to see the essence of this column I would have rejected the ideas it carries as preposterous.

At that time I, and everyone else in civilized America, knew that West Coast wineries were making strong strides forward in quality, but that the king and master of truly great wines was clearly France. For centuries that had been true and surely would continue to be so for the foreseeable future. France, with her Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne and Chablis regions!

But it is amazing what this long decade has seen.

The first fissure in the previously impenetrable barricade came in 1976 when some California Cabernets began to show most favorably in face-to-face competitions with the glints of the Medoc. Such names as Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, Mondavi, Beaulieu, Duckhorn and Sequoia Grove and others began to rise rapidly in world esteem. Today they take second chair to no Bordeaux efforts. Petrus and La Tour cost considerably more and are no less great than they ever were but it is now tradition that enables this to continue for the most part.

By the early 1980s it became apparent that the great white burgundies of France, priced beyond reasonable limits even then, and the more affordable, crisp wines of chablis could be matched in this country by a wide variety of chardonnays from California.

Sonoma county especially began producing wines that could meet the highest quality standards of France. Wines from Simi, Sonoma-Cutrer,

Jordan, Kistler, Chateau St. Jean (and more recently Ferrari-Corano) in Sonoma, Kendall-Jackson in Lake, Quail Ridge, Pine Ridge, Girard, Beringer and Chateau Montelena in Napa, all have come to be accepted as world class.

Then, beginning with the 1983 vintage and continuing through 1985 and 1986, the great red burgundies have been challenged from three sources: the Carneros region of Napa-Sonoma, the Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo areas and, above all, Oregon and the Willamette Valley. The cool growing conditions in these three regions, combined with excellent soils and increasing winemaking skills all dictate that one no longer need pay \$35-\$50 for a great wine made from the Pinot Noir grape. At half the price, or less, the glories of this perhaps finest of all wine grapes can apparently be realized under label names such as Wild Horse, Byron, Carneros Creek, Acacia, Sainsbury, La Crema, Knudsen-Erath, Rex Hill, Cameron, Tuslanti, Elk Cove... the list is a long one.

The less tradition-bound wine people acknowledge some of the above (and there are some who grant most of it). But, then it comes to the true champion of wine, the great one, champagne, they resist. The name, after all, is synonymous with prestige and excellence. It is also one of the most hyped commodities in all the world, whose cost is determined more by the difficulty in producing it than in the quality it holds.

The quality of true champagne, whatever the price, cannot be challenged. It is enormous, but some evaluations are beginning to come in



wine  
**Richard Watson**

suggesting that some of the finer, small California producers are now offering sparklers of comparable quality. Though today they have not yet attained the mystique of such names as Dom Perignon, Taittinger, Krug, Mumm, Salon and Roederer, the time may not be far off. It was not too long ago that the names Mondavi, Sainsbury and Simi were virtually unknown.

The evidence seems clear that today several California regions are producing, at a fraction of the price, wines of absolute top quality, comparable to some of France's finest. From Napa the S. Anderson winery particularly is gaining tremendous press for its chardonnay and pinot noir-based sparklers. A modest, family affair, S. Anderson's operation has risen from obscurity to prominence in little over half a decade. Excellent wines.

Scharffenberger in Mendocino and Iron Horse in Sonoma have fared almost as well and once tiny Culbertson in San Diego is now growing both in quantity and quality. Shadow Creek, now housed in San Luis Obispo, has won many international awards. And so it goes.

Add to these modest producers the French/California alliance producers (using French skills and money and California grapes and winemakers) such names as Domaine Chandon, Piper-Heidsieck, Malsen Deutz and Domaine Mumm, all reflect burgeoning sparkling production and excellence.

Do not interpret what is being written here as chauvinistic patriotism or mere provinciality. It is rather a reflection of a trend that has evolved quickly. One that is being acknowledged by more and more of those who shape the trends and observe the patterns of the wine industry.

It is not a matter of a lessening of French quality. It continues to be of the highest order. But the evidence grows that American West Coast wineries have caught up and, in some cases, surpassed them. After all, in the auto industry, on a reverse scale, it has happened before. We know that.

I am hesitant to get that dusty crystal ball out again. It did me too little good a dozen years ago. There are those who feel the Australians' time is next.

## table talk

### Franco-Chinese

A special dinner featuring French and Chinese cuisines will be held at 7 p.m. Monday-Tuesday, July 25-26, at the Lark in West Bloomfield. The menu is highlighted by Beijing Duck with Poi Gras and Rack of Lamb Genghis Kahn. For reservations at \$65 per person, call 661-4466.

founded in 1970 by Olga Loizon of Birmingham. From her Original Olga recipe, there are now 19 different varieties of Olgas.

### Bottled dressing

The salad dressing served at the Summit Steakhouse at the Westin Hotel in Detroit is about to become a star. TV actress Joan Collins of "Dynasty" requested the recipe, and later a bottle of the dressing was sent to her, after she asked for it. The Summit has decided to market the dressing at retail outlets. Chef Beal Richel developed the recipe for the dressing.

### Four-color menu

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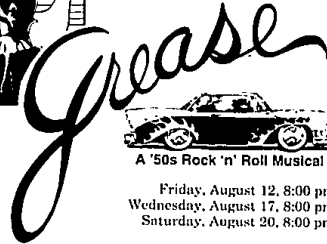
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