

Ordering wine? The label can tell the story

By Phillip A. Sherman editor

YOU'RE HAVING dinner at a nice restaurant and the task of selecting a wine has fallen to you. You were doing fine up until this point, holding your own on world affairs, the election, hot literary properties, new diseases. But now, you are about to appear the fool, for like many people who won't admit it, you know nothing about wine.

What to do? Well now, the cheap stuff with the colorful label from the grocery store has served you well. So long as the cork came out in one piece and the wine didn't smell like salad dressing, life was good. But the waiter is waiting. The decision is yours. And exactly how do you decide if the offered bottle is a winner or Mountain Dew in drag? Ask Elle.

ELLE BOUDT MANAGES The Merchant

of Vino on Northwestern Highway in Southfield. He has studied wine and its accompanying disciplines — geography, geology, farming, poetry, philosophy and history — for more than 12 of his 30 years. The last eight of those years have been spent at The Merchant.

"Wine is ultimately a farm product. The grape has a lot of water which comes from the ground," Boudt said. "That's one of the main reasons the taste of wine varies from region to region."

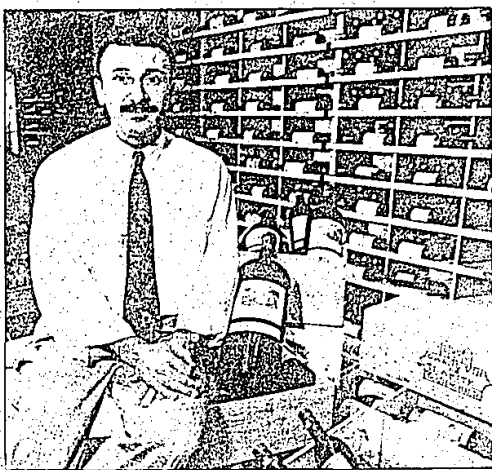
Even if you know very little about wine, Boudt suggested several ways to, at the very least, make a very intelligent assumption about the wine before you.

Start with a glance at the label. "Any label is a reflection of the laws of that particular region. What is compulsory in one region perhaps is not in another," Boudt said.

The label will tell you the level of alcohol (which varies), the quantity the bottle holds (which may seem unimportant but it's important — we'll get to that momentarily), the name of the producer and the name of the area where the grape was grown. First rule: the more information on the label (and the more specific that information is), the greater the chances that you're looking at a good bottle of wine.

"The name of the area it comes from indicates the type of wine. It defines the fruit," Boudt said. "The producer defines the style. The vintage (year) defines the fruit." In an ideal world where all sugars are the same, a higher alcohol content means less sugar.

Boudt also said the higher the alcohol content the higher the viscosity, which is the way the wine feels on the tongue and inside of the mouth. Remember, however, the bottle isn't open. And you don't want it opened just yet.



Elle Boudt sits in a secluded part of the cellar underneath the Merchant of Vino. If you're interested in duplicating the environment for your wine collection, Boudt recommends keeping the temperature at 63 degrees, with 60 percent humidity.



They may appear similar in appearance, but these wines are not the same. From left to right, the price varies from about \$8 to about \$14 per bottle.

Name that wine — carefully

All of the wines pictured above correctly would be called Beaujolais. They are not, however, the same.

Beaujolais is a region near Burgundy, France. All of these wines are from that region. From left to right, though, they become more specific.

The first bottle's label indicates it is simply from the Beaujolais region, in southern Burgundy. Because it is not more specific than that, it also is the least expensive among them.

Labeling on the second bottle indicates the wine is a Beaujolais that comes from a more select area, which includes only 15 percent of the growing area. So, geographically, we're becoming more specific regarding the wine's heritage.

The third bottle names the village. Regnie in the Beaujolais region. Due to geological differences, grapes grown in one area can taste different from grapes grown nearby.

Finally, the fourth bottle actually names the particular plot of land — (Domaine Des Boyets, in the village of Regnie, in the Beaujolais region) where the grapes were grown and harvested. It is the most expensive bottle of this particular collection.

The French government designates that a wine is, in fact, Beaujolais Beaujolais Regnie or another variety with the words "Appellation Controllee" on the label. A label with the phrase "Appellation Beaujolais Controllee" means that the wine is indeed Beaujolais.

LOOK AT THE WINE — it should be clear. "If you're looking at a cloudy bottle, that's a problem," Boudt said.

While you're looking at the bottle, look at how high the level of wine is, check to see how far that level is from the bottom of the cork. Boudt said this distance, which should be minimal, is called the "fill."

"The fill should be bottled to the cork as possible," Boudt said. The more air there is in the bottle, the more opportunity for oxidation of the wine. The oxidation process gives wine a vinegary taste, oxidation is the only reason Boudt could think of to send back a bottle of wine.

That's why it's important to observe the quantity listing on the label, as mentioned above. If the bottle is said to contain 750 milliliters, yet the fill is bad, then that might mean the wine won't taste as good as it should.

There's one more thing to check, and one

more thing to avoid, before opening the bottle. Boudt said you should gently run your thumb across the top of the cork.

"It shouldn't be pushed out or pushed in," Boudt said of the cork. You're looking for a level, firm closing. That means the cork's in good shape.

Avoid "giving hung up" on the vintage, or year the wine was bottled, Boudt said. The year is more of a guide when you're considering keeping the bottle in a cellar or drinking it in the near future. It isn't a good enough reason by itself to send a bottle back, Boudt said.

Now let the waiter open the bottle. Touch the cork (Boudt said smelling a cork tells you nothing). If the cork is excessively dry, that could mean air is or has been leaking into the bottle, which accelerates oxidation. If the cork is excessively soft, that might indicate leakage from the bottle.

Typically, the waiter will pour a small amount of wine into your glass. Don't taste it — smell it (twice, as a matter of fact).

Slowly swirl the wine in the glass and take a sniff. This first pass will smell more like the alcohol in the wine and certain other aromas, Boudt said. Now pick it up down for about 15 seconds, then pick it up and smell it again. That's what the wine really smells like.

By now you should have a very good idea of whether or not the wine will taste good. Keep one thing in mind — if you think it tastes bad, rethink your position. The wine, if it's passed the tests up in now, probably tastes exactly as it should, which simply might be different from what you expect.

If, on the other hand, it tastes like vinegar, conjure up your best Hollywood face, wave your hand to and fro and cast it aside like so much toxic waste. After all, you're an expert, now.

Hills dips into reserves to balance tight budget

By Joanno Maliszewski staff writer

Farmington Hills taxpayers will get a smidgen of local tax relief if a proposed 1992-93 \$30.9 million budget is adopted June 1.

That doesn't mean the city is on easy street. To balance the proposed budget, city officials have again tightened the belt and dipped into city reserves. The proposed budget also reflects a consolidation of purchases and delays in small capital purchases. No promotions or changes in job categories have been allowed, and the city's workforce has been reduced by the equivalent of four full-time positions.

Despite the tighter budget, no reserves have been cut and plans are in place to proceed with "an ambitious, but realistic" capital improvements plan, said City Manager William Costick. "Everything we are going to spend, we've got the money for. This is not a deficit budget."

Taxpayers' relief comes in the form of a slight reduction — four-hundredths of a mill — in the debt levy. That reduction puts the proposed tax rate at 8.86¢ compared to the current rate of 8.87 mills.

IF YOUR house has a market value of \$130,000 and assessment of \$55,000, you would pay \$576.29, compared to \$576.61 on the same house in the current year.

Costick and department heads were faced with the current property tax assessment freeze and a slowdown in construction, which forestalled a decrease in revenues from building, engineering and other development fees when developing the proposed budget. Anticipated action by voters later this year on several property tax reform measures has also been kept in mind, Costick said.

The result is a "hold-the-line" budget. The proposed \$30.9 million budget represents a 2.5 percent in-

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crease — compared to a 4.2 percent cost of living index — over the current \$28.8 million budget.

"There's no significant change in anything," Costick said. "We didn't have any inflationary revenue (resulting in assessment increases) to fall back on. It caused us to tighten our belt further. There is no fat in the budget."

To balance the budget, \$556,981 will be used from reserves. The budget also reflects expected revenues of \$609,600 in building fees and licenses — down from \$820,100 budgeted this year. Interest earnings also are expected to decrease to \$1.05 million from the \$1.4 million budgeted this year.

State shared revenues are expected to come in at \$4.9 million, slightly up from the budgeted \$4.8 million in 1991-92. "It's a guessing game," Costick said.

DESPITE THE tough economic times, the city's state equalized value increased moderately to \$2.420 billion, compared to the 1991 SEV of \$2.352 billion. A good part of the SEV increase resulted from a couple major industrial research buildings that were not fully placed on the tax rolls in late 1990 when the buildings were started. New housing represented a good part of the \$88 million SEV increase.

For the second year, Costick has not recommended additional staff for the police and fire departments, despite increased public demands on

both departments. Salary increases for both union and non-union personnel, including department heads, are scheduled at 4 percent.

Because of changes in taxpayers' attitudes and anticipated tax reforms of one sort or another, Costick is sending the city council to think ahead to the future when a special millage for police and fire might be necessary.

"I think we have reached a point where people are frustrated with property taxes and won't support initiatives that aren't brought before voters," Costick said.

Capital improvements will take \$572 million and a significant allocation of \$80 million for drains in the proposed 1992-93 budget. The capital improvements program calls for more than \$2 million in storm drain improvements with \$1.5 million for the Kewadinwood subdivision flooding problems.

ROAD IMPROVEMENTS also are proposed, including the continuation of the 12 Mile boulevard and the reconstruction of the Grand River-Drake Road intersection.

The proposed budget — for the first time — reflects the additional costs of the almost year-old recycling program. The 1992 budget reflects a total of \$2.2 million for refuse removal. The proposed budget calls for \$3.2 million, largely due to the recycling program.

But reductions in compost disposal and billing are expected to produce a reduction from \$54 annually to \$50 for single-family residents' recycling bills. Condominium owners' fee of \$40 is expected to be reduced to \$36.50.

The recycling program has been considered successful because an estimated 90 percent of the city's residents participate, which has led to a 30 percent reduction in the amount of waste taken to landfills.

The city council plans to discuss the recycling fee and other options for paying the tab at a May 13 meeting.

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Budget review schedule

- 7 p.m., Thursday, May 21 — planning and community development, fire and police budgets.
- 7 p.m., Tuesday, May 26 — capital improvements, special services, parks and recreation millage budgets.
- 7 p.m., Monday, June 1 — public hearing on city budgets.
- 7 p.m., Wednesday, May 13 — recycling, public services budgets, major and local street budgets.
- 7 p.m., Tuesday, May 12 — joint budget session with Farmington.
- 7 p.m., Wednesday, May 13 — recycling, public services budgets, major and local street budgets.