

FOCUS ON WINE



RAY & ELEANOR HEALD

Are auction's
lower wine
prices a trend?

During the past holiday season, it's no secret that most consumers opted for lower-priced wines. Will such behavior impact wine prices overall? It's hard to say, but the annual Hospices de Beaune Burgundy Wine Auction has frequently been an economic benchmark, providing a point of reference for the wine world's economic climate.

At the Burgundy Wine Council's press conference, which traditionally precedes the sale, Pierre Henry Gagey, President of both the

Négociants' Group and the Burgundy producer Maison Louis Jadot, expressed hope that prices fetched by Hospice wines would be in line with current market trends.

They were. Since 1994, prices at the Hospice auctions have risen steadily.

This year, and clearly signaling a desire for moderation, prices dropped by an average of 25.8 percent for red wines and 17.3 percent for whites. Are California wine producers paying attention?

Where the U.S. ranks

According to the most recent statistics from the Wine Institute, California accounts for more than 90 percent of U.S. wine production and vineyard acreage. In world wine rankings, the U.S. continues to be a major producer, fourth behind France, Italy, and Spain.

In global vineyard acreage, the U.S. is fifth behind Spain, France, Italy, and Turkey. Isn't this latter country a surprise? In volume consumption, the U.S. is third behind France and Italy. Since 1993, California wine sales have witnessed a 22 percent growth. California wine shipments accounted for about 70 percent of the U.S. wine market, with an estimated retail value well over \$13 billion.

Good or bad news? If year 2000 (the latest statistics) is isolated, California winery sales to just the U.S. saw a 1 percent decline from the previous year. Does the consumer buying shift during the 2001 holiday season portend a trend?

Value-priced wines are nationally defined as \$7 and below. They are facing increased competition because of a shortage and soaring demand, creating the greatest seller's market of all time is over. California's record winegrape harvest in 2000 restored winery inventories. Growing production in other countries is being targeted at U.S. consumers. That's good news.

Please see FOCUS, B3

WINE PICKS

Syrah from California and France's northern Rhône or Shiraz, as the Australians dub the variety, will get even "hotter" in 2002. The following are our top tastes.

Outstanding: 1998 Witz End Shiraz \$53.

Excellent: 1999 Viking Grand Shiraz \$58; 1999 D'Arenberg Dead Arm Shiraz \$67; and 1999 Deles Freres Crozes Hermitage Rouge Les Lunettes \$10.

Very Good: 1998 Woodstock Shiraz "The Stock" \$35; 1999 Moramb Creek Shiraz \$27 (power-packed blockbuster); 2000 Kilikanoon Shiraz "Sibling's Blend" \$15; and 1999 Gatekeeper Estate Shiraz \$15. From California: 1999 McDowell Reserve Syrah \$24. Although not genetically related to syrah, the 1998 Stags Leap Winery Petite Syrah \$32 is simply delicious.

Winter inspires...

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

A bowl of hot steamed mussels. Consider it the ultimate seafood winter-chill chaser.

Invite some friends and cook up a big pan of mussels. In addition, all you need is a loaf of crusty French bread and a salad of crisp greens tossed with citrus vinaigrette. Looking for an easy Super Bowl party idea? Get the gang going with mussel mania.

What are mussels? Archaeological evidence indicates that this bivalve mollusk has been used as food for over 20,000 years. The French and Belgians are notorious mussel lovers. To meet growing demands across Europe, mussels are cultivated on special farms.

Until recently, Americans have not been as enamored of mussels as they have of oysters and clams. In the past, huge quantities along both U.S. coasts went unharvested. That's no longer true. Today, they are also farm-raised in North America. To satisfy global needs, Chile has also become a mussel supplier.

There are dozens of mussel species, all of which have a thin, oblong shell, ranging in color from indigo blue to bright green to yellowish-brown.

Depending on the species, the shell can be from 1½ to 6 inches in length. The "meat" ranges in color from creamy-tan to bright orange.

Most abundant is the blue or common mussel, found along the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Its shell is inky dark blue or black and about 2 to 3 inches long. The green-lipped mussel is imported from New Zealand and has a 3- to 4-inch long, bright green shell.

Live, fresh mussels are generally available year-round from top fish markets. On the West Coast, however, the mussel season is November through April.

Popular on his menu: Michael Thomas, certified executive chef and owner of Rustica Europa (877 East Auburn at John R in Rochester Hills), purchases farm-raised, common blue mussels from Canada's Prince Edward Island and Chile. "They are plump with a good meat to shell ratio, have a mild taste and soft texture," he said.

He noted that although New Zealand and Belgian-sourced mussels may have a cache, if the recipe is loaded up with garlic and wine, subtle taste differences of these more expensive mussels are lost.

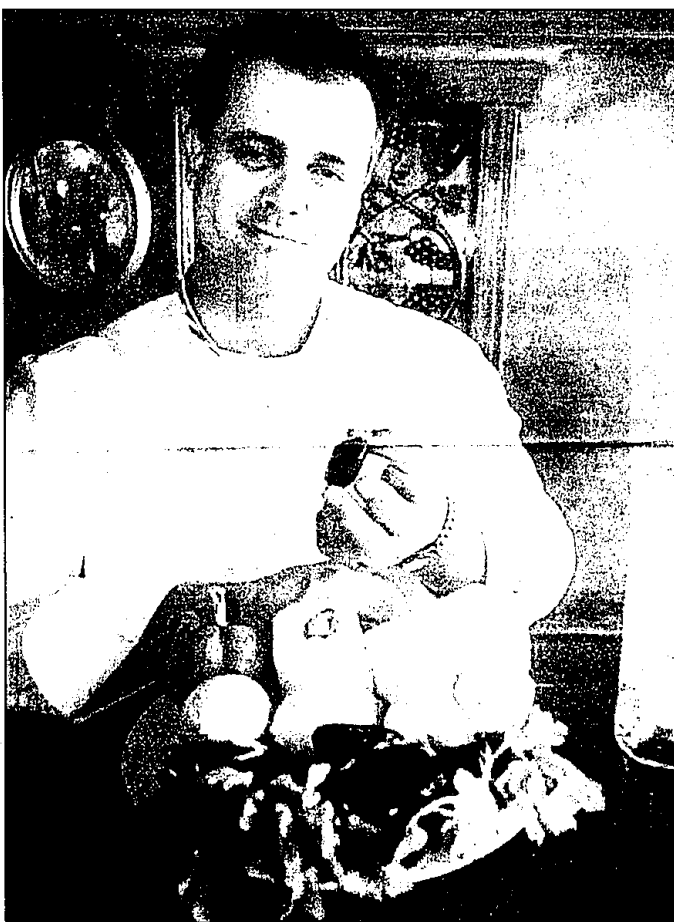
"Look at it this way," he said. "It's like making a vodka and grapefruit juice cocktail with expensive vodka like Grey Goose from France. It's a waste of money."

Choosing the best mussels

Live, fresh mussels are generally available year-round from top fish markets. On the West Coast, however, the mussel season is November through April. This is because microscopic organisms that cause "red tide" make mussels unsafe to eat during the late spring and summer months.

Chef Michael said that new techniques of flash

Please see MUSSELS, B2



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN STOKEMAN

Simple and marvelous: Michael Thomas shows the raw fixings of the simple but delicious mussel dish called Moules he offers at Rustica Europa. It includes farm-raised blue mussels steamed with white wine, garlic and multi-colored bell peppers.

'Malternative' beverages a refreshing change

What will the brewing industry

think of next? The newest malt (or beer-based) beverages to hit the market in full swing are the citrus flavored beverages like Smirnoff Ice, Mike's Hard Lemonade, and Uncle's Jed's Hard Pink and regular lemonades. Most are citrus-flavored or lemon-flavored versions of a basic light lagers, but with a much higher alcohol content (somewhere around 5 percent alcohol by volume).

Miller Brewing Co. has just announced its contribution to this category, a concoction called "Skey Blue," a light citrus-based malt beverage flavored with vodka, to join the already-cramped storefront shelves in this particular category of the market.

At first glance I was appalled at the particular thought of fine handcrafted beer being used as the base for such a beverage, until I tried one. I have to admit it was really good! I tried the

TRUE BREW



DEAN JONES

Mike's Hard Lemonade you may know the product from its advertisements, where the tan lemons go in to the bottle, and only one comes out).

I was very surprised at how actually refreshing the beverage was, a little acidity, with a slight malty sweetness balanced by that familiar lemonade-like quality—not QUITE like mom used to make—it does have more of an alcoholic drink-type flavor, but it was still

MARINADE FOR FISH

- 1 teaspoon fresh minced garlic
- 1 bottle Mike's Hard Lemonade
- ½ cup olive oil
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon fresh cracked black pepper
- 1 tablespoon chopped herbs of your choice – tarragon, chervil, basil or oregano

Mix all ingredients together and marinate fish in the refrigerator for two hours. Use marinade to baste fish with as it grills. Makes approximately two cups.

very refreshing, along the lines of good old-fashioned lemonade.

It was so different and unexpected, I could not even tell it was a beer-based beverage, but I guess that's the point. Despite my loyalty to traditional beer

and its flavor, I still found this new product to be very enjoyable.

Now the wheels were turning in my head. How do I put this newly created enjoyable beer based beverage to work in the kitchen? My first thought was to use it as a marinade. I scavenged my home kitchen for spices I had on hand and some protein or vegetables to marinate. I found a large piece of sea bass my wife had purchased the day before and I assumed it was intended for dinner tonight. I figured I would help her out a bit and try the marinade on the fish.

I mixed up all the ingredients (see recipe box) and let it marinate in the refrigerator for a couple of hours, firing up the grill during the last half-hour of the marinating time. Yes, I DID say grill! Our grill is constantly running all winter long. As many of you will agree,

Please see BREW, B2