

out." The fact that you get blotto on one glass of this stuff should indicate that this is closer to jet fuel than food accompaniment.

So it was with a fair bit of pleasure the other day when I met with Grady Wann, wine maker for Quivira in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley, who focuses on a more claret style of Zinfandel. Wann said that even picking in the dead center of the picking window is not optimum for Zinfandel.

"You have two choices," he said. "One of them is to pick once, which means getting X% underripe and X% overripe."

I asked if this wasn't a bit simplistic in that if you picked in the center of the picking window, wouldn't most of the fruit be ripe? Wann said that with Zinfandel, the best tactic is to go through the vineyard four or five times, picking only ripe clusters each pass through.

"The other option is the one we adopted last year," he said. "We added a sorting table with an 11-foot-long, 3-foot-wide conveyor belt." He said Quivira first does selective thinning of the vines before harvest, then selective picking, and then sorts through what is picked. Thus flavors can be fine-tuned before the fermentation starts.

The sorting system came as a result of a spectacular 1996 Zinfandel that Wann produced at Quivira by various vine thinnings, blendings and trials, and he said, "In almost every trial we've done, the wine we liked the best fell in the 13.5% to 13.8% alcohol range."☐

## Tasting Notes

### Exceptional

1996 **Quivira** Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley (\$16.50): There is a classic berryish aroma here, with hints of wild spices, a hint of clove, mild oak, and then traces of strawberry and jam. The taste is loaded with lush fruit and the aftertaste has a hint of red currants. An impeccably balanced wine.

1995 **Thurston Wolfe** Syrah, Burgess Vineyard, Columbia Valley (\$18): Dense color and a huge, spiced aroma that includes sandalwood, clove, pepper and blackberry and a trace of nutmeg. A dense, powerful wine that nonetheless tastes great today with hearty foods. Only a few dozen cases remain of this dramatic wine. When I tasted it, I suspected it would sell for about \$40 or so because it compares favorably with the (now sold-out) 1996 Charles Melton Shiraz from Australia, which was \$40. Wade Wolfe, viticulturalist for Hogue Cellars in Washington, made this wine. To order call the winery, 509-786-3313.

1996 **Louis Martini** Merlot, California (\$11): Made mainly from fruit grown in Martini's Russian River vineyard, called Los Viñedos del Rio, this wine has a cool-climate base of fruit with a blackberry scent. The rest of the wine, from

Napa, gives it generosity. There's a bit of oak and the balance is striking – great to drink now, but with the acidity to age.

1996 **Erath** Chardonnay Reserve, Niederberger Vineyard (\$50): Dick Erath is one of the first in Oregon to harvest the new Dijon 76 clones of Chardonnay. His new wine maker, Rob Stuart, chose to make this wine with no malolactic fermentation and he aged it in used barrels, to preserve fruit. Only 40 cases were made, and the winery is selling it only to those who visit the tasting room or call 503-538-3318. The aroma is citrusy with blossom, hazelnut and delicate mint qualities and the balance of fruit and acid is near-perfect. A stunning achievement, worth comparing to top Burgundies.

1996 **Morgan** Malvasia Bianca, Monterey County (\$12): Sadly, this wine will probably be ignored on shelves or wine lists because the grape is poorly regarded. But it is a dramatic example of how an underrated grape can make great wine. Very floral with a trace of mint adding intrigue to a carnation-like aroma. Dry, yet soft enough to work with Thai food.

### Very Highly Recommended

1995 **Truchard** Merlot, Carneros (\$18): Maybe a bit stylistic for some because the aroma of spiced blueberry has an undertone of underbrush or earth. But there is a sweet fruit entry and a charming spiced finish. Attractive now or soon. Tasted blind.

1995 **Columbia Crest** Merlot, California (\$12): Oak plays tag with ripe cherry fruit and the finish has a lovely crispness to work nicely with food. A lighter-weight wine that has a fair price. Tasted blind.

1995 **MacRostie** Merlot, Carneros (\$20): Straightforward cherry aroma with hint of dried herbs and a dry, tart finish. Nicely crafted, and needs another year or two. Tasted blind.

1996 **Quivira** Dry Creek Cuvee, Dry Creek (\$13): An attractive cranberry and strawberry aroma with a spicy note not unlike pomegranate. Based on 62% Grenache, which gives the wine a lovely freshness in the finish.

### Wine of the Week ☛

1997 **Hogue** Fume Blanc, Columbia Valley (\$8): For those who think the assertiveness of New Zealand-style Sauvignon Blanc is too strong, this wine has the perfect varietal intensity of lime and olive, but with melon and hay undertones. Soft, generous and perfect for grilled seafood. A really delicious wine.

### Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

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