

SFGate.com

Print This Article

Back

to Article

SFGate.com

## Chronicle Wine Editor 2008's most memorable wines The top picks, the rare finds and the biggest surprises

Jon Bonné, Chronicle Wine Editor

Friday, December 26, 2008



Download a  
**FREE**  
Audiobook  
Today!

audible.com®

Learn More

An advertisement for an audiobook. It features a smartphone displaying the audiobook player interface for 'The Ascent of Money' by Niall Ferguson. The phone screen shows the book cover and playback controls. To the right of the phone, the text reads 'Download a FREE Audiobook Today!' and 'audible.com®'. At the bottom right, there is an orange button that says 'Learn More'.

At this time of year, we all think back on what left an impression. Wine, obviously, occupies much of my brain, and even after I'm done with the Top 100 Wines, I still have notebooks filled with tasting notes that often never see the light of day. I write down nearly everything I taste, but sometimes the wines aren't on the market anymore, sometimes they're too hard to obtain, sometimes they just don't fit neatly into the stories I'm working on at the moment.

As the year draws to a close, I start thinking back on which wines have left their mark.

My 10 most memorable wines aren't a buying guide so much as a window on where my tastes were at in 2008. Looking back through my notes, the topics of fascination were clear: meticulously made Chardonnay, Marsanne, German Spatburgunder (Pinot Noir), Sherry. Burgundy, as always, was front of mind but in short supply. Barolo, which normally would be my own personal obsession, played a minor role. So much Pinot passed through with little impression; so much Syrah caught my eye.

Many of these are special and scarce enough to be made with extreme care. That means many - though certainly not all - weren't cheap. Some are rare enough that I wouldn't expect to find them again. All the more reason to consider them now.

There's no direct overlap with the Top 100. We limit that list to the best wines we taste from the West Coast, which represents just a fraction of all the wines I taste in a year. Why simply repeat them?

I scoured the thousands of wines I wrote notes on - not only in our weekly blind panels but in public and private tastings and bottles opened with dinner. That yielded a list of about 80 wines that immediately stirred a fond memory.

These final 10 represent the wines that achieved true persistence of memory through the many

months.

**10 2005 Scarecrow Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon** There's something almost frustrating about a blockbuster Cabernet with such amazing provenance. From a bountiful vintage and the gnarly 60-plus-year-old vines of Rutherford's J.J. Cohn vineyard, now overseen by Bret Lopez and Mimi DeBlasio, Celia Welch Masyczek crafted a pitch-perfect expression of Napa Cabernet that's as seductive and perfumed as it is dense and wound in its tannic power. Even as Masyczek walked me through her outstanding lineup of wines in October - Hollywood & Vine, DR Stephens, Lindstrom and more - the Scarecrow stood clear, making its undeniable point about the virtues of vines from the pre-clonal, pre-rootstock era that have been given time to adapt to a very special patch of ground.

**9 2006 Tahbilk Nagambie Lakes Marsanne** The Tahbilk came in a fit of curiosity at Wine & Spirits' Top 100 event this fall, in my momentary breath-catching moment between tasting grand cru Chablis and unctuous Beerenausleses. One taste and it was so darn evident: Tahbilk has more than earned its place among the top examples of Marsanne, that fine and often misunderstood Rhone grape. From Australia's Victoria region, the winery claims to grow more of it than anyone else in the world, with vines dating back to 1927. This version is exotic and floral, bursting with jasmine scents and the almost slippery texture that Marsanne can have, yet ready to expand with some age. As well kept a secret as you'll find.

**8 2006 Nino Negri Ca' Brione Terazze Retiche di Sondrio IGT White Wine** Mostly I associate Nino Negri with its exquisite line of Valtellina Sfursat wines, made from semi-dried Nebbiolo in the Alpine reaches of Lombardy. This oak-aged white made from partially dried Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, indigenous Incrocio Manzoni and a bit of red Nebbiolo vinified as a white seemed like a fun curiosity when I first wrote notes back in May. Then I found myself returning to it through the year, recommending it to anyone who would listen.

The Ca' Brione meshes the best of northern Italy's explosive Sauvignon minerality with the lavish palate found in white Rhone and the opulent fig and honeycomb of ripe Chardonnay. With tons of endurance and character, it's a unique creation that shows how much innovation lies in northern Italy.

**7 2005 Mills Reef Hawkes Bay Reserve Merlot Malbec** Half Merlot and half Malbec? Could New Zealand's Preston family have picked any less fashionable blend? This radiantly beautiful bottling, tank fermented and aged in older barrels, was the final proof I needed that the Gimblett Gravels area of the North Island is meant to be a perfect home for Bordeaux varietals. It's all about pristine berry fruit and subtle aromatic notes - sandalwood, tea and dried white flowers. A high-wire dance between a high-acid profile and fleshy texture made the Mills Reef one of the most appealing dinner-table bottles I found all year. Its many threads of improbability made it all the more special.

**6 1998 Gaston Chiquet Special Club Brut Champagne** A highlight from my Election Night lineup - and several other occasions, including a very good bottle shared at Nopa with Champagne sage Peter Liem. If the '98 vintage didn't quite stack up to user-friendly '97 or powerful '99, Nicolas Chiquet found a ripe but completely precise and firm expression for his Special Club (a special bottling that undergoes peer review from other growers in the Club Tresors de Champagne). The '99 may be more opulent, but the '98 is a jubilant, rich, spectacular Champagne. In a year with plenty of great Champagne - the 2000 Cristal Rosé and 1997 Salon left lasting impressions, for instance - the '98 Chiquet remained top of mind.

**5 2005 Guigal Hermitage Blanc Ex Voto** In a strong Hospices du Rhone lineup of wines from this nonpareil vintner, including the red Ex Voto and a gobstopping 2006 Condrieu, this rare white Hermitage was what left me breathless. Ninety percent old-vine Marsanne (the rest Roussanne) from the Murets and tiny Hermite parcels, aged a full 30 months in all new oak, it is as ageless as white wine gets. In May, at least, the full depth of the white Ex Voto couldn't even be approached from a distance. What came through was a flinty, drama-filled expression, lavishly silky and knotted in a ball of mineral power with grated orange, fresh peach and macadamia as accents. Philippe Guigal recommended a good 20 years aging at the time. Given the explosive power hovering below its surface, that seems perfectly reasonable.

**4 2004 Meyer-Nakel Ahr Fruhburgunder** Even as German Pinot Noir has finally made a cameo appearance on these shores, the powerful reds of the Ahr Valley outside Cologne remain an elusive presence. The exquisite Meyer-Nakel is among the rarest of all. All I had to do for this bottle was haul it back in my suitcase from the state domain at Marienthal in the Ahr, in which Werner Nakel now owns a share.

Can we even call it Pinot Noir? Fruhburgunder is an ancient early-ripening mutation that seems to have migrated to the Ahr. And yet ... Meyer-Nakel's expression is the very soul of Pinot. A galvanizing, rich expression of white mineral, violets, rum-soaked currant and wild strawberry, full of earth and fine-grained power. To buy another bottle, all I'd have to do is catch a flight to Cologne, drive about an hour south and pray there's still one in the cellar. I'd do it in a second.

**3 2006 Kongsgaard The Judge Napa Valley Chardonnay** Along with a couple other talented hands, John Kongsgaard revived my faith in California Chardonnay this year. (It's not bad; it's just made that way, as a pastiche of real wine.) For the Top 100, I ended up siding with Kongsgaard's more available - and affordable - Napa Valley bottling. But it's the Judge that perfectly expresses his death-and-resurrection philosophy with Chardonnay, and his understanding of how timeless wines come from naturally low yields in the perfect site. The fruit here is powerful enough to put 100 percent new French oak in its place, and there is nothing short of inspiration from tasting the clear tension and power within. One drop of this in a sea of butter would do a ton to revive Chardonnay's good name.

**2 NV Bodegas Garvey Jauna Sacristia de Garvey Palo Cortado Sherry** I bought this Sherry in July from the collection at Darrell Corti's Sacramento store, utterly fell in love with it and promptly took the scenic route back through the delta to buy more - the hell with the fact it runs about \$70 a bottle. Ever since, I've been sipping it, in tiny amounts, when I need a dose of the sublime to lift an otherwise mundane day.

Palo Cortado is a natural anomaly of Sherry - it begins with the freshness of an Amontillado until the protective layer of flor fails and it ages like a robust dry Oloroso. From one of Jerez's older but less known shippers, Garvey's Sacristia line is a limited bottling of wines kept for extra aging and traditionally served only to the house's special guests. This one hails from a refreshed solera that, in Corti's view, likely has a lineage back to Garvey's 18th century roots - a continuum of Sherry history. An endless barrage of flavors hits me each time I revisit it: roasted almond, lavender sea salt, damp bark, preserved lemon peel and so on, all with perfect unity and endless broad presence. In a year when I've been on the hunt for exemplary Sherries, this has the honor of blowing them all out of the water. On its own virtues, probably my most perfect wine of 2008.

**1 1985 Domaine Ponsot Griotte-Chambertin** There's no question setting plays a role in the enjoyment of wine. The circumstance in this case was pitch-perfect: at the end of a string of dinners at New Sammy's Cowboy Bistro in Talent, Ore., the quixotic restaurant run by Chez Panisse and New Boonville Hotel veterans Charlene and Vernon Rollins. It was the culmination of a completely unplugged summer vacation in the hills outside Ashland.

But setting aside, here was perfection, from one of the most rigorous producers, from the smallest and probably most obscure of Gevrey's grands crus, from a ripe toss-up vintage. Scents of blood and cinnamon and earth, and fresh red cherry fruit - still fresh some 23 years later - emerged with extraordinary clarity. The only recent analogue from my notebooks this year might be the 2006 Faiveley Corton Clos des Cortons, a monopole bottling that signals that house's current strength. There will always be Burgundies that rekindle the doomed love affair with these most difficult wines. But at a time during the year when I was brought low by the uniformity of too many wines, the '85 Griotte was nothing short of a restorative act of faith.

## **20 unexpected pleasures**

Winemakers, like ad execs, spend a lot of time trying to cut through the clutter. Some wines make an obvious impact - if a 2005 first-growth Bordeaux doesn't knock you over the head, it hasn't done its job - but the most exciting finds often appear from your blind spot. When you're at a dinner party, with no notebooks or Blackberries to consult, you find yourself gushing about these wines and the unpredictability of discovering them.

What follows are my 20 biggest surprises of the year. After all, sometimes the unexpected pleasure is the best of all.

**2005 Andrew Will Two Blondes Vineyard Yakima Valley Red Wine** I don't know that I'd say the young-vines Two Blondes was a better wine than Chris Camarda's Ciel du Cheval, one of our top red wines this year. But the cooler vineyard site and 36 percent Cabernet Franc in the blend made it thoroughly compelling - and further evidence that Washington state has enormous potential to make world-class wines from Cab Franc.

**2006 Betts & Scholl The Chronique Barossa Valley Grenache** Nearly 15 percent alcohol Grenache from the toasty Barossa that's channeling Volnay? Yep. This effort from master sommelier Richard Betts and art collector Dennis Scholl pulls it off, exquisitely.

**2005 Big Basin Rattlesnake Rock Santa Cruz Mountains Syrah** For several years, Bradley Brown has been making a name for the Syrah from his estate parcel near Boulder Creek, but after tasting it twice this year, it was clear that he's found a perfectly expressive site for it - and may have given the southern Santa Cruz Mountains a reputation for spectacular Syrah.

**2007 Cowhorn Applegate Valley Oregon Marsanne Roussanne** Bill and Barbara Steele left San Francisco to found this biodynamic Rhone-focused project in a remote corner of southern Oregon. This inaugural, Marsanne-dominant white blend is precise and snappy, showing tons of promise.

**1996 J.-A. Ferret Les Menetrieres Hors Classe Pouilly-Fuisse** Importer Neal Rosenthal poured this in June to make a point both about the ability of the better '96 white Burgundies to survive their downward-spiral reputation, and generally about the age potential of typically young-drinking Pouilly. He may have proved it too well, as this smoky, hay-inflected specimen blew away the Meursault next to it, and most other wines that night. Vive la Pouilly!

**2006 Heggies Vineyard Reserve Eden Valley Chardonnay** Peter Gambetta's wines from one of Australia's cooler sites would have made an impact in any case. But I happened to taste this at the same time as the 2005 Giaconda Victoria Estate Chardonnay, from one of Australia's most sought-after names. The \$20 Heggies won the empty-glass test over the \$100 Giaconda, a happy result for all our wallets.

**NV Bodegas Hidalgo La Gitana Manzanilla Pasada Pastrana Sherry** If most Sherry is meant to rely on the virtues of blending, Hidalgo bottles this effort from the Pastrana vineyard in Sanlucar de Barrameda as a tribute to the expression of a single plot. It's like Manzanilla amplified, full of salt and freshness but with gravitas and rich butterscotch-like notes.

**2006 Karlsruhle-Geiben Kaseler Nies'chen Spatlese Riesling** Not the best known (or most pronounceable) among Terry Theise's German wines, but the light-dark interplay of mineral and the amazing tension of this Ruwer bottling from a tricky year made it stand out in a January tasting with a lot of fantastic wines. Back on my radar, big time.

**1979 Karthausenhof Kronenberg Eitelsbacher Karthausenhofberg Auslese Riesling**

True, I'm an absolute sucker for the wines of Christophe Tyrell's historic Ruwer estate. This rerelease from an unremarkable vintage, opened for my father's birthday, reminded me why. Still glinting green at 29 years old, its stone and fresh citrus notes were nearly overwhelming, with just a bit of classic petrol for subtle edge and the Auslese sweetness pleasantly dried out after nearly three decades.

**2005 Kiralyudvar Tokaji Sec** Dry Furmint from Hungary's Tokaji region with the weight and amplitude of white Burgundy, and the opulence of an off-dry Vouvray. Just plain gorgeous.

**2006 Leth Felser Weinberge Lagenreserve Wagram-Donauland Riesling** The classic story of how a producer gets on my radar. From the Wagram area east of Vienna, really Gruner Veltliner territory, appeared this heretofore unknown Riesling, its stony rigidity and dense mouthfeel making it remarkable for the \$20 price. Enough so that after our January tasting, I spent the year ordering Leth every time I found it on a wine list - and discovered its standout 2007 Steinagrund Gruner Veltliner as well.

**2006 Meyer-Fonné Reserve Particuliere Pinot Gris** A newish arrival in Kermit Lynch's portfolio, Meyer-Fonné keeps stealing my attention away from better known Alsace names like Ostertag and Zind-Humbrecht. The foresty aromas in this remarkable bottle make you start reconsidering what you think about Pinot Gris.

**2004 Morey-Coffinet Chassagne-Montrachet Rouge Morgeot** A cool vintage and an appellation known for white wines, and yet this Chassagne Rouge was so stony, radiant and sublime that it kept me captivated over far more pedigreed Burgundies. This made me stop listening to everyone kvetching about how underripe '04 Burgundies were.

**2006 Pyramid Valley Vineyards Hille Vineyard Marlborough Semillon** Mike Weersing's project is turning out some of the most characterful wines in New Zealand, but even for the staunchly geeky, this Semillon is more an erudite pleasure than anything. But its herbal, mysterious profile was so compelling that I ran out to buy a bunch.

**2005 Salinia WE Bottoms Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir** When Californians use the word "Burgundian," prepare to start rolling your eyes. Kevin Kelley, however, doesn't invoke that word much himself but delivers the real thing in his Pinot, with lots of bloody tang and truffle earth, bolstered by almost electric red fruit that speaks to his high-acid preference and his wines' high-toned beauty.

**2007 Salwey Estate Dry Pinot Blanc** From the long and languorous 2007 vintage in Germany, a returning name from Baden in Rudi Wiest's portfolio made one of the most refined Pinot Blanc's I've had in a long time. Its gorgeous, cutting mineral presence reminded me how spectacular German Weissburgunder can be.

**2005 Scholium Project Nereides Guman Vineyard White Wine** Among the most intellectual and rare of Abe Schoener's Scholium wines, this is Chardonnay reconsidered. From stunningly low-yield vines, its saline character bursts forth, leading to an onslaught of flavors - some Chardonnay-like, many completely from left field - bolstered by a practically syrupy texture and an almost tannic grip.

**2004 Cantina de Terlan Lagrein Porphy** No, no, no - this earthy, purplish red from Italy's Alto Adige should be subtle and fruit-driven, right? The level of new French oak and extract makes the Cantina's reserve bottling a bit hard to parse when young, but it also shows that Lagrein, so often misunderstood, has fantastic potential as a cellarable, serious wine when its intrinsic earthiness is allowed to blossom.

**2005 Tre Viti Stolo Family Vineyard Central Coast Syrah** The rows of vines stretching west from Paso Robles toward the coast are ever multiplying, but few can reach further toward the ocean than the Stolos' parcel, just east of the fog-shrouded town of Cambria, perhaps 6 miles from the coast and just south of San Simeon. I first saw the vineyards in mid-2007, tasted the wine later that year, and didn't put the two together until this spring, when I was dazzled again by its potential. It gives new meaning to the second word in Central Coast.

**NV Mauro Vergano Luli Vino Chinato** Sweet fortified Muscat made with an herbal infusion, a twist on Piedmont's already obscure aromatized Barolo Chinato. This, plus Vergano's buoyant Grignolino-based Americano, have been captivating all year both on their own and as fodder for Bay Area bartenders that have used them as a reconsideration of vermouth.

- Jon Bonné

### The year in wine

The Wine staff looks back at the year's best:

-- Jon Bonné's 20 biggest surprises **F3**

-- The Chronicle Wine Selections' top-rated wines

### F4 & F5

-- Cheese Course columnist Janet Fletcher's Top 10 tommes **F6**

E-mail Jon Bonné at [jbonne@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jbonne@sfchronicle.com).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/12/26/WIR814SODU.DTL>

This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

San Francisco Chronicle Sections  

