

# The Midwest Wine Connection

Volume 13, No. 6

August 2008

Here's  
what we  
think

## 2008 Staff Picks

### Rob Hahn

#### Best wine you've recently tasted

Anything from Norton. This label from Argentina is exciting from its basic entry-level wines to its reserves. Well worth a try.

#### Most exciting winemaker (wines and personality)

Based on winemakers I've talked to and met over the past twelve months, my vote goes to Georgetta Dane (right). Her lively, almost attractively feisty personality, matches that of the wines she makes at Big House Wines. Her Big House Birdman Pinot Grigio 2006 is one of my favorite whites I've tasted this year.

#### Most overrated wine label

Any Napa Cab over \$50 that someone in a store has to say, "Parker gave this a..." in order to sell it.

#### Favorite restaurant if someone else is paying

Just about anyplace, but the St. Paul Grill for its food, ambiance and history is still atop the list.

#### Favorite restaurant if you're paying

White Castle, of course. But if I feel like driving a little further down University Avenue in St. Paul, there's a great little Chinese joint called China One. Gotta get take-out, because they don't serve wine, but the food is delicious.



#### One thing you would like to change about wine in restaurants

A free "taster" sample of a featured or house wine. I might have written about this before, but I think restaurants could easily get customers to order a glass or two of wine by offering a little "taste" of one of the specials. Keep it affordable, maybe \$4-6 a glass, and make the presentation fun, and I think restaurants and consumers would both be winners.

#### Best consistent wine value

There are many, but I'll mention just a few by label. Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve, always dependable and tasty. Forest Glen is still one of California's best values. Really enjoyed the "Forest

Fire" White Merlot recently. See page 11 for a review.

#### Wine you would buy if price is no issue

Anything from Nuits St. Georges (Burgundy).

#### What the wine industry needs

More personality(ies). At the risk of sounding redundant, this issue concerns me more than almost any in the wine business. Wine producers big and small need to make sure there are ample personalities associated with the wines, people

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# Positively Poetic



a bottle of good wine,  
like a good act,  
shines ever in retrospect.

—Robert Louis Stevenson



## Poetic wines from California's Central Coast

The Central Coast wines from  
Cypress Vineyards translate the  
alchemy of fruit, climate, earth and  
water into a poetic expression of flavors  
so radiant and refreshing they taste  
as if they were kissed by sun and sea.



**CYPRESS**  
*vineyards*  
*kissed by sun and sea*

## Publisher's Note



**Rob Hahn**

I had the opportunity to enjoy lunch late last month at the St. Paul Grill with Ravenswood founder and winemaker Joel Peterson. In fact, if this issue is a day or two late, just blame him for detaining me along with many of his good wines for a long afternoon gathering.

Joel and I had spoken on the phone a few times but never met in person until last month, reminding me again how much more you learn about a person when you can look them in the eye and drink their wines. You find out if a winemaker can converse about more than just wine or simply has a canned speech about oak barrels to share.

Joel personifies much of what is right about the

wine industry. Despite taking his winery public and later selling it to Constellation Brands, he still is hands-on with the winemaking (with assistance from a few others, of course) and getting in front of the consumer, traveling throughout this country and abroad in an effort to put a face to the wine.

Our lunch gave me pause to reflect on what makes a great winemaker. Here is the litmus test.

**Must be able to make good and great wines.** Not every wine needs to score more than 90 points to be good; a great winemaker knows how to make all wines enjoyable and some wines superb.

**Must be able to recognize the difference between everyday values and special occasion wines, creating some that fit both categories.** It's not too difficult (though I'm not sure I could accomplish it) to take a select few grapes from, say, Napa Valley and turn them into 50 cases of Cab. But making wines from grapes grown in many locations and turning them into wines that are readily available takes talent.

# What makes a great winemaker? My litmus(t) test

**Must be willing to experiment.** Wanting just to make wines that please the 'Palate-of-the-Month' preference is not acceptable. We want something different, at least on occasion if not regularly.

**Must be kind, must be witty, very sweet and fairly pretty.** Oh, no, that's Mary Poppins.

**Must be able to converse about things other than wine.** Too often some winemakers cannot state a sentence unless it contains the words malolactic fermentation or oak barrel aging or Parker.

**Must be a Notre Dame football fan.** Well, not a true requirement but surely could enhance the wine's overall flavor profile. Go Irish!

Here's to more fine drinking and enjoyable reading.

**Rob Hahn**  
Publisher



## The Midwest Wine Connection

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## Uncorked



**Dan Sobiech**

# A tale of two bars

only get to experience this view should you be fortunate enough to get past the velvet ropes at the entrance to the hotel. I happened to be with someone who knew the doorman, and we walked right in.

As you make your way to the bar you see between six and eight barmen dressed in all white preparing cocktails. I saw lots of Mojitos going out, lots of vodka drinks and a few beers and some wine, but mostly cocktails. So I stood and waited to order my drink, and it soon became clear why I am about to pay \$12 for my beverage.

The beautiful setting surely has a price, but the pace at which the barmen work is not as fast as one would expect for a bar that is four deep. So after what seemed like 10 minutes, I finally got my drink. I wandered out to the pool and sipped what would most likely be the only drink I would enjoy on this beautiful setting.

Fast forward one week, and I found myself in a very different place: Iowa City, Iowa. Parts of the city are still recovering from the flooding in June and as you make your way

mix up a few Old-Fashioneds and a classic gin drink, the Tom Collins. The attention to detail was fun to watch; this young barman took pride in his mixology. The wine list was interesting and covered a lot of ground, and the beer list was something that would make a beer geek's mouth water in anticipation. I sat at the bar and ordered one of the nightly specials and after that I ordered another, because unlike my time at the Delano Hotel, I planned on having a couple more drinks here at The Mill.

So what conclusions can one draw in this tale of two bars? Sophistication can come in many forms, and price is not always the determining factor. While Miami's South Beach surely offers up beautiful people, overpaying for people watch is overrated in my book. Will I go back to the Delano? If I am with the same crowd of people I was with last time, yes, but only because I will be out voted by the group. Will I go back to The Mill? Absolutely! I will fight the group's opinion should they choose to go elsewhere. And if I lose, I will head to the Mill alone!

## **How does a slick bar on Miami Beach compare to one in Ames, Iowa?**



I had the opportunity to be in two very different bars last month, and while very different, they both showed that they were on top of trends in cocktails.

When you live in Minnesota, the last place you would think of heading in July is Miami Beach, Florida. But for business reasons, I found myself at some meetings in Miami and, after dinner with some colleagues one night, we all decided to head to the Delano Hotel. It seems that in South Beach certain places have a night as the place to be. It was Tuesday, and the place to be was the Delano Hotel. Tucked behind some green bushes that must have been close to 15 feet high, I noticed a driveway. In that driveway are all the fancy cars you would expect to see in South Beach. Mercedes with numbers starting with a 6, Ferraris and tricked out Hummers for driving through the carnage after a hurricane.

The facade of the Delano is beautiful. The bar refers to itself on its website as an urban resort, and it really is. Once inside you feel as though you have been taken to a far away place. High ceilings with large pillars line a makeshift hallway that make up the lobby and lounge. Large sheer white curtains separate spaces to create rooms. As you continue straight through this large space, you arrive at a terrace that overlooks a pool that opens to the beach, a truly unique space. However, you will

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through town, you can see boarded up buildings. I arrived at a place called The Mill, a bar that is an institution in this college town. It was a Wednesday evening, a song writer's showcase had started, and I could hear a woman singing on stage; she was good. But I prefer a quieter evening, so rather than turn left into the room with the stage I headed left in to the smaller front bar. I noticed a few tables a small bar with 6-8 stools and a pool table. I took a look at the evening specials on the chalkboard, and I thought back to a week ago in Miami. I did the math and realized that I could have four drinks for what it cost me to have one drink at the Delano Hotel.

The crowd could be classified as young, college, hip, a bit more casually dressed than the crowd in Miami Beach with the occasional pony-tailed professor looking type thrown in to round things out. I saw one barman mixing up a few classic cocktails, using fine bar sugar to



Dan Sobiech writes this regular wine column for The Midwest Wine Connection.

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right wine?



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reviews at  
[www.wineheads.com](http://www.wineheads.com)

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who can travel from town to town and get people excited about their wines along the way. If the wine industry as a whole could offer one tribute to the late-Robert Mondavi, it would be to emulate his tireless promotion of his wines and, more importantly, the wine industry in general. And he didn't accomplish that by sitting behind a desk in California looking at spreadsheets and creating quirky looking labels; he took the wine to the people and let them share his passion for the wines along with his personality.

### What the wine industry doesn't need

Homogeny. There have been times, fortunately not too often, when I've tasted five or ten wines in a sitting and thought they all tasted remarkably similar. While most wine drinkers want some semblance of consistency in a varietal, (ie a Zin should taste like a Zin, bold and spicy, not light and fruity), they don't want every single red to taste just like the one they had before. Okay, perhaps I exaggerate a bit, but I have encountered moments, especially when tasting wines blind, where it was difficult to differentiate between five different wines. The good winemakers find a way to make sure their wines stand apart from the masses.

### Most unique food and wine pairing you've recently enjoyed

Enjoyed a bottle of Cordoniu Brut along with some Spanish-flavored chicken and cold Gazpacho to celebrate Rafael Nadal's epic Wimbledon victory. Fantastic!

### Best concert of the last twelve months

Okay, hold your breath before you hear this one: REO Speedwagon (above). Went to see them on St. Paul's Harriet Island during Taste of Minnesota, and, wow, those boys from Illinois can still get it done. A huge crowd with a range of ages, too. Very fun.

### Biggest political buffoon (person or incident)

Where to start? Though I still think he would have made a great candidate, enlivened the Minnesota U.S. Senate race and probably would have won,



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former Governor Jesse Ventura gets this year's distinction for walking away.

### Favorite movie of the past twelve months

"Charlie Wilson's War." Based on a true story, you might almost think this is a satire on how dysfunctional Washington DC sometimes appears. Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts were great, but Philip Seymour Hoffman (lower left) stole the show.

### Next "hot" varietal

Torrontes. This white, usually from Argentina, has it all. Tastes refreshing but generally not too sweet, is affordable and has a cool name that most people can pronounce.

### Next "hot" region

I think I picked Argentina last year, and its full potential is still a work-in-progress. We've seen more great wines and values from Argentina hit the shelves in the past year, but we should see

even more in the months to come.

## Dan Sobiech

### Best wine you've recently tasted

Guerilla Wine Company Zinfandel

### Most exciting winemaker (wines and personality)

I haven't had the opportunity to see too many winemakers this past year, so for that I will stick with Greg Graziano, who's opinionated and makes great wines that are a bit out of the ordinary varieties.

### Most overrated wine label

Cakebread. The wines are good but not worth the price

### Favorite restaurant if someone else is paying

Guy Savoy, Ceasar's Palace, Las Vegas

### Favorite restaurant if you're paying

Bulldog Bar in Northeast Minneapolis.

### One thing you would like to change about wine in restaurants

A more thought out selection. Why do restaurants have three, four or five Chardonnays by-the-glass? Two is one too many. Same with Cabernets.

### Best consistent wine value

German wines. Classy and elegant white wines that are a value at every price.

### Wine you would buy if price is no issue

Burgundy. There is no other.

# 2008 staff picks

### What the wine industry needs

A more casual attitude. They think they have it but events are still too chic.

### What the wine industry doesn't need

Another person talking about how the wines are made; consumers don't care. They want wines that taste good and a little background story on the wine, maybe. Leave the wine tech talk for the 5% who really care about it.

### Most unique food and wine pairing you've recently enjoyed

Zinfandel and BBQ ribs. A perfect match and always in season, too!

### Best concert of the last twelve months

I have not been to a concert in the last 12 months.

### Biggest political buffoon (person or incident)

Hillary Clinton

### Favorite movie of the past twelve months

I don't know. They all seem to come out on video so fast. But I will go see the new Batman movie.

### Next "hot" varietal

Zinfandel and not those 15%+ alcohol Zins, but good spicy, fruity Zinfandel.

### Next "hot" region

I think things need to cool off before they can get hot again but I see France making a strong comeback.

## Joel Peterson

*Ravenswood Winemaker and Founder  
Guest Columnist*

### Best wine you've recently tasted

1986 Ravenswood Big Hill Ranch Zinfandel

### Most overrated wine label

Grange Hermitage. Too much oak.

### One thing you would like to change about wine in restaurants

Many of my early gripes are gone, but the central issue continues to be price. I wish they would be more value-oriented at times.



# 2008 staff picks

## Best consistent wine value

Beaujolais wines tend to be underrated and really deliver a great value. Sauternes are very good, too.

## Most exciting winemaker (wines and personality)

Stuart Bourne (right) of Barossa Valley Estates. He makes some of the most massive wines.

## Wine you would buy if price is no issue

Domaine Romanée-Conti.

## What the wine industry needs

Winemakers engaged with the public in sincere and dedicated discussions. More authenticity.

## What the wine industry doesn't need

More sameness.

## Biggest political buffoon (person or incident)

Rudy Giuliani.

## Favorite movie of the past twelve months

"There Will Be Blood"

## Next "hot" varietal

Ravenswood Icon Mixed Blacks, the wine California would have made if it wasn't for Prohibition. Blend of Carignane, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel and Alicante Bouschet. I also think there's a bright future for Chianti and Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

## Next "hot" region

South Africa or New Zealand.



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## Chef Leo Bogee Mothersauces

7630 Lyndale Ave S., Richfield  
[www.mothersauces.com](http://www.mothersauces.com)

***We often talk about food and wine pairings. But what are some simple rules when pairing different spices with wines?***

Drink what you like is my first rule! Yes, you've heard this a million times, but it holds true for pairing. Try out your favorite wines and let the natural undertones of the wine support the dish and not let the wine over take it. For example, natural spice pairings for Chardonnay's are Mustard Seeds, Rosemary, Tarragon, Cloves, and Fresh Ginger. Try and find a dish that these ingredients would be incorporated.

***What are some of your favorite food and wine pairings?***

My favorite pairings lately seem to always to incorporate using Tempranillo into my dish. In the summer, I have used toasted cardamom seeds to highlight some Tempranillo's. It is crusted toasted cardamom pork tenderloin that I like to smoke with cherry wood to compliment the oak of the wine.

***What is Mothersauces and what was your inspiration for the concept?***

My Grandmother was the inspiration for Mothersauces; as a small child he recalls visiting his Grandmother for the first time. "As my mother drove away I found myself with my Grandmother in her kitchen. Sensing my uneasiness she started talking to me as she prepared a cake. As I watched her gather eggs, flour, sugar and the other ingredients she talked of family and passed down recipes. This was the first time I recalled being grounded in my family roots. Since that time food has been about creating that same experience". In creating Mothersauces I knew that I wanted a place where food brought an experience of bringing people together to share whatever was going in their lives and community.

***We're in the midst of grilling season, what are some of your favorite items on the grill, how do you like to prepare them and what wines do you enjoy most with them?***

I enjoy planked salmon on the grill and smoke baby back ribs. For salmon, I like to use cherry wood planks, a very mild wood to enhance the flavor of the

fish since fresh Salmon should be the main ingredient you taste. My favorite wines for this dish are Pinot Gris and Syrahs for their pepper undertones. With smoked baby back ribs I like to use a sweet wine like a Rosé to help cool the heat of my spice blend for my ribs.

***People on both coasts often consider Midwest food, and our palates for that matter, bland. Do you find that to be the case? Why or why not?***

I don't necessarily agree because I see the Twin Cities in particular very rich with ingredients and restaurants from a blend of countries. Restaurants such as Saffron Middle East, El Meson and Shuang Chang use spices and ingredients that help educate the Midwestern palate.

***What wines are in your refrigerator at home or at work?***

At home my wife is the main decision maker for the wines at home. It seems we always have a Pinot Grigio in the warmer months and Cabernet's in the cooler months on hand.



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# The Cork Report

## Wine of the Month

### Norton Privada 2002

Anyone who has doubts about Argentina, listen up.

This wine is dynamite, packed full of TNT. Rich, earthy flavors, full-bodied and a long finish. Excellent. **92**



### Irony Pinot Noir Russian River Valley 2005

Nothing ironic about this. You expect quality from Russian River Pinot, and this one delivers beyond expectations. Full of flavor, delicate and a strong finish. **90**



### mia's playground Russian River Pinot Noir 2007

You won't find a lot of this around, so if you do, pick up a bottle or two. Very enjoyable. **90**



### Schramsberg Blanc de Blanc 2005

Lively and full-bodied. Do you expect anything else but quality from Schramsberg? Always dependable and always good. **90**



### Guide to the Cork Report

90-100	<i>Outstanding</i>
80-89	<i>Very Good</i>
70-79	<i>Good</i>
Below 70	<i>Really bad and probably won't even be mentioned</i>

# A Little Something For Everyone

A sampling of some of the best wines from the past month.



**Maximin Grunhauser Abtsberg Spaltlese 2007** - Proof that the most beautiful yet confusing German labels contain some of the best Rieslings made in the world. Looks like liquid gold in a glass and tastes even better. **90**

**Barnett Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2005** - This wine from the Spring Mountain District is quite impressive. Heavy fuel. Full of fruit, earth and tannins on the finish. Really good. **90**

**Gascon Malbec 2007** - A wonderful new entry from Argentina. Well-balanced with hints of spice and soft tannins. Long finish leaves you wanting more. At about \$10-12, a real value. **89**

**Norton Reserva Syrah 2005** - Earthy with touches of oak that smooth the tannins. Well-developed, well-aged and simply delicious. **89**

**Valckenberg Riesling 2007** - A fresh and lively Riesling. Affordable and easy to open with a twist-off cap. **89**

**Provenance Cabernet Sauvignon 2005** - An enjoyable Napa Cab. Elegant and full-bodied but not overpowering. **89**

**Forest Glen "Forest Fire" White Merlot** - A tasty dry rosé. Perfect for a hot summer's night while sitting outside and enjoying the company of friends. At about \$8, a true value. **88**

**Edna Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2005** - Rich blackberry flavors. Soft but distinguishable tannins. Very flavorful. **88**

**(Oops) Carménère Merlot 2006** - A Bordeaux-style Chilean red that's like watching a Sharon Stone movie: a little dirty but you really enjoy it. **88**

**A by Acacia Pinot Noir 2006** - Soft and supple. Touch of spice rounds out a wonderful Pinot. **88**

**Irony Cabernet Sauvignon 2004** - A well-aged Cab that isn't overdone. Full-flavored and full-bodied but the tannins are reasonable and not overpowering. **88**



**Edna Valley Pinot Noir 2006** - Soft and fun. Cherry and plum flavors. Nothing pretentious but certainly in a higher class with other California Pinots. **88**

**Omaka Springs Sauvignon Blanc 2007** - One of these years the next big white will be New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. This is very fresh and tasty. Well worth a try. **88**

**Moscato d'Asti Risata** - Very sweet but when chilled properly, this is perfect as an aperitif for a hot, sultry summer's day. Just a fun little sparkling. Could be a good dessert wine, too. **88**

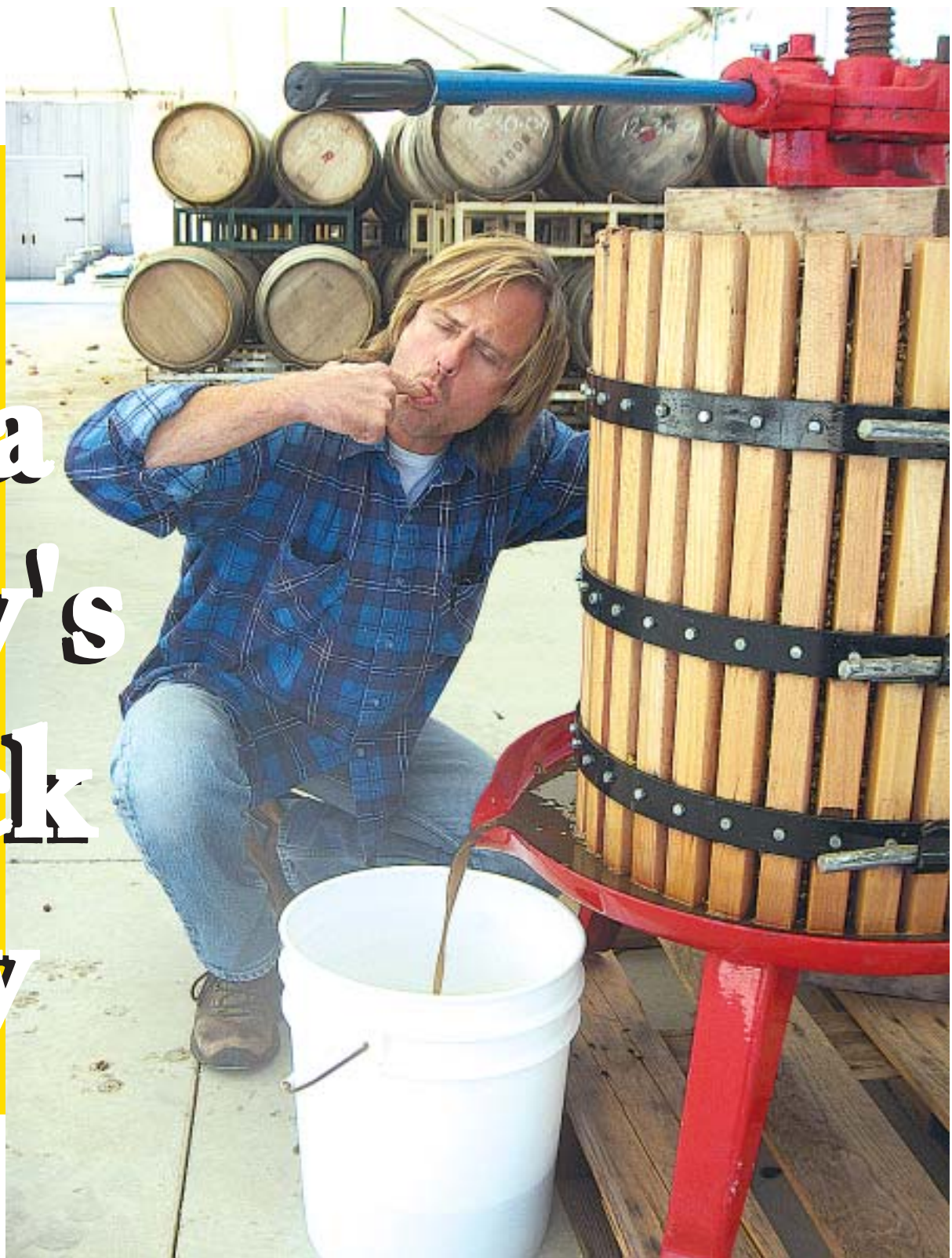
**Hook & Ladder The Tillerman 2005** - Always fresh and slightly grassy. Good acidic balance and a pleasant finish. **87**

**(Oops) Cabernet Franc Carménère 2006** - Medium-bodied with good fruit but enough heft to make for a lasting finish. **87**

**RK Reichsgraf van Kesselstatt Riesling 2007** - A slightly basic German Riesling with distinctive mineral overtones. A fun, quaffable white. **86**



# Santa Barbara County's Babcock Winery



*Editor's note: One of the unexpected responses to our June cover story on Jesse Ventura came in a voice mail message from a doctor in the metro area. He informed us that one of his neighbors gave him a copy of the June issue. He said, at first glance, he didn't expect much from our publication but ended up enjoying the issue, especially the Ventura story. He then suggested we run a feature story on one of his favorite California wineries, Babcock Winery. Ask, and you shall receive. Thanks for the comments and suggestions.*

The story of Babcock Winery, like so many others in the California wine industry, has an auspicious if not fortuitous flavor. Walt and Mona Babcock sought a retreat from Walt's dental practice and the stress of running two restaurants, Walt's Wharf in Seal Beach and Oysters in Corona del Mar. Their quest led them to purchase 110 acres on the western edge of the Santa Ynez Valley in Santa Bar-



bara County. They began by planting a 25-acre vineyard in 1980 and later sold grapes to winemakers.

Enter Bryan Babcock, the Babcock's son who in 1984 was working toward a master's degree in food science at UC-Davis after graduating from Occidental College with a major in biology and a minor in chemistry with an emphasis in enology. When the family decided to make their own wines that year, he was ready, and his in first harvest, his Babcock Estate Sauvignon Blanc earned a double gold medal, the first of many awards his wines would receive.

Bryan Babcock has been described as someone with a "daring style," presumably a reference to his winemaking techniques and not his hair fashion of years gone by (compare photos!).

Today the winery continues to grow, producing about 20,000 cases a year, utilizing 80 acres of vineyards planed with Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, among other varietals. Though expanding, Babcock, like many other wineries in Santa Barbara, remains relatively small compared to other behemoths in Napa and Sonoma. And that small winery charm seems to continue to serve Babcock quite well.

## Babcock Reviews

**Grand Cuvee Pinot Noir 2006** - Many words could describe this wine, but let's just say simply exceptional. **91**

**Rita's Earth Cuvee Pinot Noir 2006** - If you could point to a style that says Santa Barbara County Pinot, this is it. Deep cherry fruit flavors that fill your mouth and please the palate to no end. A long finish. **90**

**Classic Rock Cabernet Sauvignon 2006** - Extra credit for a cool name, but this wine doesn't need extra points. It's a lush, well-rounded Cab, long on style. **89**

**Chardonnay 2005** - A full-bodied Chard with strong buttery flavors and a hint of citrus (enjoyable). Practically chewy. **89**

# Spirits

## PREMIUM VALUE VODKA IS NOT AN OXYMORON

By Charles K. Cowdery

I hate to begin any discussion with a quotation from the Federal Code, but this definition should be required reading for all vodka drinkers.

“Vodka is neutral spirits so distilled, or so treated after distillation with charcoal or other materials, as to be without distinctive character, aroma, taste, or color.”

This follows, as such things do, the definition of neutral spirits, aka alcohol, which is a distilled spirit made from any material, distilled to at least 95 percent pure alcohol.

So vodka is neutral spirit that has been treated to make it look, smell and taste even more neutral.

Achieving a drink this pure was the goal of distillers for centuries. It was almost impossible before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, it's easy, which is why there are so many different vodkas. Vodka is very easy to make and with the right equipment, virtually fool-proof. Vodka is so easy to make and it is all so similar that most of the companies that sell it don't even make it themselves. They may do some filtering or other processing before bottling it, but no distilling.

One thing they all do is add water. Most vodka is 80° proof, which is 40% alcohol by volume (ABV). Any product that is 40% ABV is 60% H<sub>2</sub>O. Put another way, a 750ml bottle of 80° proof vodka is 300ml of alcohol and 450ml of added water.

If you want to make premium vodka at home, here is how. Buy a 750ml bottle of 190° proof Everclear and send it through a Brita filter a couple of times, then combine it with about a liter of water (1.125L, to be precise). Congratulations, it's a premium vodka.

You may think you know where this is going. I'm about to say, “all vodka is the same,” right? On the contrary, all vodka is *not* the same. The worst, cheapest vodka tastes like alcohol, which is to say it tastes and smells like a chemical solvent. The best, most expensive vodka is virtually odorless and tastes like water.

It costs only a small amount

more money to make a vodka that tastes a lot better, so good vodkas don't have to cost four or five times as much as cheap ones, but they generally do.

That's changing.

With vodka so easy to make, the business is crazy competitive. Everybody has a gimmick. The writer Terry Sullivan once suggested that a good one might be to filter it through the hair of 1,000 Polish virgins.

Not far off is Diaka Vodka, which is filtered through diamonds and costs \$100 a bottle.

But here's another gimmick, make a cheap vodka that tastes like an expensive one.

That, now that we're finally here, is today's topic.

The cheapest 750ml bottle of vodka you can find at retail is about \$6. The cheapest big name premium vodkas, like Absolut and Finlandia, are about \$18. Stolichnaya is \$20. Can we do better? Can we get premium vodka taste and aroma for less than \$18-\$20?

Would you pay \$11 for such a vodka? Then try Svedka. It's even imported from Sweden, like Absolut. How does \$9 for the most popular premium vodka in Poland sound? Then try Sobieski. That's the lowest reported price I've seen. Sobieski Vodka is new to the U.S., so there may be a lot of trial pricing going on. Let's say the everyday price goes to \$11, like Svedka. Still, not bad.

Most important of all, both products deliver.

The Sobieski story illustrates why these premium value vodkas are becoming available now. A big vodka company like Belvedere, which competes in the \$25-\$30 segment with its Belvedere brand, likes those high profits but also hates to see somebody else get that \$11 sale. So it brings in another one of its brands through a separate but wholly-owned importer.

Belvedere is a French company but most of its vodka is distilled in Poland, much of it for the domestic Polish market, so they make a lot of vodka. Is \$11 Sobieski the same as \$27 Belvedere? Maybe, maybe not, but that's not the point. Sobieski is an inexpensive vodka that performs like the

high-priced ones.

If that word “imported” on the label doesn't matter to you, Smirnoff is \$13. The blind tasting it won is getting a bit shopworn, but it was the *New York Times*. Perhaps more persuasive is the fact that it remains the world's best-selling vodka.

Skyy, also American-made, manages even to have a little cachet at a mere \$15 a bottle. It's arguably cooler than Absolut and three bucks cheaper. Also at \$15, FrWs, which is imported from Denmark.

If it's important to you to know what you are drinking and where it was made, then for just \$19 you can get a bottle of Rain Vodka. Every drop is made from scratch at the Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky, using organic white corn grown on a single farm in southern Illinois. Cool looking bottle, too.



Introduced last year, Opulent represents a high-end value in the vodka category.

### Vodka FACTS AND TRENDS

**Tip:** Although forbidden by the Bible (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-38), you can always pour these cheap-but-good vodkas into your fancy but empty Chopin, Grey Goose or Effen bottles. It would be a shame to waste such a pretty bottle, and old bottles today are much more durable than they were in Biblical times.

**Fact:** Belvedere, though based in Paris, is the largest vodka distributor in Eastern Europe. Some of its other vodka brands include Sobieski, Starogardzka, Zawisza, Krakowska, Balsam Pomorski, Sobieski Impress, Krupnik, and Danzka.

**Trend:** Flavored vodka, of course: Some of what's out there: Apple, Blueberry, Cherry, Cranberry, Currant, Grape, Lemon, Lime, Orange, Pear, Pepper, Raspberry, Strawberry, Vanilla, and Watermelon.

**Fact:** UV Vodka (about \$11), made by Minneapolis-based Phillips Distilling, wants you to know they purify their water with a technique called “three-bed deionization.” The first bed removes positively charged minerals, the second removes negatively charged minerals, and the third catches whatever is left. Really. I didn't make that up.

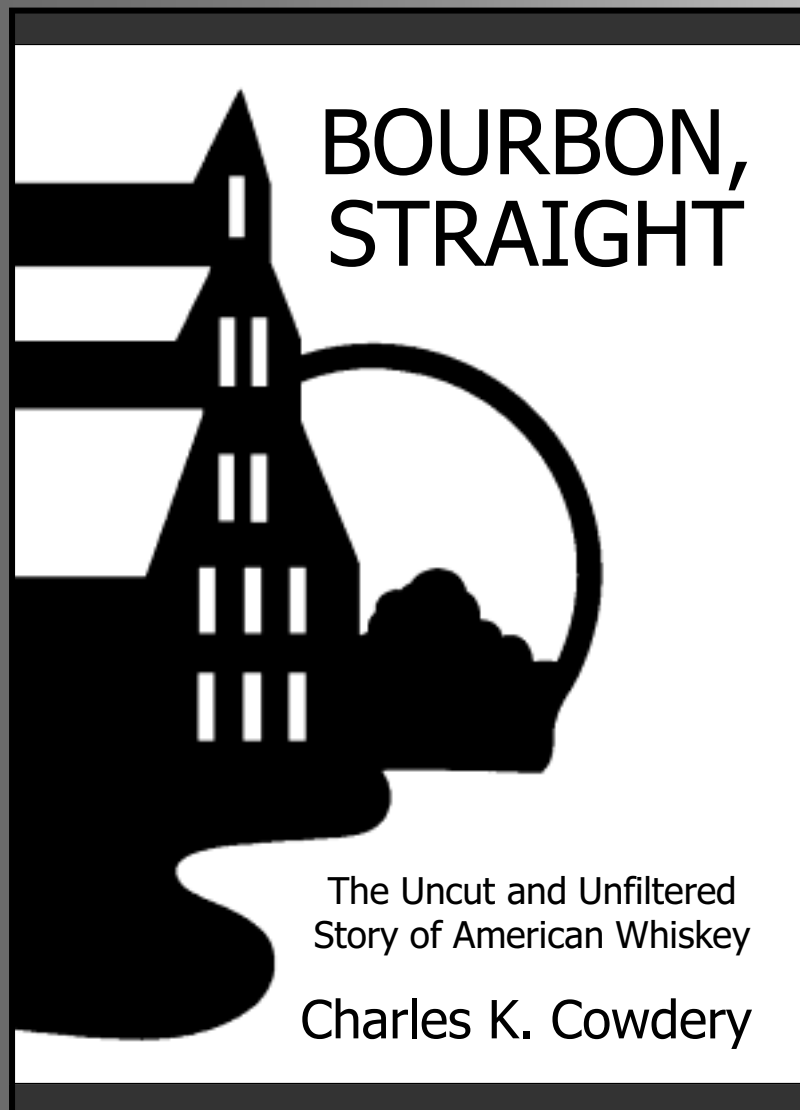


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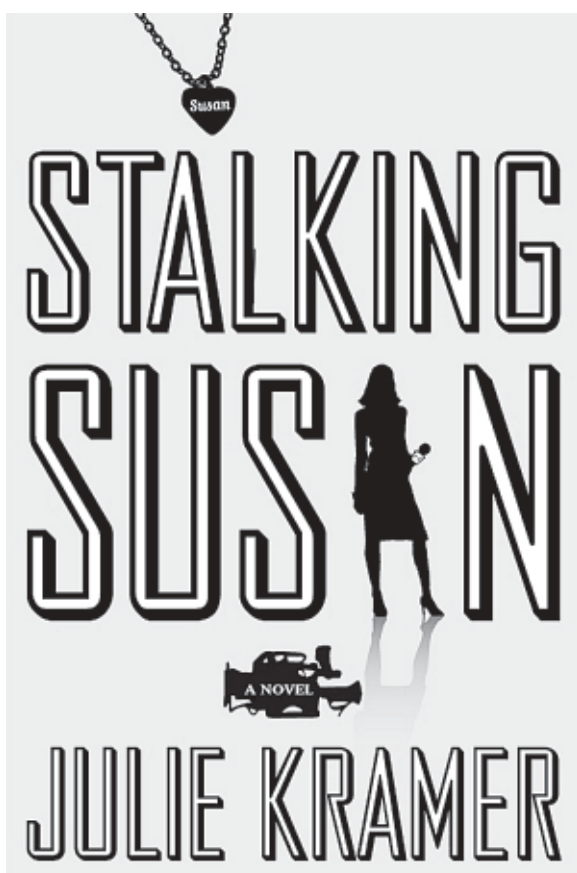
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*All things wine, food and  
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Convention comes to St. Paul*

# Reading Suggestions



*Stalking Susan*  
Julie Kramer  
(Doubleday)

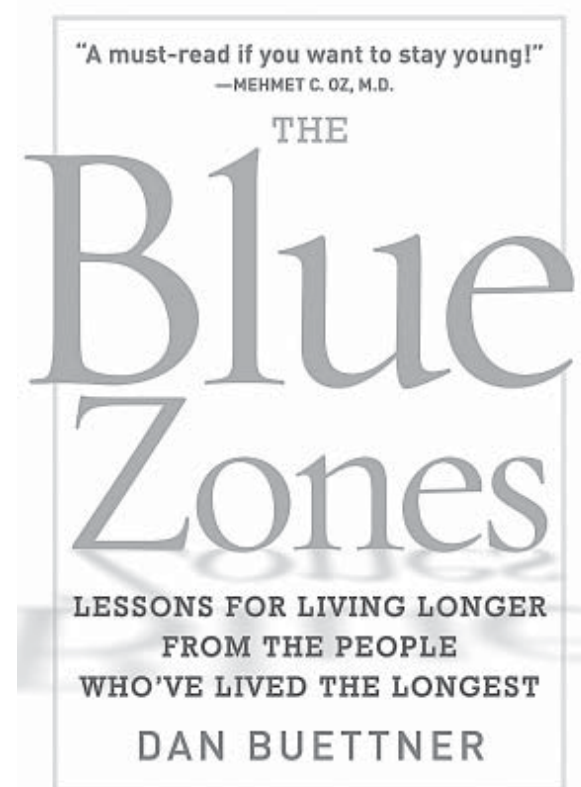
The debut novel by Minnesota writer Julie Kramer is an exciting winner. Through Riley Spartz, the reader takes a journey through the eyes of an emotionally complicated yet assertive investigative reporter. In a fashion similar to John Sandford, Kramer wraps a smaller plot (an angry pet mortician seeking revenge) into the bigger story line of a serial killer targeting women named Susan. Laced with some humor and descriptions of the Twin Cities, *Stalking Susan* is an easy, entertaining read.



*Positively Main Street*  
*Bob Dylan's Minnesota*  
Toby Thompson  
(University of Minnesota Press)

In the late 1960s, Toby Thompson got into his car and journeyed to Minnesota, hoping to capture info about the early years of Bob Dylan's life in Hibbing and Minneapolis. What emerged is a truly colorful and uniquely insightful tale that Thompson pieced together through many conversations with people who knew Dylan, coupling that with the author's own observations.

A new edition of the book was released earlier this year, giving us an opportunity to review it, and more importantly, readers a chance to pick up a new copy at their local book store. A must for Dylan fans, required reading for rock-n-roll fans and simply enjoyable for others in between.

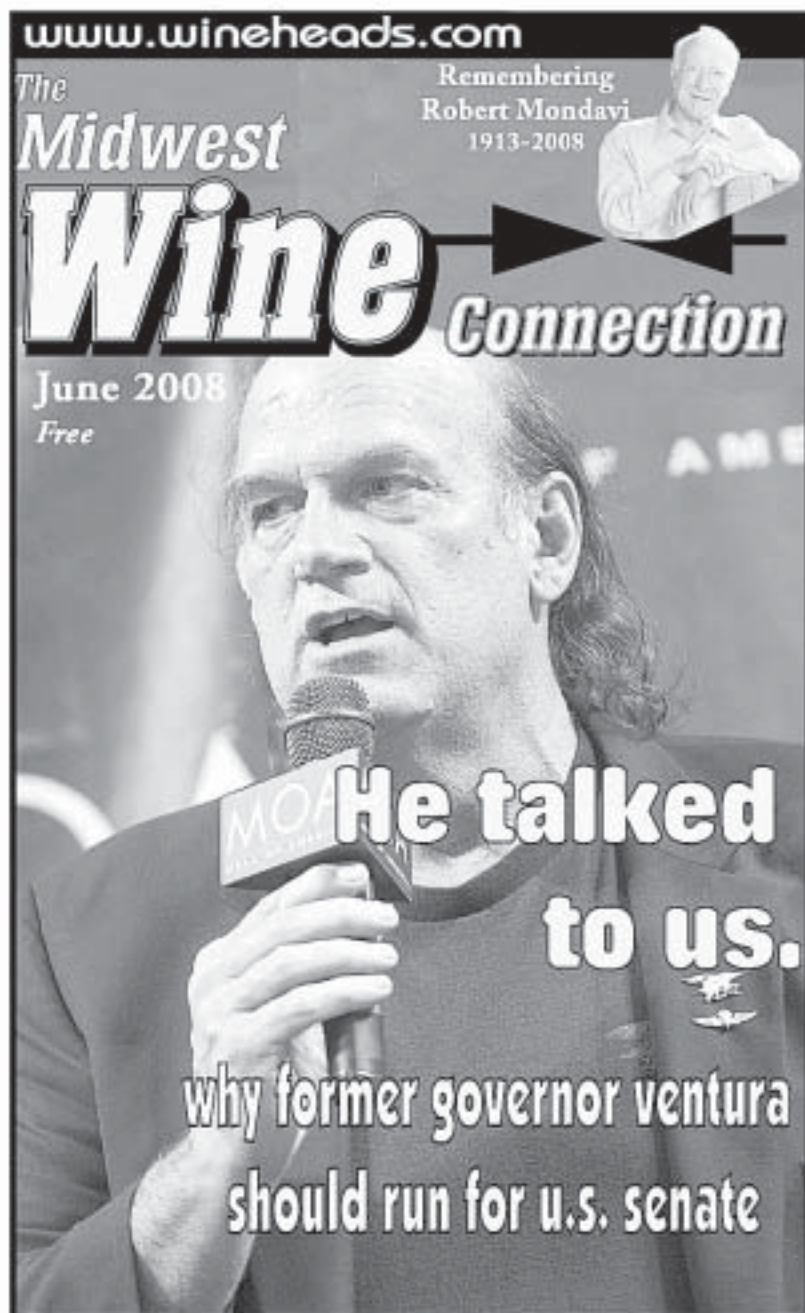


*The Blue Zones*  
Dan Buettner  
(National Geographic)

Minnesota adventurer Dan Buettner has spent the better part of his adult life trekking the globe, usually on a bicycle. The recent result of his travels and curiosity is *The Blue Zones*, a study why different people from different areas of the world live healthier, and seemingly, more enjoyable lives.

Of special interest to our readers might be Buettner's reference to health benefits of wine in moderation, writing about it long before *Star Tribune* writer Bill Ward regurgitated someone else's findings. Buettner looks at the consumption of red wine, a Canonau, in Sardinia (pgs. 243-245), and found that two glasses a day serve a beneficial purpose for most; any greater quantity negates the benefits. And, no, according to Buettner, you can't go six days without a drink and then have 14 glasses on the seventh day and still reap the benefits.

# VENTURA: LIKE A GOOD CALIFORNIA ZIN, BOLD AND SPICY WHEN FIRST UNCORKED BUT FLAT AND STALE WHEN LEFT OPEN TOO LONG



From Rob Hahn's blog on [www.wineheads.com](http://www.wineheads.com)

## Would you like some cheese with your whines?

July 15, 2008

Dear Gov. Ventura

You mentioned last night on television that God had never spoken to you or at least you had never heard him doing so. Well, here I am. I am Politico-Bacchus, the god of politics and wine, two deities rolled into one, and I am talking to you. To paraphrase Pete Townsend, "Jesse, can you hear me?"

It never occurred to me until last night that so many *whines* could be packed into a half-hour of television. Let's see: Coleman is a chickenhawk, Franken should have a bigger lead, the local media attack your family, you don't know if you're going to vote in the next election. There must have been a lot of cheese in the greenroom before Larry King's game of softball questions. You still have until five o'clock today to register to run for the U.S. Senate, and as Politico-Bacchus, the god of politics and wine, I am urging you to file. ("Jesse, can you hear me?") If you truly believe you are a "statesman," as you told *The Midwest Wine Connection*, and want to serve your country, then step into the fray again and make this a better campaign.

If you don't, perhaps we can only infer you're like a good California Zin, bold and spicy when first uncorked but flat and stale when left open too long.

Yours Truly,  
Politico-Bacchus, the god of politics and wine

## Reporter's Notebook

### DECISION 2008 VOTE ... OR QUIT WHINING!

Putting Jesse Ventura on the cover of our June issue became the gift that kept giving, making it one of our most popular and widely read issues to date. As speculation about Ventura's possible run for U.S. Senate, the former governor held to his policy of not doing interviews with the mainstream Minnesota media. That led them to turn to our story for insights.

First, there was a feature on KMSP (Ch. 9) and a mention on Minnpost.com, which referred to us as a wine rag (fitting!). Then came a mention on KSTP (Ch. 5) and a reference in a story in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. In the latter, the two reporters gave credit to *The Midwest Wine Connection* when they quoted the story, unlike another one of their wine writers who likes to borrow ideas from us and represent them as his own. Finally, Jake Tapper, the Chief Washington correspondent for ABC News referred to our publication not once, but twice, when writing about Ventura in his blog.

Even Republican U.S. Senate candidate Dr. Jack Shepard, a fugitive living in Rome,

got into the mix, calling our own columnist Leslee Miller to ask for some coverage. He reasoned that if we were willing to run a story on Ventura, we would certainly like a story about him. Maybe not.

In a year that we have made political coverage a priority, a tasty complement to our normal wine stories and reviews, the attention from the Ventura issue was fun and greatly appreciated. Alas, it's too bad in the end that the former governor, who would have made the campaign so much better, seemed to contradict what he told us in the June issue. Maybe, as he noted on CNN's "Larry King Live," God just didn't speak to him and tell him to run. Or maybe Jesse just wasn't willing to listen.

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