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Ripeness Isn't All

By Eric Asimov October 20, 2009 1:58 pm

This week, my column is on the surprising number of restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area that emphasize their commitment to local ingredients and purveyors but serve mostly European wines.

I won't rehash the arguments in the piece — you are kindly encouraged to read for yourself — but I want to offer some additional observations.

First, no large urban center in this country is quite as blessed as the Bay Area in its bounty of produce and other fresh ingredients and its proximity to wine country. You could certainly make the argument for Portland, Ore., though Portland is nowhere near as big — the 23rd largest metropolitan area in the country vs. the Bay Area, the 12th largest, sixth if you add in San Jose. Yet even in Portland, which is at least as serious about supporting local purveyors, many restaurants offer ample European selections on their wine lists.

One conclusion is inescapable: the riper and riper styles of wine that have become popular in this country simply are not versatile with food, so restaurants look elsewhere. Not that all European wines are nimble with food. But restaurants have a lot more styles and types of wines to choose from.

This has not been lost on segments of the American wine industry. It may be just the beginning, but I believe the pendulum is beginning to swing just a tad back from the emphasis on ultra-ripe, powerful and heavy wines toward more balanced, lighter-weight, higher acid wines. Ultimately, I think, the pendulum will rest somewhere near the middle so that people can select any style they like.

This does not mean that restaurants will replace their concentration of European wines with locally produced bottles. Regardless of the stylistic choices of American producers, Europe offers a wider palette of grapes, terroirs and styles to choose from. That is not likely to change.

Still, it is heartening to see wineries like Edmunds St. John, Dashe Cellars and a number of pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon producers who are committed to making wines that belong on the table.

I know far more American producers follow this road than I've named, and I am still discovering them. One wine I enjoyed tremendously recently was the 2007 Napa Valley White from Matthiasson, a tiny family operation that grows organic fruit as well as grapes for wine.

The wine is simply called "white" because it's actually a mixture of several grapes — sauvignon blanc and, unusually, ribolla gialla, Semillon and tocai friulano. Frankly, it's the kind of wine that you don't care which grapes went into it. It's crisp and lively, with enough complexity to keep you wondering about the aromas and flavors, and a little honeyed, beeswax quality for texture. I served it with clam cakes, a recent successful variation on crab cakes, and it was delicious.

Needless to say, in San Francisco, you can find this wine at Nopa.

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