

Top 10 most memorable wines of 2011

Jon Bonné Updated 5:40 pm PST, Thursday, December 26, 2013



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10 wines to remember in 2011

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The most memorable wines often aren't the latest ones to appear before you. Wines that linger in memory require time to leave their best impressions. And so my 10 most memorable list is often an exercise more in great memories than in bottles to buy today.

In 2011, however, I encountered so many pleasures simply by tasting day to day. Some candidates, like the 2009 Freestone Pastoral Vineyard Pinot Noir, already appeared in the Top 100 Wines (go to: sfg.ly/uBoGDb), but this year's list of my 10 most memorable wines feels particularly current.

While there remains a history lesson or two in the mix - notably about the potential of California - there are also extraordinary new specimens, wines that take a snapshot of the best ambitions of today's vintners.

And so, here are 10 wines that lingered with me all year long. That some are still on shelves are a good excuse to go shopping one more time before 2012 arrives.

10 2009 Dry River Martinborough Pinot Noir (Price N/A, 13% alcohol. Importer: RO Imports): This New Zealand estate's meticulously farmed 8 acres of the grape, managed without irrigation and bought in 2002 by investor Julian Robertson and Reg Oliver, owner of Napa's El Molino, are a study in the pursuit of greatness. Winemaker Katy Hammond found an intense expression, evoking thoughts of the best Vosne-Romanee. The layers keep coming: sandalwood, underbrush, star anise, lemon peel, bergamot, smoked tea and spicy boysenberry.

Here, then, is a case study in how Pinot can stop you in your tracks. As with a wine like the 2009 Rhys Horseshoe Vineyard Pinot Noir, which failed to make this list only because Kevin Harvey's project got a spot last year (go to: sfg.ly/gxfls9), you're reminded that great terroir shows itself in an instant - testament to those who hunt it relentlessly.

9 2008 Skerk Ograde Venezia Giulia IGT Bianco (\$39, 13%. Importer: Ah Wines): In February, I spent an engaging evening at Delfina with a trio of vintners from the Carso region, on the far edge of Italy near Trieste. (Go to: sfg.ly/idSRT3) The dramatic wines of Benjamin Zidarich or Edi Kante could have held sway, but it was Sandi Skerk's mix of Vitovska, Malvasia, Sauvignon and Pinot Grigio that won the night.

More salmon colored than orange, the Ograde is full of heady, sweet aromas: honeysuckle, marmalade, chalky mineral and apricot. It has the countenance of syrup without the thickness. Inviting at every moment, this is a reminder why orange wine still has a legitimate place beyond fad.

8 2010 Gaia Wines 14-18h Peloponnisos Agiorgitiko Rosé (\$18, 13%. Importer: Ideal North America):

Greece may be falling apart, but from its quintessential red grape, St. George, comes a heady copper-edged rosé redolent with iris, beetroot, robust cherry and roasted tangerine. I could have drunk it all year.

Beyond that lies a story in how old Europe can regain currency, and not just in an EU rescue sort of way. Gaia works both in the Nemea region and in Santorini, making extraordinary white Assyrtiko. Partners Yiannis Paraskevopoulos and Leon Karatsalos have found a way to address the modern market on its own terms. And so the 14-18h, named for the length of time grapes soak on their skins, is modish and sealed in screwcap. Every region needs a breakthrough wine; this might be Greece's.

7 2009 Matthiasson Napa Valley Cabernet Franc (\$45, 13.1%): While Steve Matthiasson's white wines get more attention, his work with ever-unfashionable Cab Franc makes a strong point.

Franc in Napa is often grown beyond its natural limits, overripened to remove any possible bit of the green-pepper flavors that define the grape. Matthiasson, a star vineyard manager, is on a mission to make great red wines at lesser ripeness. His Franc is ethereal and pitch-perfect.

Full of intense white flower and mineral aromas - almost like delicate Pinot with its blue plum and raspberry. It evokes examples from Italy's Friuli, showing the structure of the Loire but more brightness than the brooding scents of Chinon. According to Matthiasson, it took more than a year for the wine's greenness in barrel to morph into a delicate floral tone, a sign that perhaps the issue with Franc isn't pyrazines. It's patience.

6 2008 Patrick Piuze Terroir de Courgis Chablis (\$23 for the 2009, 12%. Importer: Aliane Wines): The standout at a Thanksgiving full of amazing magnums, including a 2001 Emmanuel Rouget Cros Parantoux made by Burgundian legend Henri Mayer. I bought this wine for three reasons: 2008 was a vintage to cherish in Chablis; Canadian-born Piuze's wines are crystalline and deeply pleasurable; and my stay in tiny Courgis last year was among my most memorable moments in wine.

This wine delivered every drop of pleasure that Chablis can, with ripe citrus fruit and deep mineral power in every sip. It's a reminder that great Chablis, even a simple village bottle, is one of the world's greatest expressions of Chardonnay.

5 2010 Weiser-Kunstler Enkircher Ellergrub Mosel Riesling Kabinett (\$24, 7.5%. Importer: Mosel Wine Merchants): The drama of Germany's crazy 2010 vintage (go to: sfg.ly/lh0XP5) has been under discussion for months, and you'll be hearing more about it soon. Here's a perfect example of why.

The young Weiser-Kunstler estate is run by Konstantin Weiser and Alexandra Kunstler. Located in Traben-Trarbach, at the very beginning of the middle Mosel, it might not enjoy the cachet of a village like Wehlen. But the Ellergrub vines in the village of Enkirch, up to a century old and residing on Devon blue slate, are testament to the region's stony greatness. The two are of that new Riesling generation willing to work with indigenous fermentation and minimal cellar intervention, and, in 2010, that yielded a dramatic Kabinett: You're almost smacked by scents of talc and strawberry, bay leaf and peach skin. This wine grips you, in a nearly saline and savory way on the palate, and guides you through its electric flavors.

Were there qualitatively better Rieslings in 2010? Sure - the Donnhoff Oberhauser Brucke Auslese Goldkapsel, from one of the world's finest estates, is pure drama in a bottle. But it's hard to beat the Ellergrub for the sheer sensation of freshness and bliss that will define 2010.

4 2010 Domaine de la Pepiere Les Gras Moutons Muscadet Sevre et Maine Sur Lie (\$18, 12%. Importer: Louis/Dressner Selections): Working from the tiny village of Maisdon-sur-Sèvre, Marc Ollivier creates dramatic, worldly wines that could easily tangle with bottles four times the price. But Ollivier's base material is Melon de Bourgogne, the grape of Muscadet, planted to old field selections that show Ollivier's commitment to the great heritage of a modest wine.

Ollivier may be Muscadet's king, but he has little to rely on for reputation beyond extraordinary care of extraordinary sites. Like Gras Mouton - one of Muscadet's grands crus, if you will. A rocky parcel of deeply fractured gneiss overlooking the Maine river, it is an epicenter of great if unheralded wine.

This is all wound-up herb and steel - tarragon, stone, Meyer lemon peel and ripe white peach, with perfect acidity. Almost chewy in its texture. It could easily channel white Burgundy, and yet at \$18 here's a wine that proves diligence and integrity are far more important than throwing money at the pursuit of greatness.

3 2010 Bernabeleva Camino de Navaherreros Vinos de Madrid (\$14, 14.5% alcohol. Importer: The Rare Wine Co.): Extraordinary old Garnacha grown on great soils - in this case, from the obscure appellation of Vinos de Madrid, near the mountains just outside the Spanish capital. Established in 2006 by descendants of Vincente Alvarez-Villamil, the doctor who purchased the site in 1923, the estate now boasts 80-year-old vines. Made by Spanish star Raul Perez, here's Garnacha unbound. Aged in neutral, large casks, it's packed with a volcanic dark-stone presence and savory power. You forget how big and powerful the wine is, and just admire its almost weightless bayberry fruit and brilliant acidity.

Like the amazing \$12 Quinta de Saes from Portugal's Dao, this shows the brilliance of well-tended old vines when tended by winemakers who are wise enough to let fruit, and not fashion, guide their work.

2 NV Cedric Bouchard Inflorescence Val Vilaine Brut Champagne (\$61, 12.5%. Importer: Thomas Calder/Farm Wine Imports): I've honestly been drinking Bouchard all year long, every chance I got. It's not that he has become the star of the ascendant Aube (go to: sfg.ly/tBdtvb) or that his tiny jewel of a house is the very model for where Champagne is headed - it's that his wines are pure, dramatic and delicious.

While I'd love to spring for his rare Creux d'Enfer, the Val Vilaine is as accessible as generally inaccessible wine can be. Dramatic and stone-driven, the latest disgorgement (based on 2009) is packed with cranberry, musk and apricot skin. If Champagne is about style, Bouchard is a crusader for purity.

1 1972 Robert Mondavi Winery Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (Price N/A, 12%): After last year's 1972 Musar (go to: sfg.ly/gxfls9), it seemed as though Lebanon might be, Princess Leia style, my only hope for a birth-year wine.

Yet here was an impeccable bottle, made by none other than Mike Grgich during his brief tenure in Oakville, a couple years before he made Montelena's world-changing Chardonnay. From a generally lousy vintage and having survived 39 years, this is still compelling, anise-tinged stuff, with silken black fruit that's wonderfully young by any standard. As with many Cabernets of that time, it shows that Napa had something profound to say in its defining era. To have a wine like this thrive over four decades is testament to what an earlier generation of California pioneers knew was in the soil.

This, plus a bottle of 1993 Caymus - not the Special Selection, just regular Caymus - inspired a philosophical vein for me this year about Napa Cabernet. Dial back beyond the past 15 years, and all the 15 percent wonders (that's where the regular Mondavi Cab landed in 2008), and you're reminded that even a basic bottle can express so beautifully what generations have known: Napa is a magical place for Cabernet.

The next question quickly follows: Are vintners willing to take us back to those days? For all the iffy carping about global warming and physiological ripeness, bottles like these are reminders that beauty and subtlety are more than possible in Napa: They're an essential part of its soul. These, after all, are the wines that inspired the world's love affair with California wine.

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