

BC GUILD OF WINE JUDGES

April 2004

CLASS I: SOCIAL WINE

Presented by Sandy Kirk (Victoria Chapter)

THE BCAWA CLASS DESCRIPTION:

Class I Social Wine

A Social wine should be enjoyable without the accompaniment of food. Colour can fall into a wide range but it should be inviting. The wine should have an inviting fruity aroma. The wine should be neither dry nor excessively sweet. It should not be too high in alcohol. In many types of wine a peak or peaks appear in the flavour spectrum – for example a White Table wine might have an acid peak; in the Aperitif class, a bitter peak is not out of place. There should be no such peaks in a Social wine. Good balance between sugar and acid is essential. A touch of “spritzy” is permissible. This is a patio wine not a table wine and may be served alone or with light style foods (snacks).

Technical Characteristics:

Ingredients: No restrictions.

Alcohol: 8% – 11%

Colour: Appealing

Sugar: 10 – 25 g/L

Specific Gravity: 0.996 – 1.000

Acid: 6 g/l – 10 g/l

pH: 3.1 – 3.4

Examples:

- Hester Creek “Kerner”
- German style Rieslings, Gewurztraminers, etc.
- Muscat Canelli
- Gray Monk “Latitude 50 White”
- Wild Goose “Autumn Gold”

Many different varieties may be used to make social wine as the classification is based on the use of the wine and its characteristics, not the variety. However, I thought it useful to provide variety descriptions for some of the grapes typically to be found in this class in competitions. I have reproduced descriptions found on Web sites for the convenience of those Guild members who cannot easily access the sources referenced. Descriptions for other varieties are also to be found on the websites referenced. See also Jancis Robinson; Oxford Companion to Wine.

The way I read the BCAWA class description there seems to be no reason not to include roses (white zins, etc), fruit wines and even reds but I have left these out as there are separate classes provided for them. Even without them there is a huge choice of possible wines, but unfortunately many of the classic Alsace and German wines have become prohibitively expensive. In the tasting I hope we can find some “Best Buys”.

There follows some information on some of the varieties used for social wines when vinted with appropriate parameters.

KERNER – This Riesling cross was Germany's third most planted vine in 1990. The characteristics of this varietal are very similar to Riesling differing only by higher sugar and lower acidity. Its very slightly coarser texture, (than Riesling), is enough to make a varietal or it may be blended. From <http://www.watsons.ca/Varietal.htm>

Those following are

from http://www.winespectator.com/Wine/Wine_Basics/Wine_Basics_Template/0,1199,1004,00.html

CHENIN BLANC

This native of the Loire valley has two personalities: at home it's the basis of such famous, long-lived whites as Vouvray and Anjou, Quarts de Chaume and Saumer, but on other soils it becomes just a very good blending grape. It is South Africa's most-planted grape, though there is called Steen, and both there and in California it is currently used primarily as a blending grape for generic table wines. Chenin Blanc should perform better in California, and someday it may. It can yield a pleasant enough wine, with subtle melon, peach, spice and citrus notes. The great Loire whites vary from dry and fresh to sweet, depending on the vintage and the producer.

GEWÜRZTRAMINER [geh-VERTS-trah-mee-ner]

Gewürztraminer can yield magnificent wines, as is best demonstrated in Alsace, France, where it is made in to a variety of styles from dry to off-dry to sweet. The grape needs a cool climate that allows it to get ripe. It's a temperamental grape to grow and vinify, as its potent spiciness can be overbearing when unchecked. At its best, it produces a floral and refreshing wine with crisp acidity that pairs well with spicy dishes. When left for late harvest, it's uncommonly rich and complex, a tremendous dessert wine.

MUSCAT

Known as Muscat, Muscat Blanc and Muscat Canelli, it is marked by strong spice and floral notes and can be used in blending, its primary function in California. Moscato in Italy, Moscatel in Iberia: This grape can turn into anything from the low-alcohol, sweet and frothy Asti Spumante and Muscat de Canelli to bone-dry wines like Muscat d'Alsace. It also produces fortified wine such as Beaufort de Venise.

PINOT BLANC

Often referred to as a poor man's Chardonnay because of its similar flavor and texture profile, Pinot Blanc is used in Champagne, Burgundy, Alsace, Germany, Italy and California and can make a terrific wine. When well made, it is intense, concentrated and complex, with ripe pear, spice, citrus and honey notes. Can age, but is best early on while its fruit shines through.

RIESLING [REES-ling]

One of the world's greatest white wine grapes, the Riesling vine's hardy wood makes it extremely resistant to frost. The variety excels in cooler climates, where its tendency to ripen slowly makes it an excellent source for sweet wines made from grapes attacked by the noble rot *Botrytis cinerea*, which withers the grapes' skin and concentrates their natural sugar levels.

Riesling is best known for producing the wines of Germany's Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, Pfalz, Rheinhessen and Rheingau wines, but it also achieves brilliance in Alsace and Austria. While the sweet German Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese wines, along with Alsace's famed Selection de Grains Nobles, are often celebrated for their high sugar levels and ability to age almost endlessly, they are rare and expensive.

More commonly, Riesling produces dry or just off-dry versions. Its high acidity and distinctive floral, citrus, peach and mineral accents have won dry Riesling many fans. The variety pairs well with food and has an uncanny knack for transmitting the elements of its vineyard source (what the French call *terroir*).

The wines from Germany's Mosel region are perhaps the purest expression of the grape, offering lime, piecrust, apple, slate and honeysuckle characteristics on a light-bodied and racy frame. Germany's Rheinhessen, Rheingau and Pfalz regions produce wines of similar characteristics, but with increasing body and spice.

In Alsace, Riesling is most often made in a dry style, full-bodied, with a distinct petrol aroma. In Austria, Riesling plays second fiddle to Gruner Veltliner in terms of quantity, but when grown on favored sites it offers wines with great focus and clarity allied to the grape's typically racy frame. In other regions, Riesling struggles to maintain its share of vineyard plantings, but it can be found (often under synonyms such as White Riesling, Rhine Riesling or Johannisberg Riesling) in California, Oregon, Washington, New York's Finger Lakes region, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, South America and Canada.

SAUVIGNON BLANC

Another white with a notable aroma, this one "grassy" or "musky." The pure varietal is found mainly in the Loire, at Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, As part of a blend, the grape is all over Bordeaux, in Pessac-Léognan, Graves and the Médoc whites; it also shows up in Sauternes. New Zealand has had striking success with Sauvignon Blanc, producing its own perfumed, fruity style that spread across North America and then back to France.

In the United States, Robert Mondavi rescued the varietal in the 1970s by labeling it Fumé Blanc, and he and others have enjoyed success with it. The key to success seems to be in taming its overt varietal intensity, which at its extreme leads to pungent grassy, vegetal and herbaceous flavors. Many winemakers treat it like in a sort of poor man's Chardonnay, employing barrel fermentation, sur lie aging and malolactic fermentation. But its popularity comes as well from the fact that it is a prodigious producer and a highly profitable wine to make. It can be crisp and refreshing, matches well with foods, costs less to produce and grow than Chardonnay and sells for less. It also gets less respect from vintners than perhaps it should. Its popularity ebbs and flows, at times appearing to challenge Chardonnay and at other times appearing to be a cash-flow afterthought. But even at its best, it does not achieve the kind of richness, depth or complexity Chardonnay does and in the end that alone may be the defining difference.

Sauvignon Blanc grows well in a variety of appellations. It marries well with oak and Sémillon, and many vintners are adding a touch of Chardonnay for extra body. The wine drinks best in its youth, but sometimes will benefit from short-term cellaring. As a late-harvest wine, it's often fantastic, capable of yielding amazingly complex and richly flavored wines.

SÉMILLON [SEM-ih-yon]

On its own or in a blend, this white can age. With Sauvignon Blanc, its traditional partner, this is the foundation of Sauternes and most of the great dry whites found in Graves and Pessac-Léognan; these are rich, honeyed wines,. Sémillon is one of the grapes susceptible to *Botrytis cinerea*. Australia's Hunter Valley uses it solo to make a full-bodied white that used to be known as Hunger Riesling, Chablis or White Burgundy. In South Africa it used to be so prevalent that it was just called "wine grape," but it has declined drastically in importance there.

In the United States, Sémillon enjoys modest success as a varietal wine in California and Washington, but it continues to lose ground in acreage in California. It can make a wonderful late-harvest wine, and those wineries that focus on it can make well-balanced wines with complex fig, pear, tobacco and honey notes. When blended into Sauvignon Blanc, it adds body, flavor and texture. When Sauvignon Blanc is added to Sémillon, the latter gains grassy herbal notes.

SIEGERREBE

In Victoria we find quite a bit of Siegerrebe in competitions.

I found the following information from <http://www.winesnw.com/winecel3.htm#Siegerrebe>:

“A newer European wine grape originated in Germany by crossing Madeleine Angevine with Gewurztraminer. Wineries and vineyards in the Puget Sound Appellation and in British Columbia grow Siegerrebe as a proven cool-climate varietal, due to its early ripening characteristics. With spice and floral aromas and flavors of grapefruit, lychee nuts, pears or apricots it pairs well with Asian cuisine and curries.”

Jancis Robinson (Oxford Wine Companion) writes the following of this varietal:

“Siegerrebe is a modern German vine crossing grown, like certain giant vegetables, purely by exhibitionists. In Germany it can break records for its ripeness levels, but the flabby wine it produces is so rich and oppressively flavoured that it is usually a chore to drink.....So powerful is its heady flavour that a fine Riesling is quite overpowered by even 10% of Siegerrebe.”

I apologize in advance to the Siegerrebe growers, makers and lovers, but I couldn't resist quoting the above!

OTHER VARIETALS: Auxerrois, Bacchus, Chasselas, Ehrenfelser, Madeline Angevine, Madeline Sylvaner, Optima, Oraniensteiner, Ortega. Some information on these at <http://www.winesofcanada/variatal.html> .