

The Great American Wine Challenge

F&W'S RAY ISLE HAS BECOME A CONVERT TO WINES FROM ONCE-UNPROMISING STATES LIKE ARIZONA. HE PITS THE TOP BOTTLES FROM "THE NEW AMERICA" AGAINST EUROPE'S BEST IN A SOMMELIER TASTE TEST.



the bottles she'd picked—a global assortment—was a Bordeaux-style blend from RdV Vineyards in Virginia. As with Texas, the Virginia wines I'd had in the past had been underwhelming, but Robinson felt the RdV red was remarkable. Tasting it, I had to agree. (Everyone in the room agreed, in fact.) It was layered and complex, with the slight austerity of classified-growth Bordeaux rather than the abundant richness of Napa Cabernet.

Then, not long after that, I was at The NoMad restaurant in New York City, and wine director Thomas Pastuszak poured me a Finger Lakes white I'd never heard of before, the Ravines Argetsinger Vineyard Dry Riesling. I've long felt that the New York State region produces some of the best Rieslings in the US, but that's a little like

saying Dubuque has the best basketball team in Iowa. This wine, on the other hand, had a precision and focus that made me pause after sipping it.

That's when things came together. It's not that Texas or New York or Virginia (or Arizona or Michigan) is producing some remarkable, can-compete-with-anybody wines; it's that all of them are. In fact, I'd hazard a guess that we're at a tipping point: In many of these states, winemaking technique and talent have finally combined with a greater understanding of what grows best where (always a long-term project) to create small constellations of ambitious producers creating truly remarkable wines.

Take Arizona, where a handful of producers—Dos Cabezas WineWorks, Sand-Reckoner and Callaghan Vineyards among them—are making impressive reds and whites from Italian and southern French varieties in the high-desert Sonoita area. Pavle Milic, the co-owner and wine director of the acclaimed FnB restaurant in Scottsdale, says, "Up until about 10 years ago, there weren't many people here making wine. Now, there

are about 100 wineries." But, he points out, of those 100, it's really five or six that are setting a new standard. "I think

AROUND EIGHT YEARS AGO, I took a trip with my father through Texas wine country. I was going to be down in Texas to research an article about Austin restaurants, and that seemed like a good enough excuse to both of us. We spent three days visiting wineries in Hill Country, taking it easy, talking and driving and tasting wine. We had a great time. But the wines we tasted just weren't very good. The worst were stinky and strange, the best were...OK. Not flawed, but definitely not all that exciting.

Flash forward to the annual Austin Food & Wine Festival in April 2013. I'd agreed to be on a panel about Texas wine, despite some misgivings because of that earlier trip. But as I tasted through the wines, what I felt instead was relief and, to be honest, a frisson of pride for my home state. The wines weren't just good; they were very good. My favorite, a Tannat from Bending Branch Winery in Comfort, Texas—a little town of about 2,300 people that's about as non-Napa-fancy as a town can get—was spicy, powerful and polished, and as good a red wine as I'd tasted in the past several months.

That Austin tasting was the first of several eye-opening American wine experiences. In New York, I was at a tasting led by Jancis Robinson, one of the world's top wine critics. Among



Open the Google app and say "Ok Google, when was the corkscrew invented?"

of it in cycling terms. There's the peloton—the main group of riders," Milic says. "Then there's the handful of people who break away from the pack. These are winemakers where if you extricated their wineries from this crazy land—Arizona—they wouldn't be out of place on Highway 29 in Napa."

Craig Collins, beverage director for the Elm Restaurant Group in Austin and a Master Sommelier, sees similar changes in Texas. "Twenty years ago," he says, "winemakers were focusing on what would sell. If you didn't make a Cabernet and a Chardonnay with oak on it, you wouldn't make money. The turning point that I saw was probably five to seven years ago, when people started recognizing that we shouldn't be planting Cabernet or Pinot; it's wicked hot here, and we have a lot of limestone kicking around, so we should be planting warm-climate varieties that grow well on that kind of soil: Tempranillo, Roussanne, Viognier, Tannat, Syrah."

Collins, like Milic, is extremely optimistic about Texas wine. He does add a somewhat cautionary note, though: "Is the Tempranillo in Texas on par with the best Riojas in the world? Probably not—but it's really, really, really damn good. The same with Viognier: We have killer Viognier. Does it compete with California? Absolutely. Condrieu? Probably not. Vermentino, though? We can definitely compete against the best in Italy."

Napa, Rioja, Condrieu: It struck me, talking to Collins and Milic, that with wine as with art, these are the stakes. If Michigan, for instance, wants to be taken seriously as a wine region, comparing itself to Missouri (also the home of some surprisingly good wines) won't accomplish much; comparing itself to Germany's Mosel—since Michigan produces particularly good Riesling—might.

At the Food & Wine Classic in Aspen last June, I decided to put some of these up-and-coming states' wines to the test, in a blind tasting with a panel of sommeliers and wine experts. I divided the wines into three categories: Riesling, Cabernet-based reds and southern French varieties. So, for Riesling, I included a top wine from Germany's Mosel region (2010 Dr. Loosen Erdener Treppchen Alte Reben Grosses Gewächs), one from Austria's Kamptal (2011 Loimer Steinmassl Kamptal Reserve), one from Washington state (the 2011 Poet's Leap), one from Alsace (2011 Zind-Humbrecht) and two from the Finger Lakes: the 2011 Ravines Argetsinger Vineyard and the 2011 Hermann J. Wiemer Dry Riesling Reserve. The other lineups were similar.

And the results? There was no question that the "new America" wines could stand their ground against the rest of the world. They weren't unanimously deemed the best in any group, but no other wines were, either; personal preference does play into tastings like this. And in every case, I think, my experts were thoroughly surprised by how well the wines showed. Comparing the Wiemer Riesling from New York to the Dr. Loosen wine, Master Sommelier Jonathan Pullis said: "While

they're clearly different wines, they're so parallel in terms of acidity and structure and overall class—it's very impressive. Even more because the Wiemer's competing with a world-famous vineyard that's been planted for more than 1,000 years." More directly, Maria Helm Sinskey, a chef and wine expert, said about the Bending Branch Tannat: "I'm really surprised, but I like this so much. It's so savory, and there's just something about it that's really gripping."

What was also fascinating was how difficult my upstart-state wines were to identify. For instance, in the lineup of Rhône-style wines, I included a Châteauneuf-du-Pape from Tardieu Laurent, a top Rhône producer. All my tasters instantly nailed it as Châteauneuf; apparently it was as easy as pointing out that it was red. But the 2010 El Norte, a Grenache-based blend from Arizona, led my panel into a wilderness of "might be's"—might be from California; might be from Australia; might be from southern Italy. That's partly because no one there had any real familiarity with Arizona's wines, but also because Arizona itself is still a very young wine region. The centuries of work that have slowly defined Châteauneuf-

The New US Wine Map

Here, standout bottles from "the new America."

ARIZONA

2010 Dos Cabezas WineWorks El Norte (\$27)

2013 Sand-Reckoner Malvasia Bianca (\$28)

2009 Callaghan Vineyards Mourvedre (\$31)

NEW YORK (FINGER LAKES)

2012 Bloomer Creek Morehouse Road Vineyard Riesling, 1st Harvest (\$20)

2013 Heart & Hands Dry Riesling (\$23)

2011 Ravines Argetsinger Vineyard Dry Riesling (\$23)

2013 Hermann J. Wiemer Dry Riesling Reserve (\$29)

TEXAS

2012 Duchman Family Winery Vermentino (\$18)

2012 Pedernales Cellars Texas Tempranillo (\$20)

2010 Bending Branch Winery Texas Tannat (\$30)

VIRGINIA

2013 Chatham Vineyards Church Creek Steel Chardonnay (\$17)

2011 Michael Shaps Chardonnay (\$24)

2012 Pollak Vineyards Cabernet Franc (\$26)

2010 RdV Vineyards Lost Mountain Red (\$95)

du-Pape simply haven't occurred there. Yet.

Not every state is going to produce great wine. Alaska's short, cold summers and nine-month winters aren't ever going to result in a tasty Chardonnay, unless global warming has something to say about it. But at the same time, when I look at the wine regions of America now, I've begun to be reminded of Europe—a place where wine grapes are grown practically everywhere, from the sun-drenched islands of Greece to northern Germany's stone-sloped river valleys. In 70 or 100 years, who knows? Maybe asking for a Michigan Riesling in a restaurant won't be any stranger than asking for a Languedoc red—both remarkable regions, and each trying to fight its uphill battle for recognition against the places that achieved fame first.

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