

VINTAGE, VERITAS AND PERCEPTION

BY JAMES CHRISTOPHER TRACY

Mother Nature smiled lovingly upon the wine-growers of Eastern Long Island this past year. The season was warm and dry with little rainfall or humidity and the good weather lasted well into October. The grapes that arrived on the crush pad were as healthy, ripe, flavorful and aromatic as anyone could hope for.

2007 was a great vintage by all accounts. (The whites and roses will start showing up in tasting rooms this year, while many reds will appear next year.) But there is a long way between grape reception and the finished wine in the bottle, let alone on your table, and many things good and bad can happen.

This is why there is almost always celebration and suspicion surrounding the declaration of a fabulous vintage.

I began wondering about the old adage; "winemakers almost never have bad vintages." The Bordeaux are the most astute in this regard and vintages there are either deemed "Great," "Classic" or at worst the euphemistic "Difficult."

Nowadays even in the most marginal climates we rarely see bad wine. Vineyard managers and winemakers simply have a much larger toolkit, from sun-capturing VSP (vertical shoot positioning) trellis systems to temperature control and reverse osmosis, to help the modern oenologist cope.

But the obsession with vintage still challenges our relatively young East End, even as it gains recognition as a world-class wine region. And it's worth wondering whether vintage actually leads us to the veritas about a wine.

This may seem like an esoteric question, but it is actually quite

liberating since it shifts the role of judge from wine critics back to the wine drinker.

There are so many factors at play that must magically align to allow for the unforgettable sensory experience possible with a bottle of wine. From the simplest, measurable conditions like the storage of the bottle, the time of day, the location of tasting, the ambient temperature of the place and the wine, to more intangible parameters like one's psychological state, quality of the company, price of the bottle, compatibility of the food and the type and experience level of the taster. A crisp, citrusy East End sauvignon blanc on a warm summer evening alongside a raw bar and the same wine in front of a winter hearth with a lamb stew will yield completely different experiences.

It's a wonder that all these variables do fall in line so often, since we live in individual subjective taste universes. Researchers as diverse as Yale University's Linda Bartoshuk and Master of Wine Tim Hanni are discovering that there are objective differences in our "taste worlds," too.

There are tolerant, sensitive, and hyper tasters, each defined by the different physiology, psychology, and neurobiology of individual sensory perception. Just for fun ask an employee of any tasting room of a Long Island winery the different responses they receive from customers about a particular wine they are pouring. They will most likely lead off with a chuckle and continue to describe notes that span the entire spectrum from lousy to excellent.

Wine drinkers can have similar experiences when enjoying a wine but we can never really have the same one. The nature of ourselves, the bottle of wine and the moment itself are too varied. Which means you should spend less time pondering vintage and more time remembering what Stephen Brook writes wisely in his book on Bordeaux; "A great bottle of wine is not a work of art; it is a work of nature, sleepily alive, constantly changing." 🍷

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