

Wines from Unusual Places

I have to tell you ahead of time, I am pretty excited about this tasting. It's a good news, bad news kind of thing. I have a lot to tell you about some of these wines, so I may try your patience just a bit. But I hope you will feel it's worth it, in the end.

I have done about six other presentations for the club over the past years, and I really enjoyed them. But I think this may be the most interesting one I have done yet. Fasten your seat belts, we will be doing a lot of travelling in the next hour or so!

As a brief preview of coming attractions, I can tell you we will be tasting three white wines, three red wines and finally a dessert wine! It isn't an official meal without dessert, now is it?

How did we come up with this topic? Well . . .

- Did you know that all 50 states now have at least 1 licensed commercial winery? North Dakota was the last state, and they have at least 3 now (maybe more). (I've been to one of them.)
- Some sort of grape will grow almost anywhere that people can live, and yeast is everywhere. So it should be possible to make wine (of some sort) almost anywhere. So I wanted to find examples of wine from places we don't usually think of for wine.
- Similar topic tonight and for the April 2014 tasting – this is the international version, April will be the domestic US version.
- I wasn't especially looking for the world's best wines. We could spend our whole tasting budget on one bottle of Chateau Margaux, and everyone would get about a teaspoon of it, we could Ooh and Aah, and then go home. I wanted to find good wines, drinkable wines, and wines that were a bit different, were interesting for one reason or another.
- After research, two types of wine emerged:
 - Wine using traditional, often French, grape varieties, grown in places without a recent history of winemaking. Tonight that includes:
 - India, from which we will taste a dry white made from Chenin Blanc
 - Lebanon, from which we will taste a red blend of Cinsault, Syrah and Cab. Sauv.
 - Wine using unfamiliar grape varieties in places with a long history of winemaking, but which we're not as familiar with. Examples we will taste tonight include:
 - Greece, an Assyrtiko from the island of Santorini
 - The Republic of Georgia (formerly part of the USSR), an Rkatsiteli
 - Montenegro, a dry red made from their signature red grape, Vranac
 - Croatia (this may be a first for the club), a dry red using their signature red grape, Plavac Mali. Based on DNA testing, this is a cross between Zinfandel (called **Crljenak Kaštelanski** in Croatia) and another native vinifera grape
 - Hungary, a Royal Tokaji dessert wine (made from several native Hungarian vinifera varieties).

White Wines

India Sula Winery, Chenin Blanc

India is the world's second largest country, with well over a billion people. It calls itself the world's largest democracy, and that's a fairly accurate assessment. It's not a country most of us are very familiar with. But it has a huge population of people that speak English. Why, you wonder? Well, for several centuries it was ruled by the British. That accounts for part of it. But many other countries, like India, won their independence in the years following WW II. Some countries tried to erase memories of their colonial past, by focusing on the native language. India, however, is a huge country. There are many regional and local languages. Hindi is, probably, the most widely spoken local language, but even Hindi is the native language for only a minority of the citizens of India. It would have caused a lot of resentment to adopt ANY of the native languages as the official, national language for official purposes. So, as a compromise that didn't favor any one group, India more or less adopted English as an official language. In India, it is essentially everyone's second language. Indians speak their local, regional or tribal language at home, but for business or for legal purposes, most things are done in English.

I'm not sure why there isn't more of a tradition of wine-making in India. Partly, perhaps, it's because much of the country is too hot, too tropical to grow proper wine grapes. Partly, it may be that they couldn't afford the relative luxury of devoting good agricultural land to growing grapes. And partly that for several centuries before the British ruled India, it was ruled by a series of Muslim dynasties. For whatever reason, India does not have much of a cultural tradition of wine-making.

Interestingly, India is one of the largest markets in the world for distilled spirits. India consumes huge amounts of whisky! We tend to think of India as a poor country, and much of India does live in relative poverty. However, maybe 25% or so of India is middle or upper middle class. That's still about 300 million people, and they have a fair amount of discretionary income. In India, when people drink, they drink to get drunk. Whisky does that pretty efficiently, so people drink whisky.

Our vineyard, SULA, is the leading vineyard in India. It is located in northwest mainland India, a bit inland from the west coast, north of Mumbai (formerly Bombay). The winery was started by a guy who grew up in Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay), who went to college at Stanford. He worked for Oracle for a few years, then went back to India and decided to start a winery. The wine we are tasting tonight is a Chenin Blanc, a French vinifera variety generally associated with the Loire valley.

Greece Boutari, Assyrtiko of Santorini

Greece has a long tradition of wine-making, but tends not to export a lot of wine. Greece is a poor country – most of the land area is only marginally suitable for farming, and the seas around Greece are not particularly well-endowed with edible fish. Greeks make a fair amount of wine, but keep most of it for local consumption. Also, for historical reasons, Greeks tend to like wine flavored with pine resin. This is generally called Retsina, and the reasons go back many centuries (before barrels were invented), when wine was stored in clay jars called Amphorae. The jars were sealed with lids coated with sticky, gooey pine resin to prevent leakage or spoilage. Over time, the wine picked up some flavors from the pine resin, and Greeks eventually came to like this taste. Most of the rest of the world doesn't especially care for Retsina. ☹️

Tonight's Greek wine comes from the island of Santorini, the southernmost island in the group of islands called the Cyclades. These are between mainland Greece, Turkey and the island of Crete. It is the remains of an ancient volcano – the island consists of most of the rim of the volcano; part of one side and the center of the volcano are now underwater. This grape, Assyrtiko, is a vinifera grape, but it is native to the island of Santorini. One interesting thing about this grape is that when it ripens, as the sugar levels increase, the acidity does not drop (like other grapes), but stays constant. This allows wine-makers to let the grapes ripen fully, without worrying about having an unbalanced, "flabby" wine with too little acidity.

Georgia,

Vinoterra winery,

Rkatsiteli

This is probably the most interesting wine we will taste tonight, and to explain why will take a few minutes. Bear with me, it will be worth it. We will be tasting a bit of history tonight!

People have been making wine for thousands of years. In fact, archeologists have found evidence of wine-making in Georgia that date back between 6,000 and 8,000 years! Where is Georgia? See the map. It is located in the Caucasus region, east of the Black Sea, between Russia (to the north), Turkey (to the south-west) and Iran (south). Georgia was one of the first places to adopt Christianity (about the 4th Century A.D.). It was the birthplace of Joseph Stalin, and one of the republics in the former Soviet Union. It has a long history as a separate country, and has its own language (Georgian).

How, exactly, do people know that Georgians were making wine thousands of years ago? Well, in Georgia, they have a special technique for making wine. They make it in large clay jars, with a special shape, that are fired in a kiln, coated with beeswax on the inside, and buried in the earth. Yes, I said buried! (See pictures in handouts.) This is an ancient tradition, but widely used in Georgia. Some estimate are that there are a million or more of these jars (Qvevri) buried in Georgia, outside rural homes or in villages, of which maybe 100,000 are still being used to make wine!

The grapes are crushed and poured into the Qvevri. They rely on wild yeasts, and generally don't add anything to the must. A loose lid is put over the opening, and the cap is punched down several times a day during fermentation. At the end of fermentation, red wine is pumped out of the Qvevri, separated from the skins and seeds, and stored for a year or two in a clean Qvevri. Whites, though, are pretty much just sealed (using soft clay to make a seal around the rim), and the lid covered with loose gravel or dirt for a year or two. The seeds sink to the bottom first, followed by the skins. The skins tend to protect the wine from the seeds, so the wine does not absorb too much bitterness from the seeds. After a year or two, the lid is opened, and the wine is removed. The Qvevri is cleaned, the seeds, skins and stems are removed, and the Qvevri is ready to be used again. With care, a Qvevri can last a century or more. (see photos)

Archeologists have found ancient Qvevri that are 5,000 years old, or more. In some cases, they have found seeds trapped in the bottom of the jar. When they did DNA analysis of the seeds, they found that the seeds were in fact from the Rkatsiteli grape! This is the same grape grown there today.

In fact, Rkatsiteli is probably the most widely-grown white grape you've never heard of. It was the work-horse white grape of the former Soviet Union, with vast amounts of land devoted to growing it in Georgia, Ukraine and southern Russia, as well as surrounding republics. It is fairly easy to grow, flavorful and produces good harvests. It is still extensively used to produce dry table wines, as well as dessert wines. It is now being grown on a small scale in upstate New York, among other places.

The wine we are tasting tonight is an Rkatsiteli, from Vinoterra winery in Georgia. It was made in a Qvevri, using the traditional Georgian wine-making techniques. White wines made in a Qvevri tend to come out with a darker, richer color, and a bit more tannin than other whites, because of the lengthy exposure to the skins. This is extended maceration, carried to a whole new level !!

Lebanon, Chateau Musan, Musan Jeune (blend of Cinsault, Syrah, Cab. Sauv.)

Lebanon, like Israel, has a long history of wine-making, but not in recent centuries. Although Lebanon has a very mixed population, it has in recent centuries been ruled by larger nations that were Islamic, and hence did not approve of alcohol consumption (at least officially). Chateau Musar is owned by the Hochar family, which is originally French. The story is that the family came to Lebanon during the Crusades, and never left. They have maintained ties to France, however. In the late 1920's, the young son of the family, Gaston Hochar, went to Bordeaux to learn to become a doctor. A few years later he returned, not a doctor but a winemaker. He founded Chateau Musar in 1930, and the family has been making wine in the Bekaa Valley of northern Lebanon ever since. Today, several generations of the Hochar family are active in the business. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago, Marc Hochar (grandson of the founder) was in town, pouring samples of Chateau Musar at Haskell's in Minnetonka. Their flagship, premium red wine, named after the winery and retailing for about \$40 per bottle, was quite impressive. According to Marc, all of their wines are blends, no single varietals. They use no commercial yeasts, no fining agents, and do not filter the wines. The wine we are about to taste, Musar Jeune, is their less-expensive red wine, consisting of about 60% Cinsault, 20% Syrah and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon. It's a bit of a non-traditional blend, but it seems to work. If you like it, you should be able to find more at Haskell's.

Montenegro, Vranacs

Montenegro, part of the former Yugoslavia, is located just across the Adriatic Sea from Italy. So it shouldn't be surprising that grapes grow well there, or that winemaking has a long history there. Montenegro (literally, "black mountain") is a tiny country – maybe 50 miles square. The premier red grape in Montenegro is the Vranacs, and that is what we will be tasting tonight. For many years, Montenegro (as part of Yugoslavia) was behind the Iron Curtain. Even after the Iron Curtain parted, Montenegro has not been very active in exporting its products, including wines. Fortunately, however, I was able to find a company specializing in importing into the US wines from the former Yugoslavia, and so we have this Vranac wine to taste tonight. It has been described as having distinctively Balkan flavors – see what you think of it.

Croatia Dingacs Plavac Mali

When I found it was possible to get Croatian wines in this country, I couldn't quite resist the idea of tasting a **Croatian** wine at the **Croatian Hall**. This wine is made from the signature red grape of Croatia, the Plavac Mali. This grape is now known to be closely related to Zinfandel. In fact, the Zinfandel grown in California has been found to be genetically identical to a Croatian grape called **Crljenak Kaštelanski**, which is one of the parents of the Plavac Mali. So we are tasting what is essentially the son of Zinfandel. Looking at the map, much of Croatia extends along the shores of the Adriatic, and many of the best examples of this grape are grown at the southern end of the Croatian coast, including the wine we will be tasting tonight. See what you think of this one – does it remind you of Zinfandel?

Hungary

Royal Tokaji

(various grapes)

Now, we come at last to dessert! I have wanted to taste a Hungarian Tokaji for quite a while – it is one of the most famous of the dessert wines.

What do we know about Hungary? It's in eastern Europe, of course, east of Austria. The people of Hungary are called Magyars, and theirs is one of the very few languages spoken in Europe that are not Indo-European. Almost all the languages we are familiar with are Indo-European, deriving ultimately from Sanskrit and languages spoken thousands of years ago in the Indus river valley, in what is now Pakistan. Greek, Latin and German are all Indo-European languages. English, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages (Danish, Swedish, Norwegian) are all Germanic, and hence also Indo-European. French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese are all essentially variants of Latin, having evolved and drifted off in different directions since the fall of the Roman Empire. In fact, the Hungarian language is related only to one other known language - - - Finnish! I don't know how they became separated, but at some point, the Finns and Hungarians split up, and ended up in different corners of Europe!

Tokaj is a town in north-eastern Hungary, and has been producing sweet dessert wines for a long time. In fact, Tokaj boasts the oldest Appellation of Origin system in Europe, having been set up by royal decree in 1757. In contrast, the famous classification of chateaux in Bordeaux wasn't set up until 1855. The French classifications were based on market prices for wines, and famously excluded Chateaux Mouton-Rothschild (which well deserved to be included in the top category) probably because, at the time, it was owned by an English family.

The Royal, or Imperial Tokaji (Tokay in English) is a sweet wine produced from wines concentrated by botrytis, the "noble rot" also used to produce sweet Sauternes wines in France. Six grapes are allowed to be used in the production of Tokay, but the primary grapes are Furmint and Harslevelu (both native Hungarian vinifera grapes). Interestingly, the Furmint grape has skins which become thinner during ripening, allowing more sunlight in to help concentrate the sugars. As ripening progresses, however, the grapes grow a second skin which prevents the grape from bursting. Grapes are harvested late, sometimes into December, to allow the sugars and flavors to concentrate as much as possible.

This region produces several styles of wine, but we are interested in Tokaji Aszú, the sweet dessert wine. Traditionally, the grapes are allowed to dry on the vines. Individual berries are selected, collected in large vats and trampled into a paste (known as Aszú dough). Must or wine is poured onto the Aszú dough and left for 24-48 hours. After this, the wine is racked off into wooden casks where fermentation continues, and then the wine is left in the cask to mature, usually for several years. The casks are normally about 136 liters (about 35 gallons) in size. The traditional measure of quality is the sweetness level, measured in *puttonyos*. A *puttony* is a basket, and the *puttonyos* measure indicates how many baskets of Aszú dough were used to make one cask of wine. (That's the traditional meaning. Nowadays, the ratings are assigned based on measures of residual sugar.) These wines range from 3 puttonyos to a high of 6 puttonyos. As there is quite a large price premium to the 6-puttonyos wines, I have purchased a 5-puttonyos wine to taste tonight. It should still be quite delicious !