

Laube on Wine

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Rotten Grapes & Counting Turkeys

By James Laube

SOME OF THE WORLD'S greatest wines come from the ugliest grapes you've ever seen. I'm talking about dessert-style wines made from fruit tortured by the noble rot, *Botrytis cinerea*, most famous in the grand Sauternes region of France, but also popular elsewhere.

If you've never seen the noble rot in action or glanced at it in a picture book, brace yourself for a real shock.

I toured Far Niente's muddy Dolce vineyard east of the city of Napa, Calif., last week in between a series of drenching rain storms and eyed the crop that was still hanging, waiting for a dry spell.

I can tell you the grapes were a rotten, shriveled-up mess, just what winemaker Dirk Hampson had hoped for.

SPACE DOES NOT permit a full discussion on the process of botrytis (you can look it up), but in a nutshell the combined weather forces of humidity alternating with dry spells lead to "noble" mold penetrating the grape skins.

This process slowly shrivels the grapes to raisins, reducing the amount of liquid (mostly water), while raising the sugar content.

Botrytis not only concentrates the sugar content of the juice, it also imparts complex honey, butterscotch and apricot flavors, which are desirable in dessert-style wines, but not table wines.

Along the way the grapes, in Dolce's case Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, grow fuzzy, moldy beards; invite all kinds of intruders, from pesky birds to greedy maggots; and over the period of several weeks become the most hideous-looking berries you'll ever want to see. . . .

THE THOUGHT OF even sampling one of these berries was enough to start my stomach swirling, but this rotten rot is precisely what Hampson is looking for. The resulting wines, as evidenced by his first decade with Dolce, are indeed an incredibly complex and distinctive breed of wine that is making a claim to California's greatest dessert wine.

Even though it began as something of a hobby at Far Niente, which is best known for its Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, it is now a viable business: The 1995 vintage yielded the most concentrated wine in Dolce's history and produced 100 barrels.

That's enough wine for about 8,800 six-bottle, half-bottle cases, which is more dessert wine than owner Gil Nickel needs for his lavish dinner parties or special occasions.

The new release is the 1993, which sells for \$50 a half-bottle, and while that seems steep, a bottle of Chateau d'Yquem, the greatest white dessert wine in the world, sells for about four times that. The wine is brilliant, with rich, exotic flavors and a wonderful sense of harmony and finesse.

All of the grapes come from a single 18-acre vineyard and the wine is aged in new French oak barrels for more than two years.

FOR MANY WINE WRITERS one of the year's worst assignments is trying to come up with a new twist on what wine or wines to recommend to serve on Thanksgiving Day, what with all the turkey and trimmings that go along with that gluttonous holiday.

I commend those writers who try to help those in need find the right wine to bring all the Turkey Day flavors and textures together, but the easiest way to cut through the stuffing is to open up several wines, red and white, one slightly sweet and a few that are dry, and just beware of reds that feature chewy tannins.

Good luck, keep your Tums handy and here's hoping you don't overdo it with either the bird or the wine.

James Laube, a senior editor of Wine Spectator magazine, has written three books on California wine. Check this space every Monday for his views on the latest in the wine world.