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Wednesday, April 15, 2009

Springtime Sipping

Light Plus Lower Alcohol = Refreshment

By Francis Fecteau

I'd spent the evening sipping white Burgundy from a paper cup, patting a horse on the nose and watching the sky slowly turn blue, bluer, bluer still, into night and then stars, all in the shadow of Watchman Peak. The season changed right then and there. Even with that evening chill, I didn't reach for a hefty winter-thick red wine. My palate wanted brighter pastures.

My head gravitates toward the nearest wall—to beat myself senseless—when I hear someone sharing their affection for wine with me, saying "I only drink [Brand X or flavor]." Some people just want to be slapped. The missionary position isn't without its charms, but variety is the spice of life, after all. Doesn't Baskin-Robbins have 31 flavors? The Kama Sutra, more than one page? Senses change with the seasons.

When I put the dominant, rich, extracted reds of the winter season behind me in favor of wines from lighter, cooler climates with lower alcohol, it's about refreshment—something that leaves my palate lighter and cleaner than before, and me lighter on my feet. Brightness in wine means a wine without imposing alcohol, one not subjected to excesses of oak, a wine that tastes like nice, fresh fruit.

Generally, lower alcohols indicate a wine from a moderate climate where the grapes don't reach excessive levels of ripeness. Sauvignon Blanc, a terrific place to start, is naturally refreshing and doesn't need lots of heat and sugar to show its varietal best. New Zealand Sauvignon Blancs, my favorites, are redolent with aromas and flavors of pink grapefruit and sweet herbs. They are also terrific values, rarely exceeding \$15. The legendary Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc may run \$26, but a multitude of deals abound from producers like Spy Valley, Villa Maria, Nobilo, Nautilus and Brancott. It's a region and a flavor renowned for its bang for the buck.



Chardonnay reaches its refreshing apex in two incarnations: one old, one new. Chardonnay is at its freshest and brightest in French hands, where it rarely exceeds 13.5 percent alcohol. Usually lower yields and French oak treatment make for high cost, but not so with wines designated "Bourgogne" or "Macon." Both are exceptional values that often get unused fruit from more expensive appellation wines. Louis Latour's "Bourgogne" (\$13.99) is sourced from the more expensive Premier Cru appellations of Santenay, Marsannay and Meursault. Bernard Morey also makes a terrific rendition of Bourgogne (\$20.99).

The "new" Chardonnay is at its best here in the United States. Producers are creating fresh, bright, sizzling renditions of Chardonnay without the buttery smells of oak and secondary fermentations. The best value is Mer Soleil's "Silver." The national retail on this stunning wine is \$42, but it's a mere \$21.99 in Utah. "Inox" from Oregon's Chehalem is also a good value at \$18.99.



Thankfully, the era of sweet pink wine seems to have passed and the market is again abundant with bone dry Rosé (real men do indeed drink pink). They are ideal lunch wines (wine with lunch is a damned civilized habit!) made from most any red varietal. "Lite" versions of their parent grape and abundantly quaffable, they rarely exceed \$10 and the very best ones rarely break \$20. Spain is home to a series of delicious Grenache Rosés from producers Las Rocas and Vinos Sin Ley, both under \$10. Famed Pinot Noir producer Belle Glos donates sale proceeds from its gorgeous Rosé to Susan G. Komen for the Cure; it, too, is a juicy version of its legendary single vineyard wines and a terrific value at \$16.99.

And to think, I haven't even covered bubbly wines. So much to drink, so little time.

