

Great wine or great experience?

Some wines are top performers
no matter what the mood of the day



By Michael Pinkus

SURROUNDINGS ARE everything when it comes to wine, from the way it's grown right through to how it is enjoyed.

It all starts in the country of origin, in a vineyard, the smaller the better. Here its story is not only about the family that owns the plot, but about the land, the climate, the winds and the rain, and why, over time, this particular spot was chosen.



Michael Pinkus

It is one of the intangible aspects of wine-making that really defies description — in English anyway.

The French call it “terroir” and its literal meaning is “earth or soil,” but when applied to wine it means so much more.

So let's turn to *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (third edition) to see if they can put it into English: “Major components of Terroir are soil and local topography, together with their interactions with each other and with microclimate to determine mesoclimate and vine microclimate ... which is reflected in [the] wines more or less consistently from year to year, regardless of viticulture and wine-making. ...”

That's a mouthful, and it gets rather

technical after that. But once you have a glass in your hand, it's not about the vines, the grapes, the stems and the stalks, it's all about your surroundings. It's about what makes a glass come alive for you.

There's an old saying about wine tasting better in the presence of the winemaker, and that can also be extended to wine tasting better in its country of origin.

Last spring I found myself in Germany at a winery called Winzer Sommerach drinking a wood-aged Kerner (white grape) called Experiment W. Sitting in the winery while the winemaker described the conditions in the vineyard, the winemaking techniques and the care in handling and picking, I found myself wrapped up in the romance and history of German winemaking. Each sip of the wine was better than the last.

So without hesitation, I bought a bottle to take back to Canada: my wife and my friends just had to try this wine and be transported as I was. So there we were, sitting on the back deck, summer sun beating down — no better time to open that Experiment W. Alas, no one, including myself, liked the wine. In fact, it was downright dreadful.

Your reaction to a wine is probably 80 per cent environmental. Few people taste wine

in a static lab — most of us are at a party, having dinner with friends and/or loved ones or just sipping on something to wind down after a long day. The company you keep, the people you pop corks with or the level of stress in one's day will play a part in how you react to a wine.

For example, open a bottle of your favourite wine on the day you get engaged, on a special birthday or anniversary, or after winning the lottery (we should all be so lucky) and that wine will taste like the best bottle you've ever had. But open that same bottle on a day when you get fired, fight with your significant other or receive bad news, and that wine can taste like the worst medicine you've ever had — that's why people turn to scotch at times like that.

I hear you asking, “Michael, is there a way to combat all of that?”

Well, you could keep mood-altering wines on hand. By that I mean wines that are proven performers, wines that won't let you down, no matter what the circumstances. These are wines that will always bring pleasure to the palate. No years are given because these wines are always available and prove themselves, vintage after vintage, to be good wines to have on-hand and in your glass.

Let's kick it off with some bubbles and I can easily recommend three here that won't break the bank. Starting with Cave Spring Cellars non-Vintage Blanc de Blancs (\$29.95 - #213983). It's a Chardonnay-based bubbly that over-delivers, especially when compared to its pricier Champagne-made cousin. And it's made the same way as the import so quality and flavour are not lacking.

Same can be said for the Henry of Pelham Non-Vintage Cuvée Catharine Rosé Brut (\$29.95 - #217505). The beautiful colour should bring a smile to your face and the berry smells and flavours should liven up most any day.

There are times you just want to drink bubbles and not think about the fancy way it's made. The Jacob's Creek non-vintage Chardonnay Pinot Noir Sparkling (\$14.45 - #210633) just might perform that trick.

I tried it recently at an Australian tasting and was blown away by the fruitiness of this very tasty sparkle. And at that price it'll

bring a smile to most any face.

Staying in Australia for the moment, many know the Aussies for their rich, jammy wines with high alcohol. The last thing you want when you're feeling down is lots of booze — it can go to your head and cause you to make some really bad decisions. Ringbolt Cabernet Sauvignon (\$19.95 - #606624) from the famous Margaret River region of Australia is bathed in elegance, but still offers enough fruit that you know it has an Aussie pedigree.

Those looking for something richer in a Cabernet will be happy with the Chilean Concha y Toro Marques de Casa Concha Cabernet Sauvignon (\$19.95 - #337238), beautiful mouth feel, great aromas, one to sip solo or match with a misery meal or fashionable feast.

I know there are those who shun the New World (such as Chile and Australia) for Old World traditions, and for those I offer up Masi Campofiorin (\$18.95 - #155051). Masi is the grand-daddy of Ripasso, having

started the process in 1964 — think of something between Amarone and Valpolicella, because that is exactly what it is.

Most people I know love their red wines and never go back once they are there — but I'll pass along a lovely white to always look for: Cono Sur Bicicleta Viognier (\$9.95 - #64287). Fresh, fruity and always enticing, this wine just offers so much value and fruit that it is great any time.

If you're one of those who believes wines have to be French to be good, try one from Burgundy (Chardonnay country) that will put a smile on your face: Bouchard Pere & Fils Macon-Lugny Saint-Pierre (\$15.60 - #51573).

Finally, there are times when only Port will do. At times like that, make sure you always have a bottle of Taylor Fladgate Late Bottled Vintage (\$17.95 - #46946) on hand. It flies in the face of those that say late bottled vintages don't age and should be drunk right away. Trust me when I tell you I have had 10-year-old bottles of late bottled vintages that taste delicious. ☺

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