

JAMES LAUBE

Something Old, Something New

Déjà Vu: I was reunited this year with the exquisite 1985 Château Margaux on its 30th anniversary. Served at a dinner in June at the esteemed Médoc estate to celebrate Vinexpo, the wine reminded me of our first encounter, which made a lasting impression. We first met in 1988 when the '85 Bordeaux vintage passed through the *Wine Spectator* tasting room at our old offices in San Francisco.

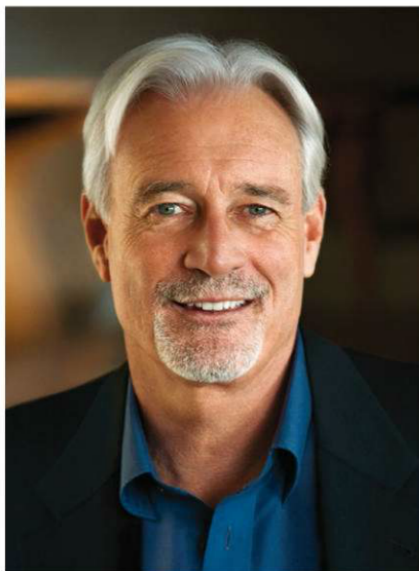
With a release price of \$76, the wine earned a near-perfect 99-point rating in my tasting at the time. Here's what I wrote: "A beautifully structured and proportioned wine, soft yet rich with cascading flavors of ripe plum, cherry and cassis that are perfectly integrated with toasty oak, firm acidity and firm but polished tannins. Finish is long, full and deep."

While Christmas shopping later that year, I happened upon a floor stack of '85 Margaux at Liquor Barn, one of California's first mega-retailers. I decided to buy a few bottles to lay down for my 3-year-old's birth year. I wasn't paying attention to the price, figuring it would be about \$65 a bottle and I would shuffle the receipt into the mix of holiday bills. Swept up in the season, I put eight bottles in my cart.

When I reached the checkout line, I ran into a friend who distracted me as the clerk totaled my bill. I quickly signed my name on the Visa slip and departed. When the bill arrived a month later I was astonished to see a grand total of \$52 charged for the wine. How could that be? I checked the bottles and read the price tag: The wines had been mislabeled at \$6.50 a bottle.

Sadly, I don't have any of the bottles left. The tasting this year at Margaux proved that the '85 remains a wine of impeccable balance and sheer beauty. Time has served it well.

Blind Date: In my experience, aged wines often disappoint. Yet when I recently revisited the 2005 vintage of Napa Cabernet (see page 41), the 2005 Phifer Pavitt Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Date Night (90 points, \$75 on release; 93 points now)



2015 was a year of reunions and remembrances, but also new surprises, new successes and new enthusiasms.

provided a surprise. This was the wine's first vintage, and even after a decade it retained its supple, graceful charm and caressing Pinot Noir–like tenderness, while also gaining richness and depth. Though the label doesn't say so, the wine is grown in Pope Valley, from Temple Family Vineyards. I think that makes it even more special.

Reboot: Producers rarely turn on a dime, but Arista did with the 2013 vintage. This Russian River Valley winery had been making very good wines from vineyards on and around its property, but knew it could improve and in 2013 it did. Owners Mark and Ben McWilliams credit hiring winemaker Matt Courtney the year before.

Courtney is a talented, attentive winemaker mentored by one of the best, Marcassin's Helen Turley. His Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs for Arista are striking, bound to invite comparisons to Marcassin. Each of the 2013 Arista wines displays its own personality, with the Chardonnays ranging from the ultraplush Ritchie Vineyard 2013 (94, \$60) to the silkier, more refined

Banfield Vineyard 2013 (93, \$60), which is especially reminiscent of Marcassin with its generous overlay of oak.

Of the 11 2013 Arista Pinots I reviewed this year, all but one rated outstanding, including the Harper's Rest (94, \$78), which stands out for its sheer elegance. Arista achieved what many wineries only hope for—to take their game to the next level.

When It Rains: Courtney also released his own set of wines this year under the Ferren label. The bottlings—three Chardonnays and one Pinot Noir—are just as riveting as his work at Arista. The Chardonnays, in fact, share similarities with the Arista versions, offering distinctive personalities and enticing spicy oak shadings—evidence of a talented winemaker working with excellent vineyards.

Both labels' Chardonnays also demonstrate a new surge of interest in California's greatest white. Chardonnay has long been a strong and consistent performer, yet in the past couple of years fewer new wines have taken the market by storm or risen to this level of quality. These wines demonstrate the orchestration of vineyard site and grape variety, as well as the ability to coax the most from a wine without overdoing it. It's a heartening sign.

Senior editor James Laube has been with Wine Spectator since 1981.

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