



Michigan Cab Franc Wine Challenge Judge's Comments - 2009

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It was a great opportunity to taste an exceptional array of well made wines from a stunning Michigan vintage. It's so exciting to realize that we are on the ground floor of something huge for Michigan's future. It was not inappropriate to compare these wines to a classic French Chinon, but our beauties left the Chinon in the dust. It was my lowest ranked wine in its flight of six.

It is, I believe, correct to compare our Michigan wines to the old world, cool climate wines of France (particularly from Alsace, Loire, and Burgundy), and Germany. In Michigan our best wines demonstrate the class, structure, and nuance of the finest old world, terroir driven wines. We should not expect anything from Michigan to be successful in the zaftig, high-alcohol styles of California or Australia, and I strongly feel that our winemakers should not try to produce wines in this style. My favorites in the competition seem to reflect this opinion.

When we were judging the top 8 and then the top 5 wines, all the judges paused to acknowledge that these were indeed excellent to superb examples of type, and that the end process was simply a style popularity contest. This was born out by the fact that each of the five final wines got at least one vote apiece for first place.

In the first flight, wine #3 from 2Lads was my favorite by far. That seems to have remained constant in my follow up tasting. With a star bright, brilliant deep blackberry hue, its lovely soft grapey nose, balanced purity of fruit and long finish it remains my favorite. In flight #2 the wines from Shady Lane and Black Star Farms got my top marks for their intensity and length. In flight #3 Raftshol was my first choice for viscous texture and black cherry flavors. The Brys Artisan was powerful and my second choice. In flight #4 the Bowers Harbor & 2Lads were my top picks. The Bowers Harbor I found to be very terroir driven and graceful, which is a plus in my opinion. Of the wines from the south, I was most pleased with Fenn Valley, Hickory Creek, and Cascade.

As to the South African connection: it speaks to the wisdom of Chateau Grand Traverse & Chateau Chantal that they were involved in the work / study programs that brought Cornel & Coenrad here. It speaks to the wisdom of Cornel & Coenrad that they wed two local girls & settled here to make wonderful wines & families. They are both very talented men with exciting futures & a lively rivalry from which we all benefit!

William Harrison, III, Chairman of the Research and Education Committee of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council

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I have reviewed my notes and find that 19 of the 22 wines were of good or better quality. The one French wine made from Cabernet Franc from the Loire Valley, Chinon region was consistent and similar to most of the Michigan wines, but ranked in my bottom 1/3. I felt that half (11 out of 22, all Michigan) of the wines were of excellent quality that could be comparable to any similar red wines anywhere in the world.

Although it is obvious that South African winemakers like Coenraad and Cornell are highly skilled professionals, I think there are wines of similar quality being made by other winemakers in Michigan. Special wines, like the Brys Estate Artisan and the Two Lads Reserve benefit tremendously from their winery's commitment to very small crop size in the vineyard and special handling throughout the winemaking process. These wines are made in very limited quantities, even by Michigan standards, and command a very high price. They show that exceptional quality wines can be made in Michigan, but I doubt that they will ever be commonplace or made in large quantities. With less than 100 acres of Cabernet Franc in the entire State, this wine is still a pretty rare commodity for us.

I have a few specific comments about the tasting:

1. 2007 Cabernet Franc produced by a number of Michigan wineries is of world class quality.
2. Wines from Northern Michigan were generally richer, darker colored and more complex than those from SW Michigan.
3. Five wineries that did not make it out of the first round also caught my attention and I think, deserve commendation, Lawton Ridge and Hickory Creek were somewhat lighter versions, but well balanced, fruit forward and very easy drinking, Raftshol was richer, lively and delicious, Shady Lane and Cascade Winery also produced a worthy wine in this group.
4. Wines from the top eight that did not win a medal, but I think are quite worthy are Black Star Farms, Two Lads Regular, Bower's Harbor.

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3: Pleasant. Medium body. Mint, Vanilla and Smoke for a nice balance. Drink it with a chill for fun!

2: Great Cabernet Franc with healthy acidity. Richness of the ageing. Patience is key to enjoy this baby.

1: Lot to share. A potpourri of orange peel, strawberry and raspberry. A dreamful body with hints of fumé. Food for this winner!

Brys Estate, 2 Lads as well as Black Star Farms and Bowers Harbors Vineyard showed serious commitment to Cabernet Franc during this blind tasting. Others could join this Michigan Cabernet Franc vision and gain consistency in quality by consistently aiming for the best and compare themselves to other wines as done during this great event.

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The quality of the wines that were submitted was surprising. I am not a Michigan wine follower. The only producer I am familiar with is Adam Satchwell, the winemaker at Shady Lane Cellars in Suttons Bay. I was really impressed with the quality of all the Cabernet Francs that were judged. Out of 22 wines 19 wines were serious contenders in the competition. I applaud all the wineries who were involved because they are making world class wines - right here in Michigan!

About the winners: I have never been to Brys Estate, but you can bet I will be visiting soon! Their wines placed 1st and 3rd, deservedly so! The winning wine was Brys Estate Artisan Series - my comments were "soft rich fruits, grippy tannins and by far the best balance and finish" - that was my #1 wine, too. 2 Lads Winery - I had just visited there recently and tasted their regular Cabernet Franc and was impressed with that. I had never tasted their Reserve Cabernet Franc, but of the top 5 wines it was my # 3 wine. My comments were "exceptional toasty oak nose, ripe fruit with supple spice and powerful tannins, again nice display of balance". The Brys Estate Cabernet Franc that came in # 3 was my #2 choice, so I selected Brys for #1 and #2. Obviously, Coenraad Stassen knows how to produce exceptional Cabernet Franc - in Michigan.

About SA winemakers - At Wines of Distinction we have had considerable success with South African wines. I know a few winemakers there and they have talent! Do they have more skill than any of our Michigan winemakers, probably not, but South Africa has a long history in the wine industry...since 1640 approx. By comparison our wine industry is much younger. Michigan winemakers have made up ground fast and now we just need to get the word out about the quality being produced.