

# CONNOISSEURS' GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA WINE



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## MONDAY MANIFESTOS

01/30/2012

### Monday Manifestos

## It Hurts To Tell The Truth

By Charles Olken

The story you are about to hear is based on a real incident. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

I was in attendance at the ZAP Festival tasting over the weekend. Had a great time. Finally used Twitter for what it was invented—chirping endlessly about very little yet being read by the masses in attendance. Well, perhaps “very little” is a bit harsh, because the reports of wines tasted and people interviewed did at least bring a very “live” aspect to my tweets. Normally, I tweet little tidbits of facts just for the fun of it. On Saturday, it was a running commentary. It was radio with a keyboard substituted for a microphone. But, that is not the whole story—and certainly not the juicy part of the story. For that I have to protect my sources. Winery owners can be prickly sorts. You do not want to cross them because they can react in not very nice ways. See Steve Heimoff’s blog about the problems that can arise and my comments therein.

So, when I had a chat with a winery principal about a Zinfandel I did not like recently, it did not go all that well. I never like those kinds of confrontations, but they do go with the territory. If one is going to say unkind things when necessary about someone’s creations, one has to expect that some of those creators are going to take exception.

Later in the day, the “truth” came out. The winemaker, who is not part of ownership, dropped by the Connoisseurs’ Guide table for a chat and confessed that the wine in question had suffered from “smoke taint” and the winery had gone to great lengths to clean it up. Quoth he, “It did lose a little in the process. I think you will find the 2010 to be back in form”.

I wish I could tell you the name of the winery and the wine, but the innocent must be protected. The review, of course, is now verified by the hands-on maker, and that is the key fact. I may not be able to tell you the names of the folks involved, but the review in our January issue is confirmed to be accurate. The truth does hurt at times, but it did come out in blind tasting—always the best way to get at the truth. Perhaps that is the moral of the story. The truth hurts but it will out in the end.

### Meet the New CGCW

For thirty-five years, Connoisseurs’ Guide has been the authoritative voice of the California wine consumer. With readers in all fifty states and twenty foreign countries, the Guide is valued by wine lovers everywhere for its honesty and for its strong adherence to the principles of transparency, unbiased, hard-hitting opinions. Now, it is becoming the



California winelover's most powerful online voice as well. And, our new features provide an unmatched array of advice and information for aficionados of every stripe.

## Comments

Taint no good

by Sherman

Posted on: 1/30/2012 1:39:37 PM

From the reading that I've done on the subject, it would seem that if there's any significant amount of smoke taint, the winery is probably better off to sell the juice on the bulk market and take the financial hit, rather than damage their reputation. Since guaiacol is the responsible for the smell/flavor of what we refer to as "smoke taint" and it binds to flavor compounds in the juice during fermentation, a wine maker generally doesn't find out about it until post-fermentation analysis.

By then, they're pretty well along into the process, so it seems some folks attempt to "salvage" the year's investment by trying to remove, or "strip," out the offending chemical. But since it is bound to other flavor-inducing chemicals in the juice, it seems that any such process inherently removes flavor as well as "smoke taint."

Damned if you do, damned if you don't -- no good solution to the problem, it would seem.

And as you have pointed out, the truth will out -- something will be amiss with the wine and discerning wine folk will suss it out. Almost seems better to not put out an inferior product, rather than damage a winery's reputation and then have to earn back their customer's trust again -- which could take years.

When Smoke Gets In Your Glass

by Mike Dunne

Posted on: 1/30/2012 1:50:49 PM

If you have a smoke-tainted wine and can't cleanse it, sell it as a smoke-tainted wine, just don't call it that. Come up with a romantic or colorful name that doesn't hide the smokiness but capitalizes on it in a positive way. I know of a North Coast winery that did that with a blush wine following the wildland fires of 2008. The wine sold out quickly. Consumers liked either the novelty or they found they actually liked the suggestion of last night's cigar butt in this morning's ashtray. Stranger things have happened, or haven't you heard of wines infused with chocolate?

Negative reviews are the hardest

by Blake Gray

Posted on: 1/30/2012 3:12:42 PM

It's so hard to write something bad about a wine, isn't it? We taste wines all the time that we don't like, but it's so rare for anyone to say it. I wring my hands over this situation whenever I want to write a story but don't love the wines (had this problem on my blog today, in fact). Whenever I wring my hands in public, I get readers who say, "Run the negative reviews!" But the curious reader is less important to me than the producers as a whole.

Film critics don't have this problem. They're lucky.

Kill the critic!

by PaulG

Posted on: 1/30/2012 3:56:16 PM

More puzzling are the winery principals who react with hostility toward very positive reviews! I've had that happen more than once, and with wines that generally got praised, perhaps more than they always deserved. Go figure.

Not Me, Please

by Charlie Olken

Posted on: 1/30/2012 4:48:58 PM

Paul, so far I have had only one winery, Radio-Coteau, actually come after me for a good review. The owner/winemaker's complaint was that Connoisseurs' Guide was not "authorized" to review his wine. It mattered not to him that I had purchased the wine at retail or that we had given it a positive review. Go figure, indeed. The guy is actually a pretty decent individual, but he sure missed the point on this one.

On Negative Reviews

by Charlie Olken

Posted on: 1/30/2012 5:00:07 PM

Blake--

It's a funny thing about negative reviews. We get a lot of stick from wineries about less than positive reviews. One owner called up and threatened never to send wine again because we publish both the positive and the negative whereas other publications only publish the positive reviews

In our case, because we started as consumers, and because we started in an era when all reviewers published notes on all the wines they tasted, it just does not bother me to tell the truth. In point of fact, that is what our readers pay us to do.

It also helps that we buy a fair percentage of the wines we taste. As I have told more than one winery, I don't care whether you send us your wines or not. If I see them at retail, I will buy them and review them in any event. Our jobs as reviewers are, in my opinion, to be humble, balanced sayers of the truth as we see it.

Blake, the truth will out one way or another.

My Gosh, Blake: Do You Really Mean It?

by Patrick

Posted on: 1/31/2012 10:09:32 AM

"The curious reader is less important to me than the producers as a whole." That's kind of discouraging to me, as a consumer, who reads your stuff regularly.

Leave a comment below, but please limit your comments to 1,200 characters or less. We find it helpful to make a copy of our comments to be sure that they fit. In that way, you can edit them if they run long.

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