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HOW GOOD CAN **COLORADO WINE** BE?

Musings on taste, quality and terroir

By Tom Passavant

Walk into Victoria's Espresso & Wine Bar on Mill Street in Aspen, and over on your left you'll see a long line of bottles — some of the 42 Colorado wines that the popular cafe offers by the glass.

Aside from being amazed at the sheer number of offerings (Colorado now has about 80 wineries, up from a mere four in 1990), the average wine lover is bound to wonder just how good they are.

"In recent years, the vineyards here have produced award-winning varietals and blends, making Colorado a rising star in the wine-making universe," said the New York Times in a travel feature last fall.

To get a better idea of just how far Colorado's wine star has risen, I talked to local sommeliers and winemakers, as well as nationally known critics, a couple of whom had just completed a five-day tour of Colorado wineries in late June. In the name of research, I also tried a bunch of wines myself.

"Some exceptional wines are already being made, but fine-wine growing is in its infancy in Colorado," says Bill Bentley, the wine director at Carbondale's Restaurant Six89. Bentley is widely recognized as a passionate advocate for Colorado wines.

"Colorado is a wine region in transition," adds writer Doug Frost, one of only three people in the world to hold the titles of Master Sommelier and Master of Wine. "West Elks [aka the North Fork Valley], Palisade and the Four Corners each have produced excellent wines. Winemakers are discovering the best techniques for

crafting fine wines, and grape growers are learning which grapes are ideal and where and how they should be grown."

Los Angeles-based wine writer Dan Berger was on the recent tour with Frost, and he added a note of caution. "In some cases, the spirit is, 'Let's do it the same as last year. That wine sold.' This is not moving forward or pushing the envelope. I think people should be adventuresome!"

Beyond these general thoughts, though, is a whole world of winegrowing variables. Which varietals are working best here? Who is making outstanding wines? And just how good can Colorado wines become in the future?

"Bordeaux red varietals — merlot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon — are at the top of my list," says Bentley. "Pinot noir seems to have a foothold in the North Fork Valley, especially Steve Rhodes' Emilia's Vineyard bottling. That said, Sutcliffe's Bodys Gallen, a blend of merlot, cabernet franc and other grapes, is the single best red I've tasted from Colorado."

"I believe cabernet franc has a great future in Colorado," adds Berger, "but so does cabernet sauvignon. And merlot, too, if they don't try to make Napa raisin juice out of it." As for specific producers, he likes Jack Rabbit Hill in the West Elks, as well as Canyon Wind, Boulder Creek, Plum Creek and Two Rivers.

Others mentioned syrah, while a bottle of Sutcliffe's 2007 cinsaut, another relatively obscure French grape, knocked my own socks off at a recent dinner at Six89.

Colorado's white wines don't always come in for quite the same level of praise. "I think the chardonnay game is over; California has won by default. So that's out," says Berger. Steve Rhodes, who has been a winegrower in the North Fork Valley since the 1970s, notes that whites in general require more expensive winemaking equipment to achieve real quality, which many local winegrowers can't afford.

Nevertheless, riesling, muscat and gewürztraminer "each have their proponents, and for good reason," says Frost. "Those grapes can produce wines with intense varietal flavors even in Colorado's short growing season. And those three grapes like to cool off; that happens at high, mountainous elevations more so than in California's flat, coastal vineyards."

"If Colorado could make dry gewürztraminer like the one at Terror Creek [in the North Fork Valley] all the time, it would open a lot of eyes," says Berger.

All these experts felt that matching grape type to region, and even to a specific vineyard site, is a work in progress. How much further can Colorado winemakers push the quality envelope?

"The potential is limited only by the winemaker's ability to dial in what excels where and then get out of the way," says Jonathan Pullis, sommelier at The Little Nell's Montagna restaurant.

"The trend for Colorado winemakers is to try and be hands off with the winemaking and let the fruit do the talking," adds Bentley. "This is a good thing if we are hoping for terroir."

Making a wine that expresses terroir is, for many winegrowers all over the world, the holy grail of their craft. This semi-mystical French word describes the effect of geography, soil, climate and all the other natural elements that come together to give a wine a unique sense of place. The greater the terroir, the more potential the wine has to say something eloquent about from where it comes.

"Yes, Colorado wines taste like they come from Colorado," says Frost, "but using the word terroir suggests a synergy between grape and place that results in very predictable and particular flavors. We aren't there yet." Achieving a synergy with their place does not usually happen to grapes for several decades, notes Pullis.

Both Rhodes and Bentley think there's already a little of the fabled terroir in Colorado. "My merlot is very different from that from Grand Valley," says Rhodes. Bentley believes that as winemakers continue to refine their technique in the vineyard, terroir will become more apparent. "I do think that the best winemakers are on to it," he says.

"The wines are already far better than they were just three or four years ago, and that's due to hard work in the vineyards and in the winery by dedicated people," says Berger. His advice to the state's winemakers is "not to buy into the 'bigger is better' and 'sweeter sells' myths. Be yourself."

Doug Frost sums up: "If enough people will put their time and effort into it, and if consumers will be enthusiastic buyers of those wines, Colorado can do amazing things in the next 10 years." 

