

December 29, 2006

TASTINGS

10 Ways to Enhance Your Wine Experience

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We tasted about 2,000 wines this year. Of those, 15 earned our highest accolade, a rating of Delicious or Delicious! You should make a New Year's resolution to find your own delicious wines next year. We'll help you do that, in 10 easy steps.

Last week, we discussed the general trends we saw in the wine world in 2006. This week, we're asking a question you can take forward into 2007: What makes a wine delicious? We want a wine to taste like fruit, have a sense of place and offer a passionate, singular vision. These days, too many wines taste like component parts -- oak, vanilla, alcohol and such. One of the great things about wine is the way it picks up its surroundings -- the soil, the sun, the slope of the hill. We fell in love with wine more than 30 years ago because every good bottle took us somewhere, often places we'd never been, because of the strong sense of place the wines offered. And, of course, the grape-grower and winemaker also are critical to a great bottle of wine. Some wines are lusty and some are buttoned-down, for instance, and if you get to know some winemakers, you'd be amazed how often the wines reflect their creators. That, too, is something we love about wine.

We buy all of the wines for this column off retail shelves for many reasons, but one of them is symbolic. We think it's important to make the point that there are wonderful wines sitting on shelves everywhere, all the time. How can you find them? Here are some tips.

1) Find a good merchant. There are more good wine merchants than ever, all over the country. There is no reason anymore to feel like you're on your own or to put up with pushy or snooty sales clerks. Don't let prices alone determine your choice. A good merchant who will guide you toward good stuff and away from bad stuff might charge a bit more, but the advice is worth it.

2) Don't be a slave to ratings. Too many people these days buy wine based on someone else's ratings, but only you know what tastes good to you. Not only that, but if you do happen to find a wine that we rated Delicious or someone else scored a 99, think about the weight on the shoulders of that poor wine. When you open it, won't you bring an awful lot of expectation to it? Our guess is that you will be more likely to have a delicious experience when you discover a wine on your own and it's a surprise as opposed to a wine that you open and then say, "OK, I hear you're delicious. Prove it."

