



More on the troubling 2011 vintage

Posted by steve on Dec 17, 2013

I was starting to feel like the only person on Earth who had concerns about the 2011 vintage, until I read this post from [Jim Laube's blog](#), in which he describes "a high presence of musty and even moldy flavors" in too many of the wines.

I've been telling [Wine Enthusiast's](#) Tasting Department for the better part of a year the same thing. Of course, one is loathe to say, of any given wine, that it's "moldy" because, unless you actually test it for, say, botrytis, you don't actually know; that loaded word can kill the wine's sales. But "musty" and "moldy" aromas and accompanying bad flavors are exactly what plagues so many 2011s. That, and a generalized unripeness across the board.



The vintage was the coldest ever—well, in living memory, anyway. It was the year that summer never came. Brutal for people and grapes alike. This problem wasn't limited just to the coolest regions: it was coastal-wide, extending into Paso Robles. I'm not going to identify any particular bottlings, but here are some Moldy Hall of Fame 2011 wines; maybe you can figure out what they are.

There was a single-vineyard Pinot Noir from the Santa Lucia Highlands that was filled with fungus. A Paso Robles red Rhône-blend that reeked of mushrooms, not in a good way. An expensive Russian River Valley Pinot whose asparagus smell reminded me of the Monterey veggies of long ago, as did one from Carneros. Another Pinot, with a Santa Barbara County appellation, smelled like green beans and tomatoes.

As I look over my notes, I see that the variety that was most susceptible to these defects was Pinot Noir, although I also found it in some Zinfandels, Sauvignon Blancs, Chardonnays, Viogniers, Syrahs and Cabernet Sauvignon/Bordeaux blends, including some expensive ones. I guess Pinot was most affected because of its transparency: the very thing that lets us taste the most finely-tuned aspects of Pinot's terroir also magnifies the slightest problem.

The thing about mold, unripeness and vegetal notes is that they don't go away. You can't blow them off with decanting. And they won't age out. On Wine Enthusiast's Vintage Chart for 2011 Pinot Noir, I gave Carneros my lowest score in many years. Ditto for Sonoma Coast, Russian River

Valley and Santa Barbara, including Sta. Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley. Having said that, the thing to realize is that 2011 was far from being a “bad” vintage. Yes, there were a lot of mediocre wines, more than usual; but there were also some fabulous one. The problem of moldy berries is easily addressed by the winery: If their viticulture can’t prevent it (and often it can’t, because botrytis moves in really fast), then the sorting table is where bad grapes are plucked out, before they go into the fermenter. Problem is, sorting is expensive. Not every winery can afford the equipment or the staff. It must be a terrible moral quandary for a winemaker to allow moldy grapes to pass into the wine—but what can she do? It’s economics.

Here are some wineries that obviously did have the means and will power to produce magnificent 2011 Pinot Noirs: Williams Selyem, Merry Edwards, Paul Hobbs, Rochioli, Lynmar, Dutton-Goldfield, Joseph Phelps, Failla, Thomas Fogarty, Flowers, Testarossa, Tantara, Freeman, Sojourn, Siduri and Foxen. The usual suspects, you say? Exactly. The reason they’re the usual suspects is because these wine companies do what has to be done to produce great wine.

Actually, the problems of 2011 (and, to an almost equal extent, 2010) underscore two important things to keep in mind: One, not every year in California is the same! And two, just wait until the 2012s start coming out. They will be superb.

<http://www.steveheimoff.com/index.php/2013/12/17/more-on-the-troubling-2011-vintage/>