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Wine  *zinfandel merlot syrah pinot grigio chardonnay
sauvignon blancs cabernet sauvignon pinot noir*

TOP 100 WINES 2006



Tactics you can use to find the Top 100 wines

By Linda Murphy

After The Chronicle tasted thousands of wines in 2006 and recommended hundreds in print and on www.sfgate.com/wine, it was daunting to whittle those favorites down to a Top 100, because we loved at least 100 more.

Throughout the year, Wine section panelists searched for the best wines from California, Oregon, Washington state and Idaho for the Top 100, and in the process, found some rising stars, were reminded of a few old hands and saw several trends emerge or expand.

Take Pinot Noir. As it did in 2005, Pinot Noir stole the panelists' hearts -- and wallets. Twenty-two Pinots made the Top 100, each scoring three stars or higher in the four-star rating system. Unfortunately, most of them don't come cheap.

But there is something for everyone here, from bubbly to big Bordeaux-style blends, from \$10 to \$200. According to ACNielsen, Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are the top three varietals in U.S. sales volume, although Pinot Noir sales are rising. In February 2006, ACNielsen said Pinot Noir had grown 174 percent in case volume and 196 percent in dollar sales since September 2003.

Vintners in California and Oregon say they can't make enough Pinot Noir to quench the thirst of the market. They're held back in making more by the fact that Pinot needs a climate warm enough to ripen the grapes, yet cool enough for the fruit to develop its delicacy and firm acidity. Pinot Noir doesn't thrive just anywhere, and where it does, the yields are generally quite low, thus elevating price. Whether Pinot's popularity continues to grow is unknown, although it's easy to envision more folks discovering this luscious, supple red that's great for all seasons and seasonings.

Merlot fans, even those who think they don't like the varietal, should not miss the spectacular bottlings from Washington State, which comprise five of the nine Merlots in the Top 100. Syrah and blends of Syrah and other Rhone Valley varietals also impressed the tasters in 2006, with 13 making the Top 100.

Another trend -- which came comes with great relief to the panel -- is that California Chardonnay tastes fresher and fruitier than in past years. Berry-ish brut rosé sparkling wines were seriously fun to judge this year, and more are being made to fill the increasing demand for pink fizz. Still rosé wines made a splash, too; panelists tasted 95 from the United States, twice as many as were available in 2005.

Why this new passion for pink? Consumers are beginning to embrace rosé as a more complex, serious wine than White Zinfandel, and vintners have found a use for previously unwanted juice. In producing red wines, winemakers sometimes bleed off some of the juice from tanks, to increase the ratio of grape skins to remaining juice. This results in more intense wines -- and in rosés made from the bled-off juice.

Everyone has their own tastes, and there is room on the Top 100 list for wines of all strengths and weights. Nine producers had more than one wine in the 2006 Top 100 -- Ridge in the Santa Cruz Mountains; Schramsberg Vineyards in Napa Valley; Gary Farrell Wines and Merry Edwards Wines in Sonoma County; Navarro Vineyards in Mendocino County; Sea Smoke Cellars in Santa Barbara County; Linne Calado in Paso Robles; **Lachini Vineyards in Oregon's Willamette Valley**; and Helix, a label made by Reininger Winery in Walla Walla, Wash.

Good stuff, all around.

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Pinot Noir

2004 Lachini Vineyards Estate Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$42)

With concentrated cherry and vanilla from plenty of new French oak, this wine has a lovely touch of earthiness, which complements the full-flavored, bright, ripe fruit. A touch of woody spice rounds out the aromas and palate and lingers on the finish.

2004 Carmel Road Monterey Pinot Noir (\$20)

2003 Domaine Serene Mark Bradford Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$90)

2004 Failla Keefer Ranch Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$42)

2003 Goldeneye Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$52)

2005 Hayman & Hill Reserve Selection No. 41 Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir (\$14)

2004 Holdredge Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$32)

2004 J. Rochioli Estate West Block Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$75)

2004 Lincourt Santa Barbara County Pinot Noir (\$22)

2004 Lynmar Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$36)

2004 Merry Edwards Olivet Lane Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$57)

2004 Miner Rosella's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir (\$50)

2004 Papapietro Perry Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$39)

2004 Roessler Cellars Sanford & Benedict Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$46)

2005 Rusack Reserve Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$38)

2004 Saintsbury Carneros Pinot Noir (\$30)

2004 Sea Smoke Botella Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$30)

2004 Sea Smoke Ten Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir (\$70)

2004 Siduri Sapphire Hill Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$42)

2004 Stoller Estate Dundee Hills Pinot Noir (\$40)

2004 Tantara Solomon Hills Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir (\$45)

2004 Williams Selyem Bucher Vineyard Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$49)

Other Whites

2005 Lachini Vineyards Oregon Pinot Gris (\$18)

Rich, ripe and almost unctuous, it has lovely white peach, pear and mineral character on a fine-textured palate. It's full-bodied, the antithesis of Italian wines made from the same grape.

2005 Acacia Carneros Viognier (\$28)

2004 Bonterra Mendocino County Roussanne (\$18)

2005 Bridlewood Reserve Central Coast Viognier (\$20)

2005 Cosentino Winery Stewart Vineyards Solano County Pinot Grigio (\$18)

2005 Navarro Vineyards Anderson Valley Pinot Gris (\$18)

2005 Navarro Vineyards Mendocino Old Vine Cuvee Chenin Blanc (\$11)

2005 Robert Sinskey Los Carneros Pinot Gris (\$24)