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Entertainment



TOP 100 WINES 2006

Whites:

**Sparkling - Sauvignon Blanc -
Chardonnay - Other White/Rosé**

Reds:

**Pinot Noir - Syrah & Rhone Red
Blends Zinfandel - Merlot - Cabernet
Sauvignon - Petite Sirah - Other Red
Blends**

Pairings:

**Incredible Edibles for the best of
the best**



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.

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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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Syrah & Rhone Red Blends

2003 Austin Hope Hope Family Vineyard Paso Robles Syrah (\$42)

Made from vineyard fruit just 20 miles from the Pacific Ocean in the Templeton Gap area, this wine is more polished than powerful. It offers a floral note of violets, vivid black fruit and moderate toasty oak. It's classy and complete.

2003 Beckmen Purisima Mountain Vineyard Santa Ynez Valley Syrah (\$40)

New World, ripe dark fruit meets Rhone Valley-like smokiness and spice in a powerful wine moderated by smooth tannins and brisk acidity.

2004 DuMOL Russian River Valley Syrah (\$52)

It shows remarkable cellaring potential -- 10 years? -- thanks to its firm tannins and density. Or drink it now for its smoky, ripe black-fruit flavors and gentle kiss of Hershey's chocolate.

2004 Edward Sellers Paso Robles Syrah (\$30)

A potent Syrah that's intense, peppery and deeply fruited. While it's quite ripe, any alcoholic heat is masked by the wine's fine balance.

2004 HdV Carneros Syrah (\$60)

Elegant and complex, it has a subtle gaminess with underpinnings of blackberry, black cherry, dusky herb and a hint of earth. The lengthy palate is awash with concentrated fruit, spice and leather, and enveloped by velvety tannins.

2004 Linne Calodo Nemesis Paso Robles Red Wine (\$60)

Made from 80 percent Syrah plus Mourvedre and Grenache, this powerhouse offers extracted mixed-berry fruit, licorice and bittersweet chocolate, supported by firm tannins and bright acidity.

2004 Linne Calodo Rising Tides Paso Robles Red Wine (\$48)

Dense, extracted and not at all subtle, this blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre will find fans for its structure and layers of ripe blackberry and black cherry fruit, licorice and coffee, all melded with sweet, spicy oak.

2003 McCrea Cellars Ciel du Cheval Vineyard Red Mountain Syrah (\$45)

McCrea is Washington state's most accomplished Rhone Ranger, and here is further proof. This Syrah has an intense, juicy berry character that contrasts nicely with its savory streak of pepper. It's bright and lively, with oak used more for texture and spice than toasty aroma and flavor. Jazzy, berry-ish acidity marks the finish.

2004 Novy Page-Nord Vineyard Napa Valley Syrah (\$32)

This unfiltered and unfiltered Syrah has soft black fruit with hints of tar, molasses and toast. While the fruit is quite ripe, it remains balanced and easy to drink.

2003 Paradise Ridge Sonoma County Syrah (\$24)

A heady nose of plum, dark berry, cigar box, coffee and cocoa heralds a complex mouthful of black plum, berry, chocolate and espresso flavors. The tannins are supple; the value is excellent.

2004 Sand T Cellars Brookside Vineyard Napa Valley Syrah (\$28)

Medium-bodied and gentle, it has a light spice and camphor nose, bright raspberry, dark-cherry fruit and tar palate, and caressing tannins.

2004 Saxum James Berry Vineyard Paso Robles Red Wine (\$45)

This is a dense, very ripe blend of Mourvedre, Syrah, Grenache and Cunoise that has vivid aromas of mixed black berries, mocha and chalky earth, and layers of luscious flavor. The tannins are ripe and silky, and with such concentrated fruit and brisk acidity, the wine is balanced despite its 16 percent alcohol.

2004 Tablas Creek Esprit de Beaucastel Paso Robles (\$45)

Petite Sirah

2003 Mitchell Katz Ruby Hill Vineyard Livermore Valley Petite Sirah (\$16)

Incredibly smooth, with concentrated blackberry, blueberry and cassis flavors and vanilla and black pepper accents. Excellent value.

2002 Quixote Panza Stags' Leap Ranch Napa Valley Petite Syrah (\$40)

Inky-purple in color, toasty in aroma and tasting intensely of black fruit. There are also hints of blueberry, spice, coffee and chocolate, wrapped in supple tannins.

2003 Rosenblum Pickett Road Napa Valley Petite Sirah (\$28)

Lush blackberry and blueberry fruit, black pepper, a rustic earthiness and chewy tannins make this the powerhouse "Petite" that aficionados seek.

Other Red Blends

2004 Amuse Bouche Napa Valley Red Wine (\$200)

Despite its lack of varietal designation, this is Merlot, and it's so supple and finely textured that it will find plenty of fans at its price. Succulent plum and black cherry fruit, subtle oak and background notes of tar and coffee close with refreshing acidity.

2002 Columbia Crest Walta-IrmorPrivolaey serve02 Columbia Valley Redshints olicorspicebitaltsweet d choco

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Check [here](#) for tips on where to find the Top 100 wines. Linda Murphy is a Healdsburg-based freelance writer and the former Chronicle Wine Editor. E-mail her at wine@sfchronicle.com.

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