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harvey steiman at large

Colorado Wine, Not an Oxymoron

But how good is it? Results of a sampling

Posted: Aug 2, 2013 10:41am ET

Every state in America makes wine. So everywhere I go, I try to taste at least a few examples of the local product. As my wife and I spend several weeks every summer in the Colorado Rockies, we have been exposed to Colorado bottlings from time to time. I've ordered glasses or bottles of local wines in places such as Arizona, Texas, Michigan, Maryland and Virginia, which get little respect except for a relatively few supporters.

Generally I find what I've tasted likable enough. But two big questions keep me from hopping up and down with excitement. I ran into both of those questions as I tasted through a representative sample of 10 Colorado wines with Kyle Schlachter of the Colorado Wine Press website. He has tweeted me when I omitted Colorado from a comment on states worth noting.

The first issue involves price. Why drink a pretty good \$25 Colorado Syrah when I can buy a terrific one from Washington or Australia for less? If you live in Colorado, the answer is simple. To encourage your local wine industry, drink their wines and let them know how you feel about them. And there's a certain pride of place. Yay, us!

Those who live in San Francisco or New York, however, might consider the next question. Is there something special about the wines from Colorado (or, fill in the name of any other wine-producing region, American or from elsewhere) that makes them distinctive enough to compel me to drink them?

That's what I was seeking when I sat down with Schlachter, who had brought along a few of his state's wines when he drove up from the Denver area with his family for an overnight visit to Aspen. Is there something in these Colorado wines that we can't taste from anywhere else?

Colorado focuses on two primary growing areas, both on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains: Grand Valley AVA, where the Rockies rise just east of Grand Junction, and West Elks AVA, a major fruit-growing region around Paonia and Hotchkiss, higher up in the mountains. We know Paonia well. We buy terrific peaches, cherries, melons, tomatoes, corn and other produce from there at the local farmer's market here on Saturdays.

Many of the state's wineries are in Denver and other towns along the more-populated Eastern Slope, but most of their grapes come from those two AVAs.

We started with a soft, lightly sweet **Talon Gewürztraminer Grand Valley 2012** (\$15). It showed some varietal spice and a kerosene overtone. **Book Cliff Chardonnay Colorado Unoaked 2012** (\$20) lacked freshness, even tasted oxidized. Not a good start.



Harvey Steiman

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Canyon Wind Rosé 47-Ten 2012 (\$13) was a step up, off-dry, with a tart edge to modest sweetness. Made from Merlot, it had modest tropical fruit and a mostly dry finish. I started to note my non-blind ratings, this one at 85 points.

But the first pleasant surprise was **Boulder Creek Merlot Colorado 2010** (\$24), weaving its caramel and toast sweetness into light-textured berry and Rainier cherry flavors. Balanced well, it lingered nicely, with fine tannins giving it a light grip without toughness (88 points, non-blind). Jackie Thompson has been making the wine since 2002. The winery is in Boulder, where the University of Colorado is, near Denver.

Rhône grapes, especially Syrah, have made some of this state's wines that I like best in the past. **Allis Ranch Syrah Two Husky 2009** (\$18) seduced me with its freshness and vibrancy. Juicy with red cherry and spice flavors, it picks up currant notes as the finish lingers. Tannins are nicely integrated (88 points, non-blind). David Rhyne makes four or five barrels each of a number of Rhône varietals and blends them in his small winery south of Denver.

Although the Allis Ranch label indicates 15.4 percent alcohol, it felt deftly balanced compared with the cooked character of **Holy Cross Abbey Syrah 2010** (\$19). It started off sleek, but got thick on the finish, yet had peppery flavors, suggesting the grapes were unevenly ripe (82 points, non-blind).

Not many places in the world produce varietal Petit Verdot, and the two I tasted prove that at least a few Colorado vintners have a touch for it. **Snowy Peaks Petite Verdot Grand Valley 2011** (\$24), and yes, they spell it "Petite" on the label, delivers a complex flavor profile on a tightly focused frame. Fresh, fleshy, with ripe blueberry, huckleberry and currant flavors that linger enticingly. At 88 points, non-blind, I liked the Snowy Peaks a shade better than **Canyon Wind Petit Verdot Grand Valley 2010** (\$30), with supple texture, richness, ripeness and a lingering finish that feels fresh but doesn't stint on the density (87 points, non-blind).

Schlachter believes that Petit Verdot could be Colorado's secret weapon. He also likes several Cabernet Francs. "The thing that drew me to Colorado wine in the first place was a Cabernet Franc. It didn't have the green earthiness you get in Loire, and it wasn't an over-the-top fruit bomb like you can find in California."

The two we tasted fit the advertised profile. **Book Cliff Cabernet Franc Reserve 2010** (\$NA) showed a beguiling sweetness and freshness, polished tannins and juicy red berry and fresh herb flavors (87 points, non-blind). Better for me than **Creekside Cellars Cabernet Franc 2010** (\$35), which uses grapes from the same Book Cliff Vineyard in Grand Valley. It was a bit cooked and dense, with a chewy, spicy finish (maybe 84 points, non-blind). Both wines came from the same vineyard source.

Most wineries in Colorado are part-timers, run by individuals and families that rely on other income to allow them these second jobs. There are only 750 acres of wine grapes in the state, mostly Merlot and Chardonnay, two varieties that do not necessarily put the state's best foot forward.

It's fun to drink wines made down the road in your home state, but will Colorado find a voice in the growing chorus of states that produce wine worth following? For now, it's still pretty much a local phenomenon.

I could agree with Schlachter that Petit Verdot has a chance to be the state's signature varietal, if enough producers can do it as well as the two I tasted.

More than a signature grape, however, what Colorado (or any incipient wine region) needs to establish is an image that will allow it to stand out from the crowd. California succeeded against an entrenched Old World wine culture when it became known for ripe flavors and likability. Whether or not its fans can articulate it, Oregon's image rests not so much on a single grape (Pinot Noir) but a clear style, a transparency that allows nuances to show through. Whether they can describe it or not, Washington fans like the balance of ripe flavors and vibrant acidity in the state's wines, whether they are Sauvignon Blancs or Syrahs, Chardonnays or Cabernets.

In this admittedly tiny sample, the better Colorado wines showed an ability to get a range of complex but fruit-centered flavors onto a friendly frame. If vine age or experience with the vineyards can result in greater depth, the state may have something.

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