

CALERA

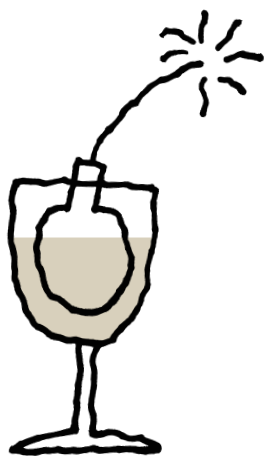
WINE OFFERING EARLY FALL 2004

BLASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE A Cautionary Tale

By Josh Jensen

Writing an essay for this Newsletter twice a year gives me two opportunities to get things off my chest. I guess I haven't had much to vent about this year, as this is the first Newsletter I've written so far in 2004. I will try to get a second mailer out around Thanksgiving -- in time for your Christmas purchases.

Today I'd like to write about the trend in U.S. winemaking, wine commentary and wine consumption -- grouped together this is



known as "the U.S. wine market" -- toward giant, top-heavy wines. Since Pinot Noir represents about 55% of Calera's production, I'm going to discuss primarily that variety, but many of the same things could be said about wine varieties we don't make, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Zinfandel and others, and also about Chardonnay, which accounts for 40% of our production. Everyone is free to draw his or her own conclusions, of course, about this

trend and whether it's bad or good, and even whether it exists or is just imagined. The comments below are just one man's opinion.

This week I and my team here at Calera are getting ready to start Calera's 30th harvest and "crush," so it seems a good time to look back over those 30 years and reflect on whether the wines being made around the world today, for the 2004 marketplace, differ from the wines we were drinking 30 years ago, and if so, how do they differ. Suddenly the picture I see seems quite shocking. It's often that way with change, which can occur so gradually over time in small, incremental steps that

it's easy to lose sight of the big picture, which can be a complete sea change. The replacement of the horse and buggy by automobiles and trucks didn't happen overnight, it took decades even in the most technologically advanced nations.

The wines I "grew up" drinking as a wine lover were all the classic French types from the vintages of the '50s and '60s: Bordeaux, Rhône, Champagnes, Alsatians but especially red and white Burgundies. (I like to call Pinot Noir the "especially" grape variety because it seems that for any general statement or rule you make about wine, you can then add the phrase "and especially with Pinot Noir.")

The red Burgundies I was lucky enough to enjoy back then, starting well before I worked in Burgundy for the 1970 and 1971 harvests, were and remain wines of subtlety, elegance and finesse, extremely beguiling, giving you sort of a come-hither glance when young, and often, if you got lucky, tremendous added complexity and subtleties 5, 10 or 15 years down the road. Only rarely, in tiny crop years, perhaps combined with the infrequent drought, did those classic red Burgundies have much heft or power, or a dark color. Whether you loved 'em or hated 'em, classic Burgundies just didn't have much color, as there's less pigment in the skins of that grape variety compared to the other red wine varieties, and the pigment or color that is present is known to be unstable. That explains why you can make champagne from Pinot Noir. In fact, about 75% of the total volume of French Champagne comes from Pinot Noir.

I loved red Burgundies then, and I love them still. Such wines were always the classic model, the reference points for winemakers in Burgundy and around the world who committed their careers to trying to make the finest Pinot Noir possible. Ever since, when our wines turn out to have the properties I have just tried to describe, I'm thrilled. An important part of this classic model was that the wines be capable of improving, that is, developing additional complexities and nuances in both aroma and flavor over periods of many years.

Imagine my horror, then, to see the trend that has occurred over the last 30 years, and which seems to have accelerated greatly in the last 5 years, toward a style I will call Blaster-Smasher (or Smasher-Blaster) Pinots: exceptionally dark, cloying, overblown sledgehammer wines that are unlike anything you could find in a wine shop 30 years

ago. (The term Blaster-Smasher is not yet in general currency, as I only came up with it last night). These present-day behemoths, which to me are cartoonish freaks, the Pamela Lee Andersons of the wine world, draw raves from all the U.S. publications nowadays, and are avidly sought by collectors here and, therefore, by the wine trade.

I certainly hope that this long-term trend away from classically proportioned wines and toward the Smasher-Blaster concept, which I deplore in the strongest terms, will turn out simply as part of a cyclical fashion swing, like short skirts to long and back to short, or wide neckties to narrow, then back to wide. At some point, hopefully, sanity will return to the wine market and everyone will go back to making, and drinking, classically proportioned wines that go well with your lunch and dinner, elegant wines that encourage you to have another glass, unlike these trendy flamethrowers that make you feel you've been given an overdose of something after 2 sips.

For now, the pendulum has swung so far in the direction of the monsters that it looks like the pendulum has come completely off its hinge. These Smasher-Blasters, often called Fruit Bombs, are mostly one-dimensional, simple but potent beverages that will merely lose their fruit, their main if not their only appeal, with the passing years and just turn into....mud. Expensive mud. And dull, to boot.

Many of the wineries making this style of wine are quite new to the game. I think of these new breed eager winemakers as the Blasters of the Universe, making their ultra-dark, mouth-exploding Pinots that burst through the old boundaries and seem to be trying to flex their muscles. I can't imagine that these fairly recent start-up wineries ever looked to classically proportioned Burgundies as their inspiration and model. Instead, it seems to me, they've set out to make wines that can go toe to toe with \$5 Australian Shirazes such as Yellowtail. They've aimed at a reference point that is huge, ripe, rich, almost black in color, with bucketloads of fruitiness but little else. Only problem is, the Blaster-Smasher Pinots don't sell for 5 or 6 bucks, they're \$35 or \$50 or more.

Now, I want to point out that I've purchased and enjoyed a few bottles of Yellowtail Shiraz, and also their Cabernet Sauvignon and their Chardonnay. They're tasty and flavorful, and thus provide simple pleasure, as does a glass of orange juice or pineapple juice.

So how do the Blasters of the Universe manage to turn out such ultra-dark, massive tasting blockbusters from a grape variety, Pinot Noir, that has always been known, and often excoriated, for making lighter-hued, lighter-bodied reds no matter how hard you tried to make them otherwise?

I think there are 3 ways. The first is to plant any of the popular new clonal selections of the Pinot Noir grape variety that have been developed, or selected, in France in recent years. These are often referred to as the new Dijon clones, not because they taste like mustard but because Dijon, the biggest city in Burgundy, is the location of the experimental plant breeding station where these hip, trendy clones were selected, developed and from which they have been disseminated. These clones are known by designations such as 667, 777, 115, Pommard 5 and the like, so if you're at dinner or a wine tasting and the conversation veers in the direction of a paint-by-the-number code talking, you'll know you've fallen in with a rough crowd. The Dijon researchers sought out from within the varied vines growing in the vineyards they were working with, the darkest-skinned vines they could find, and these are, essentially, how they came up with the "new" clonal selections. An extra advantage, particularly for the growers in Burgundy, was that these vine selections routinely ripened their grapes a week or 10 days before the traditional plantings, and a week in Burgundy, where the weather can turn beastly in October or even in September, can be the difference between a successful harvest and a washout.

So the new clones will give you darker Pinot Noir wines that are also fruitier and ripen earlier.

The second way to make the wines darker is by a non-traditional method first introduced to Burgundy about 20 years ago by a wine-making consultant named Guy Accad. His radical suggestion was to give the grape juice a "cold soak" (maceration à froid in French) by dropping the temperature of the grape must (newly crushed grapes just after they've arrived at the winery and have been put into a fermentation tank) to 35° or 40° F. and to keep it there for a week or as long as 2 weeks. You also have to put a relatively elevated level of the anti-oxidant sulfur dioxide into the must at that time to prevent any spoilage from occurring during this long "cold soak."

A temperature that low blocks the fermentation from starting, so the grape juice that will eventually ferment into wine sits all that

time in contact with the grape skins, extracting more and more color with every passing day. Then at some point the winemaker warms up the must and allows the fermentation to take off, and the juice/must/wine gets additional color during all that time. You end up with much darker wines than the traditional method which allows the fermentation to start right away. But my friends and colleagues in Burgundy, who are some of the greatest and most famous winemakers there, are horrified by the use of cold soak because after tasting many examples (I haven't) they tell me that cold-soaked wines all tasted alike. That is, the unique differences and subtleties, the distinction that each wine can derive from being grown on a unique spot of land, are erased, and the wines all taste the same.

So at Calera we have always used classical Burgundian methods, and we always will, with no cold soak. We want our native yeasts that grow naturally in these parts to get our fermentations off and running by the second, or at the latest the third, day after the tank has been filled.

A third way of making Pinot Noirs unusually dark, over-the-top fruity, fat and juicy is the biggest heresy of all: blending in another grape variety. I will venture the guess that the wineries using this sacrilegious trick do it with Syrah/Shiraz. No one I know and respect in Burgundy would even think of doing such a travesty even on an experimental basis, and these are open-minded guys who are willing to try out new ideas or experiment with this or that variant on their normal protocols. But putting another grape variety into a great Pinot Noir? Lunacy! Malpractice! It completely breaks the magic that is Pinot Noir. It's an absolute taboo.

The Syrah will make the wine darker, but the wine is no longer Pinot Noir. It becomes a blended thing, an artifact, instead of an honest expression of the earth.

People have suggested to me that we should try making a Smasher-Blaster or two just to show that we can do it, to catch the wave. Some of those same, well-intentioned folks have from time to time over the years also suggested that we try planting and/or making the most popular grape variety, Cabernet Sauvignon. But we're not going to do either of those things. We're staying true to our philosophy, and to the original vision that has sustained Calera for all these years: growing and making distinctive, classic wines from unique vineyards, and relishing the subtle differences as well as the similarities between them.