

# My Wines of the Year

**E**very year at this time I look back at the many wines I've tasted and drank. Some of this year's wines were awfully fine, while others were decidedly forgettable. Chances are, you could say the same.

When I began to put together the candidates for "My Wines of the Year," a pattern emerged that was unintentional but—paging Dr. Freud!—surely present in the subconscious. That pattern was "wines of surprise."

The surprise, it turns out, was a function of expectations. In one instance (a Spanish cava), my expectations were low indeed. I'm not much on bubbles to begin with and even less so when they're of the Spanish sort. Another involved a wine from a vineyard that previously underperformed. Suddenly, a wine bursts into glorious life, delivering a sense of surprise and delight. Is there anything better than that for a wine lover? I don't think so.

**Torre Oria Brut Cava NV** If you had said to me last year that I'd be praising a Spanish sparkler, let alone citing it as one of my Wines of the Year, I'd have told you, as gently as I could, that you were nuts. My mistake.

So what's this wine got that so rocked my palate? In a word, flavor. To me, most Spanish sparklers taste like liquid Melba toast. Here, however, is something unusual: a 100 percent Macabeo sparkler. (Most cavas are blends of Macabeo, Parellada and Xarello.)

Macabeo, by the way, is also known as Viura when it's grown in the Rioja zone. It's the foundation of most white Rioja wines. But I've never come across a 100 percent Macabeo sparkling wine before. And what a good idea it is. Torre Oria Brut NV is a surprisingly (there's that word) rich, flavorful wine delivering scents and tastes of lemon curd, citrus and a note of honey. Really, it's a world-beater.

**Bodega Mendel Malbec Mendoza 2008** After spending three months this year in Buenos Aires, and touring all over Argentina, it was inevitable that one or another Malbec would make my Wines of the Year list. Certainly the wines of Achával-Ferrer



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were top contenders (and I presented that producer's single-vineyard Mendoza Malbec Finca Bella Vista at this year's Wine Experience). But the Malbec that I drank more of than any other while in Argentina was Mendel.

The "surprise" of Mendel Malbec is its detailed austerity, a feature rare in Malbecs in Argentina. The flavor is as substantial as Argentina's best. But the delivery is Savile Row—restrained.

Winemaker (and minority partner) Roberto de la Mota makes the wine, from vines that are between 60 and 80 years old, in an unusual fashion: Each vineyard is divided into multiple small sections. The grapes in each are harvested at several markedly different ripeness levels and are fermented and barrel-aged separately. Only shortly before bottling does de la Mota create the blend.

The 2008 vintage made some exceptional wines in Mendoza, including this one—vibrant yet restrained, polished and detailed, with a discernible minerality. This is a Malbec for those for whom classified-growth Bordeaux is

the benchmark. It's that refined—and that good.

**Rancho Arroyo Grande Mourvèdre 2007** Talk about a surprise. I visited this large property (3,400 acres, with 209 acres of vines) years ago when it was owned by Gary and Thereza Verboon. The vineyard had promise but the wines were unsatisfying. The site itself—tucked into the easternmost tip of the small Arroyo Grande AVA near the hills of the Santa Lucia Wilderness—is so removed that it's very nearly feral.

In 2007 the property was sold to the Conway family, which has applied a different level of ambition, demonstrated by its 2007 Mourvèdre. Now, Mourvèdre is hardly a red grape variety ardently pursued in California (it's famous in Provence's Bandol district). But this wine could give a top Bandol a run for its euro: dense, elegant, suffused with Mourvèdre's signature spice and dust notes yet devoid of the sometimes excessive hardness that can accompany Mourvèdre's famously tough tannins. Regrettably, just 125 cases could be eked out from the dry-farmed vines' yield of .25 tons per acre. But as a signal, if you will, of a potentially great vineyard site (the superb Saucelito Canyon Vineyard is contiguous, by the way), this is a wine and a winery that you should know about.

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