

■ WENDY VAN DIVER

A Wallflower's Perspective

We've all heard this over and over again: Great wine is born in the vineyard. Now, after attending the 2016 Vintage Perspective Tasting hosted by the Napa Valley Vintners, I believe that it's also coming from the corners of the room.

This was the first year I participated in the Premiere Napa Valley tasting event. I attended with a group of professional colleagues with whom I'd spent the previous few days conferring at The Symposium for Professional Wine Writers at Meadowood Napa Valley. We were bused to Charles Krug Winery first thing in the morning and climbed the concrete stairs of Charles Krug's Carriage House to an expansive room featuring a dozen long tables. Each table was set with 12 decanters in groups of three. Each decanter, filled with a Napa Valley wine, was marked with a number and a vintage year. We had been given notebooks and pens to record tasting notes, so I stepped up to the first open spot to start my evaluation.

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present the Napa Valley. To me, they were all simply great wines.

As I tasted, I observed others evaluating the wines. Besides my fellow writers, there were sommeliers and buyers for restaurants from around the country. For them, this presentation was a great opportunity to taste many Napa Valley Cabernets side by side. They were marking their favorites and flipping to the back page of their notebooks, where they could learn the names of each winery. Some were looking the wines up online. But, not I. After tasting the 2013, 2012 and 2011 vintages from several wineries, my palate stalled.

"Something's missing," I muttered to myself. I stepped back against a wall to hydrate and regroup. Standing there on the sidelines, I watched the other "analysts" and pondered over what was bothering me. The wines I had sampled certainly had different attributes, and they all were stellar wines in their own right. Yet sitting there naked in their decanters, void of their bottles, labels and backstories, they lacked something. For a moment, I was resolved to become a wallflower and simply watch the others as I nursed my palate with sips of water. But then something drew my eye to a dark corner.

"Winery No. 6, 2013," I began. I sniffed, swirled, tasted, spit, made a few notes and moved on to the 2012. Slowly, I made my way around the room. The wines were chosen for a number of attributes, primarily for how well they represent their vintages and how well they repre-

There, behind a banquet table with signs similar to those found at a science fair, a woman talked with animated gestures to a small group of wine tasters. I drew nearer and soon learned that she was a winemaker, and she—along with three other Napa Valley winemakers—had set up small exhibits to demonstrate the experimental aspect of what they do.

At one table, Domaine Chandon's winemaker Pauline Lhost was pouring samples of base wines made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier and offering samples of wines that received different dosages to start secondary fermentation. At another, winemaker Julie Hagler Lumgair of Ideology Cellars was explaining the nuances of native versus inoculated yeasts in Chardonnay from the rare See Clone from Red Hen Vineyard in the Napa Valley. In another corner, Yannick Rousseau, the winemaker and owner of Y Rousseau Wines, was demonstrating the impact of stirring the lees on Chardonnay. At his side, winemaker Andy Schweiger displayed renderings of his uniquely shaped fermentation vessel, which he hopes will produce rounder tannins, expand aromas and enhance mid-palate characteristics better than the traditional stainless steel tank.

Here, in the dark corners of the room, I discovered what I'd been missing. Invention. Innovation. Enthusiasm. Commitment. These qualities come not from the vineyard, but from the hearts and minds of individuals who are truly passionate about winemaking. Through ideas and experimentation, these winemakers' will make a lasting impact on future vintages.

Great wines may indeed come from the vineyard, but without people, we would just have grapes. The winemakers who shared their trials with us at this year's Vintage Perspective Tasting are fueled by their passion for winemaking. I'm excited to see where their passions lead. It's not likely we'll find them in the corners for long. 🍷

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