



Stephen Webster

Best of 2007: Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

The Pursuit of Perfection

In 2007, These 15 Wines Hit Just the Right Note; What Makes It 'Delicious'

EARLIER THIS YEAR, we conducted a tasting of Penfolds Grange, Australia's most famous wine, from 10 vintages. The 2001 was so special that it earned a rating of Delicious!, a rare honor. A month after the tasting, we taped an online video segment about Grange, so we opened another bottle of the 2001 for the camera. With the first sip, we were both speechless. Incredibly, this bottle was even better. When we finally spoke, John declared it "absolutely flawless." Dottie called it "profound." It was like the most perfect piece of music you've ever heard, with each instrument offering its distinct voice but all of the elements working together in perfect harmony. Ultimately, it was the kind of wine that reminded us that truly great wine is made by God, not by man.

What makes a wine Delicious? Thinking that it was touched by God is a pretty good start.

We taste, blind, around 2,000 wines a year for this column. We enjoy wine, so we find something to like about most wines, and we always have. When we began drinking wine together more than 30 years ago, we kept notes on all of our wines and concluded by ranking them Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious or Delicious! Those ratings mean pretty much exactly what they say. When we

started writing this column almost a decade ago, we simply continued our personal rating system in the index.

In 2007, one wine—the 2001 Grange—rated Delicious! and 14 others rated Delicious. This means that fewer than 1% of the wines we tasted rated Delicious or better, which is pretty typical of our tasting experience through the years. In other words, we like many wines, but wines that stand out far above the rest are rare.

The Best of 2007

What are the various elements that, added together, make a wine Delicious? Obviously, it needs to taste good. That seems simple, but it's too fundamental not to mention. It should have balance, so that no single taste or characteristic overwhelms the others. It should have depth and complexity, so there are various layers of tastes that reveal themselves over time and keep our interest. It should taste like its type—Sauvignon Blanc should taste like Sauvignon Blanc, not like Chardonnay—but it should take the tastes of its peers to another level, perhaps purer or more focused. It should have a sense of place; tasting it, we should be able to imagine it growing in the vineyards of Tuscany or the Barossa Valley. It should taste like fruit—

this is grape juice, after all—but we should also have a sense that the winemaker had a vision of the wine, some sense of what he or she was trying to accomplish, from the vineyard to the bottle. A good deal of luck goes into a great wine—the winemaker can't control the weather, after all—but great wine is no accident.

A wine that's Delicious will make us notice it, not because it's flashy and slaps us in the face, but because we will know, somewhere deep down, that it tastes both familiar and different—and better. That haunting sense will make us stop and try to figure out what's so special about it.

Many wines that are Delicious are expensive. There's a reason for this. Good land, small yields, good oak, personal attention—things like that cost money. But just because a wine is expensive certainly doesn't mean it will be Delicious. And just because a wine is inexpensive doesn't mean it won't be Delicious. One of our Delicious wines of the year cost \$13.50. It was Bernardus Winery Sauvignon Blanc 2005. In a broad blind tasting of American Sauvignon Blanc, it rose to the top and planted a flag on the hill: It got everything right—the varietal tastes of Sauvignon Blanc with a backbone that gave the wine gravitas far beyond its price.

Age certainly can help make a wine Delicious. Some people argue that certain fine wines are "undrinkable" in their youth. That's cute but silly. A wine that's truly undrinkable today isn't going to be Delicious down the road. Great wines can be Delicious even in infancy, but Delicious in a different, more challenging way than they will be when they are mature and comfortable with themselves and all of their elements. Beautiful wines such as the 2004 Château Mouton Rothschild are already a treat and already Delicious. Fully enjoying them at this point, however, can take some effort, and they will certainly be better in time, when they knit together and add the kind of complexity that we often refer to as wisdom. In fact, in 2007 we went back and retasted the first-growth Bordeaux from 1995 and rated two of them Delicious. They are the same two that topped our lists when we first tasted them back in 1998, but they are both still gaining depth and becoming easier and easier to love. The 2001 Grange is gorgeous, but in a couple of decades it will be both gorgeous and wise and, really, how rare is that?

GENUINELY EXCITING

In our lifetime of drinking wine, few bottles have rated Delicious! Those are wines, like that 2001 Grange, that are not only flavorful, complex and beautifully made, but genuinely exciting, the kind of wines that we talk about endlessly but still never describe adequately because their beauty goes beyond words.

Finally, the most important thing about Delicious wines: It's all about you. Just because we find a wine Delicious doesn't mean that you will. The taste of wine is subjective. One of our Delicious wines of 2007 was a Viognier. This is an unusual, somewhat challenging white wine, and when we found one that wore its tastes proudly, with the focus of a laser, we stood up and cheered—but, in fact, we know that many people simply wouldn't like any Viognier. This is why it's so important to find your own Delicious wines. Read our column, look at wine magazines, talk to merchants, but in the long run the only wines that will truly be Delicious to you are the ones that touch your soul and no one—not even you, until it happens—knows which those will be.

Wine, to us, is an everyday treat. A wine doesn't have to be Delicious to be special to us because we pretty much always enjoy the drinking it. And the time we spend together enjoying it. But knowing that one out of every 100 or so really will be something we'll always remember, a taste that will always stay with us, adds an extra element of excitement and wonder that we cherish in wine.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column.

WSJ.com

Watch John and Dottie taste and talk about Delicious wines of 2007, at WSJ.com/Tastings.

Delicious Wines of 2007

Among the many wines we tasted for this column in 2007, 15 earned our highest praise. The 2001 Grange was the only wine rated Delicious!, our top ranking. Fourteen others, including four other vintages of Grange, rated Delicious. The Grange is listed first in this list as the top wine of the year; the rest are listed in order of price. These are the notes we included with our original columns about the wines. The prices listed here were representative when the columns were published. These specific wines would be very difficult to find, but there are Delicious wines on shelves every day. Follow your own palate and you will find them.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE	PRICE	TASTERS' COMMENTS
Penfolds Grange 2001 Australia	\$225	Black pepper, cedar, earth and rich, concentrated fruit. Intense blackberry, blueberry and black-cherry fruit with pinpoint clarity and perfect balance of fruit, oak and acidity. Real guts, real structure. In a tasting of 10 vintages of Grange, we also rated as Delicious the 1971, 1987, 1990 and 1995 (\$295 to \$995).
Bernardus Winery Sauvignon Blanc 2005 (Monterey County) U.S.	\$13.50	Filled with fruit, with richness and mouthfeel, especially in the middle and back of the mouth. A wine of finesse and some stature, even as it retains its varietal tastes.
Incognito Viognier (Michael-David Winery) 2005 (Lodi) U.S.	\$18.99	Real clarity, with peaches, almonds and pure, clean tastes of good fruit. Sophisticated and memorable.
Ramey Wine Cellars 'Hyde Vineyard' Chardonnay 2004 (Napa Valley, Carneros) U.S.	\$59	Fine wine. Fills the mouth with fruit and some butter, but it's so focused and balanced that it's easy to drink, with a kind of lemon-lime-fruit-oak taste. Bright as sunshine.
Podere Salicetti 'Piaggione' Brunello di Montalcino 2001 Italy	\$78	Earthy, tight and filled with sun-baked minerals and bittersweet chocolate. Brawny and lusty. Powerful, but tightly wound, with great acidity.
Peter Michael Winery 'La Carrière' Chardonnay 2004 (Sonoma County, Knights Valley) U.S.	\$125	A complete wine, very American, very proud, very balanced. Great rich fruit, sparkling acidity and judicious use of oak. What Chardonnay can be.
Kistler Vineyards 'Durell Vineyard' Chardonnay 2004 (Sonoma Valley) U.S.	\$140	Great restraint and serious class, with Chablis-like intensity and focus, good minerals and plenty of elegance, especially on the long, clean finish. A California Chardonnay with real terror.
Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon 'Cask 23' 2002 (Napa Valley) U.S.	\$170	Tightly wound and powerful. Great fruit, but well-controlled, with lovely blackberries, blueberries and minerals. Exciting to drink as it dances along all the edges.
Château Mouton Rothschild 2004 (Paulliac) France	\$225.50	The richest, deepest, earthiest Mouton we've had, with concentrated, super-rich fruit, terrific balancing acidity and all sorts of layers. Soul-satisfying.
Château Lafite Rothschild 1995 (Paulliac) France	\$425	Great nose of cedar, black cherries, earth, oak and even some black olives. Serious, earthy wine, with a dark hardness about it, and some tight tannins that explode in the back of the mouth. Classy and elegant.
Château Margaux 1995 (Margaux) France	\$525	Intense, structured, blackberry fruit, still young and tight. Minerals, sandalwood and all sorts of layers. This really sticks to all the right places, Dottie said, which isn't classic wine-speak but gives a sense of the sensual pleasure of the wine. A genuine first-growth experience. Tasted twice; the first bottle wasn't as good.