

## DUNNE ON WINE Here's what is pleasing the palate so far in '07

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“Best of” lists are a staple of the news business, especially at the end of the year.

But why wait?

Last year, over at my blog – [www.SacTicket.com/appetizers](http://www.SacTicket.com/appetizers) – I introduced a feature called “10 Best Wines of the Year, So Far,” which I’d periodically update as even more impressive wines crossed my palate.

So far this year, I haven’t done it, but halfway through 2007 seems like a good time to start.

The introductory list for 2007 is based on tastings at home, restaurants and wine competitions over the past six months.

And instead of kicking it off at the blog, I’m doing it here.

● **Forefathers 2006 Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$16):** OK, I’m crazy about the zestiness of New Zealand sauvignon blancs, but they can be an acquired rather than an immediate taste. And some people may never acquire a taste for this

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over-the-top representative of the genre. It’s got all the grapefruit and lime fruit and zippy acidity you’d want in a New Zealand sauvignon blanc, and then about 50 percent more. Approach

gingerly.

● **Foley Estates Vineyard 2005 Santa Rita Hills Rancho Santa Rosa Pinot Noir (\$40):**

In a blind tasting of recently released pinot noirs from various regions of California, this Santa Barbara County entry was far and away the most characteristic and persistent. Medium bodied, with lush cherry/berry fruit and a silken texture, it’s simply one unusually elegant and proud pinot noir.

● **Simi 2003 Alexander Valley Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65):** I’ve long favored Alexander Valley cabernet sauvignons for their accessibility, even when they’re young. This one certainly lives up to that expectation, but it also possesses more complexity than what usually is found in cabernets from the Alexander Valley. The fruit runs to cherries and plums, with notes of eucalyptus and cedar that become more evident as the wine opens. Overall, the wine is all about grandeur, which never faded during the course of a meal.

● **C.G. Di Arie 2005 Shenandoah Valley Estate Primitivo (\$20):** By DNA profiling, primitivo and zinfandel are the same variety of grape. Yet they yield marginally different styles of wine. In a blind tasting, this primitivo may or may not be taken for zinfandel. Regardless, it’s one voluptuous red wine, generous with both fruit and oak, with a smell and flavor that can vary from berries and cherries to roses and smoked meat. Save it for when the centerpiece of the dinner menu is husky and wintry, such as prime rib.

● **PreVail 2003 Back Forty (\$80):** PreVail is a relatively new brand by Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery in the Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma

County. The PreVail 2003 Back Forty, however, is based on cabernet sauvignon grown on low-yielding vines on the back side of Rock Rise Mountain in Alexander Valley. Blended with syrah and cabernet franc, the wine is monumental yet readily drinkable, its fruit sweet and juicy and its build muscular yet gentle. A lot goes on with this wine – a suggestion of minerals here, a note of spice there – and its complexity and length will leave you wondering how in the world such a big wine could disappear so fast.

● **Scott Harvey Wines 2005 “Vineyard 1869” Amador County Zinfandel (\$35):** To my palate, no wine is more unassuming and friendly at the dinner table than Chianti Classico. It combines the sunny radiance and good-natured bite of the most memorable kind of dining companion. California zinfandel isn’t Chianti Classico, but this Amador County wine has the same effect, engaging you and making you happy. We took a bottle to have with pizza at Gianni’s Trattoria along J Street not long ago, and the pairing transported us right back to the Chianti Classico and pizza we shared at a sidewalk cafe in Rome, but with not so many scooters about. The wine shows just how fresh, sleek and balanced zinfandel can be when in the right hands. Little was made, and it can be difficult to find, but the winery has a tasting room in Sutter Creek.

● **Mumm Napa 2001 Napa Valley Grand Année Brut (\$30):** When I tasted this wine blind at the recent California State Fair commercial wine competition, I noted on my form: “Anniversary wine!” It’s that special. It’s dry, crisp and elegant, with a smell that suggests a mound of freshly kneaded bread dough rising on



a marble slab on the kitchen counter in wintry sunshine. Unfortunately, it's so special that it can be found only at the winery.

● **Laurenz V. 2005 Kamptal "Charming" Grüner Veltliner (\$25):** When I first wrote of this composed but vital Austrian release in May, I said no other wine I'd tasted that season had said "spring" with more grace and joy. Its mature stonefruit flavor, floral smell, peppery spice and uplifting acidity would be just as welcome in the summer, especially during a heat wave like last week's.

● **Chasing Venus 2006 Marlborough Comely Bank Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc (\$17):** Not as assertive as the Forefathers mentioned earlier, but nonetheless reeling with suggestions of grapefruit, pimento and lime. Its acidity goes beyond tingling to nearly effervescence, and in length it mimics the inspiration for the name of the brand – Capt. James Cook's first voyage to the Pacific Ocean aboard the Endeavour between 1768 and 1771, when he recorded the transit of the planet Venus

across the sun for England's Royal Society.

● **Sierra Vista Vineyards & Winery 2005 El Dorado Fleur de Montagne (\$25):** Sierra Vista had three candidates in the sweepstakes round at the El Dorado County Fair commercial wine competition this spring, a remarkable accomplishment. I liked them all, but the one that has lingered longest in memory is the Fleur de Montagne, winemaker John MacCready's emulation of Chateauneuf-du-Pape, the complex blend from France's Rhone Valley. MacCready uses several of the same grape varieties – grenache, syrah, mourvedre and cinsault – to create a refined and buoyant take on the style. Fleur de Montagne, incidentally, is French for "flowers of the mountain," an apt name for a bright red wine with the versatility to accompany chicken and salmon as well as venison and lamb.



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