

# Dan Berger's Vintage Experiences

## The Weekly Wine Commentary

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# Wine Without Meat

**W**ine and food pairings have been a major topic among wine lovers in the United States (and I'm sure elsewhere) since about the 1980s.

I first began to hear queries about this back then and many wine writers and even food people began to chat about it.

First came the old dictum, "White wine with fish and red with meat," a totally simplistic remark that long ago was debunked so regularly it's now a cliché.

Books have been devoted to the topic of wine-and-food pairings, and most people point out the absurdity of any sort of simple solution.

The worst coverage of this topic is on television.

I have seen many mid-morning chuckle sessions that addressed aspects of the wine-food pairing, often with a guest coming into the studio to "shock" the host with a pairing no one ever thought of before (uh, *right!*), usually involving some sort of beverage that the guest is there to promote. Like bacon-and-chocolate-flavored beer, or kimchee cider.

Decades ago I read a column on wine-food pairings in which the writer basically debunked the concept of wine with vegetarian food, saying it was a lost cause. "Drink tea, he said.

He was clearly not alone. At the time, most people thought of vegetarianism as a fad usually related to a cult of some sort that cared more about the soul than the food. Brown rice was next to godliness; breakfast

had to include a smoothie made with grass.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many people thought veganism was nothing more than a form of soil and soul worship practiced by people who ascetically treated food as an objectionable necessity that ought not taste any good at all so as to get the most self-flagellation benefit out of it.

Even if that were largely true, it all has changed. Vegetarianism is today a legitimate, thoughtful way to dine for a fast-growing segment of Americans. And vegans seem a lot saner to me than I ever saw in the 1970s when eating granola was seen as subversive and un-American.

Today most people who have half a brain (or more) see that eating such a diet regularly is generally considered far more healthful than the way the average American eats—obsessed with bacon (we wrote about this and its connection to wine many months ago) as well as processed foods of all sorts, complete with their salts, sugars, unhealthy fats, and additives.

More and more people now are heeding the advice of dieticians and heart specialists by eating more veggies and fruits, and eschewing "bad" foods. One walk past the refrigerators and freezer cases at a Trader Joe's store reveals how extensive this movement has become. Meatless meatballs and sausages and "chick'n tenders" that never harmed a fowl.

The recent government report

(See *Meatless* on page 2)

## Chocolate Variations

Last week's discussion of the differences between real and faux bagels, coffee, and olive oils soon led me to see the radical differences in another popular food product.

Chocolate can be bought in widely differing styles, the major ones being milk chocolate and dark chocolate.

The former can be broken down into various sub-groups, including my least favorite, American milk chocolate. It was developed by Milton Hershey roughly 85 years ago and it has a taste profile that differs greatly from the milk chocolates found in Europe.

Of the various kinds of dark chocolates we see on store shelves, the Swiss, Dutch, and Belgians have always taken great pride in their versions.

In most of Europe at least a dozen different versions of chocolate are seen as perfectly valid. Each is made to hit a certain taste profile.

Beyond that there are white chocolate and flavored chocolates, many of which are hated by chocolate purists.

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## Meatless

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about the dangers in bacon, hot dogs, and other cured meats may have sounded like scare tactics, but the science behind this stuff is real and verifiably accurate.

Beyond vegetarianism, there are those who are not strictly vegetarian but eat that way most of the time and who add a small amount of fish to their diets, so-called pescatarians. No red meats, but an occasional shrimp or haddock.

How does wine work with this kind of food?

From our experience, pretty well, all things equal, as long as you know the basic rules. It starts with the fact that true vegetarians will probably find more satisfaction with white wines (such as aromatic wines) and lighter reds than with heavy reds.

You have far more choices if you're cooking at home than if you order a vegetarian or vegan dish at a restaurant, especially at a place that

doesn't cook this way all that often.

This is a massive topic that ought to be addressed in a book. Some food web sites address this in general ways, but few are very specific. Here are a few basic ideas that recently came to mind (and see also the article on Page 4):

—Many restaurants that do not do vegetarian foods often cook it to be bland on the theory that diners who are vegetarian do not want strong flavors. Result: be prepared for some unexciting vegetarian food from such places.

—Soups, stews, and the like often are a way for a restaurant to offer a veggie (or especially vegan) option by making the stock from mushrooms or other non-meat ingredients. But in many cases, a soup may sound vegetarian, but isn't.

For instance, we always ask if a soup (such as minestrone) was made with a base that included meat.

About 75% of the time we learn that meat was the base.

The same is true with many reduction sauces: A dish may indicate it's made from vegetables, but if you ask, you may find out the sauce was made from a reduction of veal bones.

—Vinegar often is used in making vegetarian dishes, notably in marinated foods. Two cautions: First, if the vinegar is of poor quality, the marinade could be too strong (volatile) for any wine. And beware of flavored vinegars. It's not uncommon to see a dish use a fruit vinegar, which could destroy the wine choice.

—Portobello mushrooms do have a favor not unlike meat, but they also contain a lot of moisture. Be prepared for inexperienced chefs who under-grill Portobello mushrooms, or cook them in a pan where the liquid drips out and detracts from the dish.

## Syrah Lovers

Grange, Australia's iconic Rhône Valley reflection, is one of the longest-lived reds in the world, and set the paradigm for literally hundreds of warmer-climate Syrah-based wines.

In the last decade or so, a fast-growing movement toward a new paradigm, featuring colder climate fruit, has given Syrah a new image.

We have written here in the past

of Syrah efforts from Hawkes Bay and Martinborough in New Zealand as well as from the Russian River Valley (i.e., Dan Goldfield); the Petaluma Gap (i.e., Three Sticks), Santa Lucia Highlands (i.e., Morgan); Southern Oregon's Umpqua Valley (i.e., Reustle Prayer Rock), and Edna Valley (i.e., Qupé from Bob Lindquist).

There are clearly other cold-

climate regions capable of making a statement with Syrah that has more of a Côte-Rôtie earthiness, and this week I tasted a number of these wines, all from Oded Shakked, wine maker for his Longboard Vineyards that uses Russian River Valley fruit.

Shakked, former sparkling wine specialist at J in Russian River, has a passion for Syrah that few people have, and his approach adds yet another new look to cool-climate Syrah production.

In fact, all of his Longboard wines are classic examples of the Russian River area and reflect his deft touch with tannin handling, moderate alcohols, and wines of personality.

During our meeting, Shakked revealed that making sparkling wine

*(See **Syrah** on page 3)*

## Wine of the Week

2014 **Longboard** Sauvignon Blanc, Russian River Valley (\$20): When you grow Sauvignon Blanc in a cool region, you can make an herbal statement, as this wine does. But instead of doing one with New Zealand green olive and gooseberry aromas, here the wine splits the difference with a load of California-like spice notes and only a trace of the "peepee du chat" that can occur in colder regions. A sensational and reasonably priced Sauvignon, part of which was aged very briefly in neutral oak. A wonderful cooler-climate SB.

# Tasting Notes

The wines below were tasted open over the last three days.

## Exceptional

2013 **Longboard** Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, “Mystos” (\$55): One of the top PNs you can find that offers a Burgundian earthiness along with fresh and dried raspberry fruit, a trace of oak and a spice note that adds real personality. Wine maker Oded Shakked says the fruit is from a great RRV vineyard that he declines to identify.

2013 **Longboard** Merlot, Russian River Valley, Dakine Vineyard (\$30): A stunning and complete wine that shows olive, green tea, bright red cherry fruit, and has a long, rich finish without much tannin. Excellent balance.

NV **Longboard** Brut Rosé, Russian River Valley (\$48): Pale in its “partridge eye” color, this bubbly is a superb New World style of wine with red cherry nuances in

the aroma, and a succulence from very little sugar, but a partial malolactic and some barrel aging.

2013 **Savage Coast** Syrah, Russian River Valley (Longboard) (\$68): Dark, dense, and handsomely structured to work with food—but not for another few years. This just-bottled wine of complexity and depth has trace amounts of Grenache, Petite Sirah, Malbec, Carignan and Zinfandel. Best in a decade because it’s tannins now are a bit on the gripping side!

2013 **Longboard** Syrah, Russian River Valley, Ledbetter Family Vineyard (\$49): Aged in Russian oak barrels, this exotic, distinctive Syrah has huge, juicy red and black fruit aromatics and plenty of tannin for aging. It also has a solid 3.6 pH for holding, allowing it to improve.

2012 **Longboard** Syrah, Russian River Valley (\$30): This “regular”

bottling, with broader distribution, has excellent red berry fruits and a hint of oak, is more approachable, and still would be best in 2-3 more years.

NV **Longboard** Brut Cuvée, Russian River Valley (\$42): A classy sparkling wine that is spiced, rich (from a partial ML), and yet dry. The wine has only 7 grams per liter of r.s., but remains succulent.

NV **Longboard** Late Harvest Semillon, North Coast (\$42/500-ml bottle): Botrytis-affected Semillon can make a sublime wine and here the faint tropical aroma with dried peach and pear is offset by a trace of dried figs, clover honey and dried apricot. The flavors include caramel and Asian pears, and the wine’s excellent acidity reminds me of ice wine.

[www.longboardvineyards.com](http://www.longboardvineyards.com)

## Syrah

*(Continued from page 2)*

was more difficult than making table wines.

“It takes far more intuition than making table wines,” he said, adding that the one thing he seeks out when doing a blending-tasting session for any wine is a wine with a tiny flaw.

“Its not a flawed wine that I’m looking for, but it’s a lot of wine that isn’t quite right. I never really feel comfortable until I find that wine.”

A small amount of such a wine can be used to add a bit of intrigue to any wine, he said.

As for his Syrah, he makes five of them in most years, and rarely do they top 14% alcohol as he seeks a unique Syrah-ness and an age-

worthiness.

Russian River Valley offers a generally cooler climate, leading to wines that start with a better acidity than do warmer climes.

Tasting through a range of the Longboard wines, I was struck by how their cool climate natures seemed to show through like a beacon. The soil-y charm of the wines was fascinating.

The night before, we had a chance to try some of the older vintages of Reustle as Stephen and Gloria, his wife, opened seven of them dating back to the 2004.

The cool climate in Oregon’s Umpqua Valley leads to a more assertive black pepper and violet

aroma in the Syrah, and the great 2005 we tried was a stunner with its purity of blackberry fruit.

As we have said here recently, the 2013 Reustle Syrah (\$32) is a great wine worth cellaring. More on this superb house another day.

See above for Longboard tasting notes.

### Bargain of the Week

2013 **Francis Ford Coppola** Claret, California “Diamond Collection” (\$15): Attractive Cabernet aromas and flavors and a nicely structured wine that is ripe, but not fat or clumsy. Only 13.5% alcohol. Often discounted to \$12 or so.

# Vegetarian Options

Green's at Fort Mason in San Francisco was one of the nation's first vegetarian gourmet eateries, and it remains a standard by which all other places can be judged.

A glance at its sample menu (<http://greensrestaurant.com/wp-content/gallery/dinner/Dinner.jpg>) will give you a hint of the creativity that's aimed at its also-terrific wine list.

There are vegetarian places all across the country, mainly in larger cities, and one vegan place we have liked in the past was Millennium, now in a new Berkeley location. (We have not yet been to the new location.)

What vegetarian food goes best with wine? First on this list are Italian cafés where pizza, pastas, and other traditional fare are easy to prepare without meat. Even vegans can often find something to eat in a trattoria, though eschewing Reggiano is no fun.

Next on our list are Asian places, such as Japanese (tofu, tempura), Thai (pho), Chinese, Vietnamese (stir-fried vegetables), and Indian food (curry).

When the food is spicy, off-dry Gewurztraminers or Rieslings, or even Pinot Gris, work well.

One problem with dining out at many such restaurants is that most have only sweeter versions of these wines on their wine lists, which play against such wine-food pairings. Before going into such places, check out the wine list.

One fabulous choice for a great Vietnamese meal is Charles Phan's Slanted Door on San Francisco's Embarcadero. The wine list here, top-heavy with great whites, is exceptional, though a bit on the pricey side.

In most less-than-exclusive Asian and Indian restaurants, wine is usually such an afterthought that the owners often are OK with diners bringing in their own bottles for a nominal corkage charge. In California, we have rarely paid a corkage fee of more than \$10 a bottle at Asian/Indian places.

At many places where menus are mainly meat-oriented, the "vegetarian option" often turns out to be a salad. If a salad has a vinegar-based dressing, the wine choice is limited. If you want wine, it's best to seek cream-based dressings.

We often find that without the usual fat in vegetarian (versus beef

dishes, Pinot Noir works better than other reds. We also like lighter-styled red Rhone blends, Beaujolais, and other red wines that are best with a slight chilling.

In general, I'd stay away from heavy Cabernets with veggie foods, mainly because there is often little fat or protein in the food to compete with the tannins.

However, a few dining spots, often those that specialize in vegetarian food, can make dishes that work with red wines and contain no meat.

We have dined often at Waterbar, on the Embarcadero in San Francisco, and learned that the kitchen is always excited to make a vegetarian meal—and the sommeliers are skilled enough to suggest wines that work with such fare.

Finally, if a dish has a Spartan look to it because of the use of, say, lentils, brown rice, eggplant, or other such mundane ingredients, one way to make it taste better—and work better with wine—is to drizzle some extra virgin olive oil in it.

It's a treat that most people love.

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P.O. Box 5857  
Santa Rosa, CA 95402

Phone 707-571-1200  
Fax 707-595-5333

E-mail: [Info@VintageExperiences.com](mailto:Info@VintageExperiences.com)  
Website: [www.VintageExperiences.com](http://www.VintageExperiences.com)

Dan Berger, Commentator  
Juliann Savage, Editor & Publisher

Delivered weekly via e-mail.

Subscription details and other wine related information:  
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