



Orange Wines Blindtasted

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by Richard Jennings

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**ORANGE WINES (WHITE GRAPES FERMENTED WITH EXTENDED SKIN CONTACT)
BLINDTASTED – La Ciccia, San Francisco, California (7/30/2009)**

This is a new category to me, as I'd only tried a couple of these unusual wines prior to this tasting. For an excellent summary of the background of these wines, see this piece on Thor Iversen's oenologic blog: <http://oenologic.blogspot.com/2009/08/adventures-in-skin-trade.html>

There were 11 of us on hand for this tasting, seated at two tables. Our two orange flights, consisting of six wines each, were poured blind, and we had about an hour to linger over each flight. We later learned that Slaton put most of the less expensive and younger wines in the first flight. While I quite enjoyed several of these wines, and applaud the spirit of experimentation and innovation that they represent, the jury is still out for me on the future of this particular branch of winemaking. The high acidity and tannic nature of most of them may make them difficult to enjoy in their youth (and the rather unstable nature of a few of them makes one wonder how well they will age). I think they're pretty tricky to pair with food as well. There seems to be a consensus that the most ideal pairing for orange wines is uni, or sea urchin, and we were fortunate that La Ciccia was able to obtain some and offer us a sea urchin pasta so we could sample that pairing. My other concern about these prolonged skin contact whites (some of which are also aged in amphorae and other exotic vessels), is that they are winemaking wines and not wines of terroir. Virtually all of them had much more in common with each other, in terms of color, texture, acidity, tannin and flavors, than they do other white grape based wines of their particular area. Nonetheless, I do look forward to sampling more of these with some bottle age or them, and to trying some by other producers. My favorite wine of the tasting was the '06 Paolo Bea Santa Chiara, followed by the '04 La Stoppa Ageno and the '08 Natural Process Alliance Chard.

The Sardinian cooking (mainly with local ingredients) generally went well with the wines, especially the sea urchin pasta and the tender pan roasted pork loin drizzled with cooked grapes must. A good dish on its own, but poor pairing with these (or virtually any) wines was my entree of pan seared tuna, as the olive sugo sauce was much too peppery for a palate already dealing with unusually tannic white-grape-based wines.

Many thanks to Slaton for organizing us and the wines for this tasting, and for picking La Ciccia as the venue. Thanks to Slaton also for the info included in parentheses in the TNs below on the length of skin contact and other winemaking details.

Jim, Jack and Slaton

Sardinian Vermentino opener

with our appetizers, including tuna salume, sardines, and pizza al pesto con patate e pancetta

- ★ **2006 6 Mura Vermentino di Gallura** – *Italy, Sardinia, Vermentino di Gallura*
Medium canary yellow color; nice lemon rind, herbal, tart peach and very minerally nose; tasty, crisp, tart lemon, mineral palate with medium-plus acidity; medium finish 91+ pts. (91 pts.)

1st Orange Wine Blind Flight

I enjoyed four of the wines in this flight, had a hard time with the Cornelissen MunJebel (which I'm told requires a lot of airing, and can change a lot over hours and days), and was disappointed with what turned out to be the Rusticum, as I've had this wine before and enjoyed the prior bottle a lot more. The Paolo Bea, as mentioned above, was my WOTT; the Natural Process Alliance Chard was the least like anything else in the tasting, but complex and good; and the Movia Lunar was also quite good. One of our party that evening, wine board celebrity Florida Jim, was the maker of the Sauvignon Blanc which I thought was very impressive for a barrel sample.

Fregula with fresh Mendocino sea urchin

- ★ **2006 Frank Cornelissen MunJebel Bianco 3 Sicilia IGT** – *Italy, Sicily, Sicilia IGT*
Slightly cloudy light medium orange color with clear meniscus; VA, smoky, sour, kumquat nose; very acidic, tart kumquat palate with a bitter note and hint of artichoke; medium finish (Blend of Carricante, Grecanico Dorato, Coda di Volpe; vinified like a red wine, with long skin-contact; Jack, who's had this a number of times, says it improves with several days of being opened) (82 pts.)
- ★ **2006 Paolo Bea Bianco Santa Chiara Umbria IGT** – *Italy, Umbria, Umbria IGT*
Lovely bright tangerine orange color with gold and red lights and clear meniscus; complex hibiscus, tart sage, honey and kumquat nose; tart kumquat, mineral, tart apricot, dried apricot palate with roundness, balance and depth; medium-plus finish (my WOTT; blend of Grechetto, Malvasia, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Garganega; 16-day fermentation on skins, finished in stainless steel) (92 pts.)

- ★ **2007 Monastero Suore Cistercensi Coenobium Rusticum Lazio IGT** – *Italy, Latium, Lazio IGT*
Light medium orange color with pale meniscus; VA, tart orange, a little oxidized on nose; tart, pinched, mineral, tart orange palate with bite, medium-plus acidity and firm tannins; medium finish (not as good as the bottle I tried earlier in the year; Trebbiano, Malvasia, Verdicchio, Grechetto; 15-day fermentation with the skins, and extended lees contact) (85 pts.)
- ★ **2005 Movia Lunar** – *Slovenia, Primorje, Goriška Brda*
Light medium cloudy orange color; smoky, tart orange, cantelope, cherry pie and nutmeg nose; a little tight, tart orange, orange melon, tart apricot palate with soft texture; medium finish 90+ pts. (Ribolla Gialla, from 65 yr old vines; whole grape clusters are placed in barrels. The wine is never pressed off the skins or racked, and after 7 months the free-run juice is bottled unfiltered.) (90 pts.)
- ★ **2008 Cowan Cellars Sauvignon Blanc Silver Pines Vineyard** – *USA, California, Sonoma County, Sonoma Mountain*
Barrel sample – light medium canary yellow color with clarity; crisp, mineral, tart grapefruit, floral, high pitched nose with a sharp note; tasty, poised, complex, tart lime and grapefruit palate with great minerality; long finish 90-92 pts. (13-day cold soak with no sulfur, followed by 15-day alcoholic fermentation before pressing off skins; full malo) (90 pts.)
- ★ **2008 Natural Process Alliance Chardonnay “Skin Fermented” Sonoma Coast** – *USA, California, Sonoma County, Sonoma Coast*
Cloudy light medium yellow color with orange lights; clementine, baked lemon, floaty, tart apricot nose with an intriguing herbal note; tasty, tart pear, lemon, clementine, mineral and lemon sorbet palate with texture, hardly discernible as Chardonnay; medium-plus finish (18 days on the skins, entire alcoholic fermentation, w/ twice daily punchdowns, then pressed off to neutral barrels) (91 pts.)

2nd Orange Wine Blind Flight

There was more similarity amongst the wines in this flight than there was in flight 1. Despite a touch of brett, I liked the Ageno the best for its complexity. The Gravner and Vodopivec Vitovska were both intriguing wines, and I look forward to trying more of those with additional bottle age. The Collio had a lovely nose, and may need time to develop. The one that was most offputting (the distinct urine smell, the sweetness and firm tannins on the palate) was the Zidarich. I was thinking it might be an off bottle, but Slaton reported that he tried what was left in the bottle over the next two days, and that it improved tremendously in that time.

pan seared Ahi Tuna served with Sardinian Olives sugo and pureed peas

- ★ **2001 Gravner Ribolla Gialla Anfora Venezia Giulia IGT** – *Italy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Venezia Giulia IGT*
Light orange color; focused, creamy, tart mandarin orange nose with some VA; tight, tart lemon, tart orange, mandarin orange slices, mineral palate with a sense of salinity; medium finish 90+ pts. (6 to 7 month maceration on skins in terracotta amphorae, followed by 3 yrs in “botte,” large barrels that are used vintage after vintage) (90 pts.)

- ★ **2003 Damijan Podversic Collio Kaplja** – *Italy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Collio*
Light medium orange color with clear meniscus; intriguing, lime honey, floral, butterscotch nose; tangy, tart lemon, cantelopo palate with a touch of butterscotch and a sense of smoke; medium finish (Chardonnay, Malvasia Istriana, Tocai Friulano) **(89 pts.)**
- ★ **2004 La Stoppa Ageno Emilia IGT** – *Italy, Emilia-Romagna, Emilia IGT*
Medium red orange color with ruby lights and clear meniscus; big, intriguing, brett, red grapefruit, tart blood orange, herbal and lime nose; unusual tart blood orange, kumquat, clementine, mineral palate with depth and such firm tannins, they give the wine an almost fibrous texture, needs a few years; medium finish (Malvasia Bianca, Trebbiano and Ortrugo; 30-day maceration on skins, then pressed into neutral barrels & stainless steel tanks) **(91 pts.)**
- ★ **2000 Zidarich Carso Vitovska** – *Italy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Carso*
Light medium golden yellow color with pale meniscus; rest home and/or diabetic urine nose with minerals and dried orange; tart orange, sweet urine, tangy, firm tannins, disjointed palate; medium finish (8 to 10 days skin contact, then racked into mid-sized Slavonian casks. Note from Slaton: from the wine we drank it would appear Zidarich had not yet started using extended skin contact back in 2000 vintage) **(77 pts.)**
- ★ **2002 Azienda Agricola Stanislao Radikon Ribolla Gialla Venezia Giulia IGT** – *Italy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Venezia Giulia IGT*
Medium orange color with red lights and clear meniscus; high pitched, tart orange, mineral, yam nose with some reduction; tart orange, baked or dried orange, kumquat palate with medium acidity; medium finish (3 and 1/2 month maceration on the skins, including entire alcoholic fermentation; 4 times daily punchdowns, then racked into neutral “botte,” large barrels that are used vintage after vintage, for 36 mo.; no SO₂ ever added) **(88 pts.)**
- ★ **2004 Vodopivec Vitovska Venezia Giulia IGT** – *Italy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Venezia Giulia IGT*
Light medium orange color with red lights and clear meniscus; appealingly unusual, cherry koolaid powder and cantelopo nose; solid, tart cantelopo, caramel, yellow raspberries palate with a touch of butterscotch, firm tannins and a sense of skins; medium-plus finish 90+ pts. (15-day fermentation on the skins, then racked into “botte,” large barrels that are used vintage after vintage, and aged 2 yrs.) **(90 pts.)**

a little red for the road

Our last wine was another Jim Cowan (“Florida Jim”) production.

- ★ **2007 Cowan Cellars Syrah Dry Stack Vineyard** – *USA, California, North Coast, Bennett Valley*
Bright red violet color; rather herbaceous, tart red fruit and mineral nose; slightly concentrated, tart red fruit, mineral, tart plum palate, with focus, that’s very reminiscent of Cru Beaujolais; medium finish 90+ pts. (1 barrel made, won’t be commercially released) **(90 pts.)**

La Ciccia chef/owner Massimiliano Conti

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