

Matt Kramer

My Wines of the Year

Fine wine, like compound interest, takes a while to make itself felt. This is most obvious with aging a finished bottle. Less obvious is the effect of the gestation of vineyards. Only now are we seeing—and tasting—the results of new vineyards planted a decade ago.

Mind you, what we're tasting is not just a matter of new vines but of a new mentality as well. All my wines of the year come from winegrowers who are either biodynamic or sympathetic to a hands-off approach to growing grapes and making wine, never mind what they label the philosophy.

Does "philosophy" matter? It sure does. These are wines of what might be called a "culture of tenderness" rather than of a hard-knuckled "market mentality," where what sells is, by definition, good.

Rhys Vineyards Pinot Noir Swan Terrace 2006. Simply put, this is easily one of the finest California Pinots that I've yet come across. A new producer in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Rhys (pronounced "reese") is biodynamically influenced and Burgundian in its devotion to site-specificity. Swan Terrace is a 1.5-acre subset of Rhys' larger (13 acres) Alpine Vineyard. What's the difference? Both share a button-down austerity and a detailed depth of almost "wild" flavor, but Swan Terrace is strikingly mineral. It's a real rock-licker. Wines like this represent the exciting, beyond-the-cough-syrup future of California Pinot Noir. \$59.

Clau de Nell Anjou Rouge à Norbert 2003. The future of France's Loire Valley resides in young producers such as Claude and Nelly Pichard. This 100 percent Cabernet Franc is an exemplar of what the Loire can do with this still-underrated variety. Biodynamically grown, this is flat-out elegant yet powerful Cabernet Franc, delivering a raspberry-scented succulence that you might not expect from this variety. It's a pinnacle effort and still in its early days. \$23.

Catherine et Pierre Breton Bourgueil Clos Sénéchal 2005. This must be my year for Loire Cabernet Franc, as I cannot resist commending the achingly pure Cab Francs of Catherine and Pierre Breton. Located in the district of Bourgueil, they make several different site-specific wines. The one that consistently grips my palate is Clos Sénéchal, from a 3.2-acre plot of clay and limestone. Biodynamic in philosophy (no chemical fertilizers; no weed killers; wild yeasts; no filtering; limited or no sulfur), in 2005 they made their

best Clos Sénéchal ever, with exceptional depth and scale melding blueberry, black currant, minerals and a hint of tobacco. It needs a decade to fully unfurl. \$30.

Királyudvar Tokaji Sec 2006. A new winery, Királyudvar was created by American Anthony Hwang in 1997. (He is also the majority owner of Domaine Huët in Vouvray.) In this brief time, it has emerged as one of Tokaj's finest producers. A blend of 70 percent

Furmint and 30 percent Hárslevelű, the barrel-fermented and oak-aged dry Tokaji (six months in 500-liter Hungarian oak barrels) delivers scents of citrus, hay and stones. It's an extraordinary dry white wine of uncommon originality. And it's just 12.5 percent alcohol, by the way. \$35.

Colomé Estate Malbec 2006. If you want proof of just how exciting Argentina's Malbecs are, you can do no better than to taste Colomé Estate Malbec 2006. The story of this estate is one of extremes: It's one of the oldest wineries in Argentina, founded in 1831, and is today owned (and very much revived) by Donald Hess of Napa Valley's Hess Collection. This is commitment on a grand scale, with 400 acres of vines grown biodynamically at some of the highest elevations in the world (upwards of 8,000 feet). A blend of Malbec (85 percent) with Cabernet Sauvignon and Tannat, Colomé Estate Malbec 2006 comes partly from vines as ancient as 90 to 150 years old. The result is

a stunning red delivering intensity yet restraint, with a mélange of flavors incorporating cherry, blackberry and white pepper. The 2006 shows a deft, almost undetectable use of oak. \$25.

Pyramid Valley Vineyards "Earth Smoke" and "Angel Flower" Pinot Noirs 2006. If New Zealand has created a finer Pinot Noir than these two single-vineyard wines from Pyramid Valley Vineyards, I haven't tasted it. The first estate-bottled wines from Americans-turned-Kiwis Mike and Claudia Weersing, these two biodynamically grown Pinot Noirs are thrilling in their intense minerality. Grown on chalky soil in the North Canterbury zone of the South Island, Earth Smoke (1.7 acres) is all black fruits and a kind of dark richness; Angel Flower (1.5 acres) is red fruits and exquisite finesse. Both wines offer a lovely tenderness. They are among the finest out-of-Burgundy experiences I've ever had. And this is just the first vintage, no less. \$65.

Matt Kramer has contributed regularly to Wine Spectator since 1985.



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