



The White Zin Dilemma

ON TURNING THE TIDES OF TRENDS

WINE TRENDS AREN'T always fathomable. I distinctly remember, for instance, the befuddlement I felt as a sommelier watching the meteoric rise of White Zinfandel in the 1980s. In those days, my peers and I were all flush with enthusiasm for the type of California Chardonnays and Cabernet Sauvignons that had bested French Grands Crus in the 1976 Judgment of Paris—and yet we couldn't give Chateau Montelena or Stag's Leap away. The vast majority of consumers preferred fruity wines such as Blue Nun or Wente Grey Riesling.

Grey Riesling, for the record, wasn't a Riesling. The name was given to whites made from Trousseau Gris in an attempt to capitalize on consumer tastes for Riesling-style wines. My response was to specialize in authentic German *qualitätswein*: classic Rieslings from growths such as Scharzhofberger, Wehlener Sonnenuhr, and Ürziger Würzgarten. If they liked their wines fruity, I figured, I was going to give them the best fruit-driven wines in the world. For a few short years in the early 1980s, this strategy actually worked.

Alas, by the middle of the decade, the

market for German wines in general was dead in the water. Instead, domestic brands such as Kendall-Jackson and Glen Ellen had saturated the market with \$5 or \$6 Chardonnay, ushering in a crushing tidal wave of soft, fruity, buttery whites that would take at least 20 years to subside. (Remember "cougar juice?" That wasn't too long ago!)

Meanwhile, consumers were finally beginning to gravitate toward Cabernet Sauvignon—which was great, except for the fact that not every dish is ideal with it. By the early 1990s, I had trained the staffs in my multi-unit restaurant group to push hard on Pinot Noir, a far more versatile red with food. I think we were extremely successful, but let's face it: Pinot Noir did not become mainstream until the movie *Sideways* came out in 2004. That should tell you a lot about consumer obsessions—they're often more about following the crowd than having actual taste.

I was recently struck by a *New York Times* column about efficiency in which the author reflected on the "sheer joy" of setting a "vinyl record carefully on the turntable" despite the obvious convenience of digital

music. No one has to guess why vinyl records have returned with a vengeance—there is something compellingly organic about listening to music in an analog format, rife with auditory imperfections. By the same token, it should not be hard to understand the current madness for imperfection in wines, particularly murky, prickly natural wines.

The positive thing about trends, even those we object to, is that they are usually indicative of some kind of evolution in consumer tastes. The thirst for natural wines, after all, is not too far off from the appreciation of terroir-driven greats such as Romanée-Conti, Tempier, Musar, and Vega Sicilia—all of which are often as raw as can be. To my mind, natural wines are just a gateway to that higher class of producer (one can hope!).

Wine professionals stand to benefit, then, from not only recognizing and embracing trends but taking the guests who are interested in them to places you want them to go—ideally, of course, into the realm of higher-quality wines that enhance your cuisine, your program, and ultimately your business. ☞