

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY [JOEL M. FISHER](#) and Sara Fisher Chapin



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In Los Angeles, it's the season for red-carpet award ceremonies and rain-induced traffic jams. Thankfully, it's also the season for a major local wine expo. The **Napa Valley Vintners Association** recently hosted its annual 'Taste of Napa Valley.' More than 70 Northern California wineries descended upon **Nick and Stef's Steakhouse** in downtown Los Angeles to showcase their latest and greatest wares.

The place was wall-to-wall wine talent.

One of my favorite stops was **Viader Winery's** booth. Delia Viader has been exploring new blends and grape varietals to great effect. The *2002 Viader Proprietary Blend* (\$90) is a 51% Cabernet Sauvignon - 49% Cabernet Franc mix. Its blackberry and blueberry tones are enriched with hints of chocolate, leather and earth. The finish is complex and firm. I think the bottle should age beautifully for at least another decade – if not longer. Another find was the *2002 Viader Syrah* (\$60). A pleasurable Australian Shiraz/Rhone Valley Syrah clone, the end result combines the characteristic peppery spices and red berries of the former and the delicate notes of the latter.

Over at the **Merryvale** booth, the winery offered up its *2002 Cabernet Sauvignon, Beckstoffer Vineyard* (\$60), which is aged for 18 months in new French oak barrels. This intense, powerful – and quite purple – wine is a hefty 14.5% alcohol. **The Terraces'** Crulls featured their *2002 Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$48) and *2003 Zinfandel* (\$25). The Cabernet is claret-style, displaying a strong but balanced structure. The Zinfandel possessed an attractive aroma on the nose and distinctive flavor on the palate.

I strolled over to California winemaking legend Bill Hill. Formerly the owner and winemaker of the William Hill Winery, he began **Bighorn Cellars** in 1994 with the goal of crafting limited quantities of artisan wines. I tasted his *2003 Merlot, Broken Rock Vineyard* (\$30). The new oak barrels added strong levels of vanilla, spice and cedar to an already full-bodied wine. I bet this bottle would accompany food nicely.

Bob Broman, winemaker and owner (along with his wife Deborah Russel Broman) of **Broman Cellars**, is living the dream of finally bottling under his own name. Broman Cellars currently produces 1,000 cases a year, and intends to hit 7,500 cases. The *2001 Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$48) presents predominately ripe fruit, darkened with a light undercurrent of cocoa and oak. It boasts nicely integrated tannins and a velvety smooth finish. In contrast, the full-bodied *Napa Valley Syrah* (\$30) is a jammy red with a touch of smokiness. This wine would go well with barbequed meats.

I spotted Bob Shepard, part of the **Amici Cellars** team. Amici's *2004 Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$42) showed soft tannins and currant flavors, and the *2005 Pinot Noir* (\$42) displayed zesty pepper and cranberry notes.

I have yet to visit the **Chimney Rock Winery** in Napa, but will do so the next time I'm in the area. I simply loved the *2002 Chimney Rock Elevage* (\$75), a deep-red Meritage that will age nicely for several more years.

My next stop was with another wine legend of California, Mike Grgich, President and winemaker of **Grgich Hills Cellar**. The winery was flatteringly portrayed in George Taber's new book, *Judgment of Paris: California vs. France and the Historic 1976 Paris Tasting that Revolutionized Wine*. Mike, being the great salesman he is, talked me into buying an autographed copy of the book. To get one yourself, call the winery at 707-963-2784.

All in all, the Vinters' showcase was a fun experience. I look forward to seeing old favorites and discovering new ones at next year's event.

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Wine Vine & Dine recently hosted a seven-course pairing dinner at **Victor's** in Hollywood, showcasing lesser-known Italian wines.

The dinner kicked off with a fiery *calamari fritti* antipasto. This dish was paired with a *2004 Falanghina Feudi di San Gregorio* (\$15). The wine was quite sugary, which counterbalanced the strong horseradish in the sauce, and then dissipated quickly off the tongue. Next up was a spicy *scampi della casa*, well-matched with a *2003 Malvasia Villanova* (\$15). The bottle showed pineapple notes on the nose, and lush tropical fruit on the palate.

The group moved on to reds at this point, sampling bruschetta with a 2003 *Capezzana Carmignano, Villa di Capezzana* (\$32). This Chianti-Cabernet Sauvignon blend (a 90-10 mix) was young and fresh, with smooth tannins. Next came a Sicilian Syrah, the 2002 *Sirae Feotto della Jato* (\$32). Light and a bit sharp, it didn't hold its own against the spicy eggplant dish with which it was served. That said, the wine displayed enough interesting flavors that it may fare much better with milder food.

The main dish was *brasato di bue* (braised beef), which accompanied a good Bordeaux-quality red from Naples. The 2001 *Aglianico Serpico Feudi di San Gregorio* (\$75) had deep notes of bell pepper and leather, and showed sharp tannins. The bottle should mellow nicely over the coming years, and could be cellared for up to a decade. Speaking of cellaring, the 2000 *Gattinara 'Tre Vigne' Travaglini* (\$48) served with the cheese plate definitely needs to lie down longer. Made entirely from Nebbiolo grapes, the wine was tight and tannic.

The event ended on a sweet note – literally. A Sauternes-like late-harvest dessert wine, the 2001 *Privilegio* (\$50) provided a lovely nightcap. This wine is a pure pleasure.

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And with that, I'll sign off. After the orgiastic holiday season, I swore to be good and cut down on rich foods and decadent wines in 2006. Well ... there are always next year's resolutions.

Drink in good health!

Joel M. Fisher, Ph.D. has been Wine Instructor these past six years for the Culinary Arts Department, [Art Institute of California Los Angeles](#). He is Director of Public Affairs for Avalon Hollywood, and as a partner in [WineVineandDine](#) conducts wine tastings, wine dinners, and wine-and-food pairings throughout Southern California. He writes a column for the [Chefs de Cuisine Association of California](#). Sara Fisher-Chapin fought the enophile gene for as long as she could, but gracefully caved almost a decade ago. She's interested in making wine more accessible to the Gen X and under crowd

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