

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

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



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Happy 2006! I know this will be an exciting – and very fast – year. The calendar is filling up with vintner visits, tastings, and what promises to be a spectacular trip to Spain and Portugal. Chef Daniel Drumlake, this chapter's former president, and I will be co-leading the two-week trip. A large group of culinary students have already signed up, and we're looking forward to relaying our adventures later this year.

With the Iberian trip in mind, I jumped at the opportunity to attend "Great Match: Wine and Tapas 2005", hosted by the Spanish Trade Commission at Santa Monica's Casa Del Mar hotel. The focus was on Spanish wines relatively unknown to the buying public. One of my favorite finds at the event was a sherry, an all-too-often overlooked drink. I found **Domecq's La Ina Fine Dry Sherry** (\$15) to be very dry, in the Manzanilla style. This fortified wine is best when served ice cold, with salty nibbles like Spanish olives, cured ham and almonds.

Also notable were two red wines. The supple *Finca Antigua Reserva 2001* (\$15) is a smooth Merlot-Cabernet Sauvignon-Syrah blend from **Bodegas Martinez Bujanda** in La Mancha. The **Bodegas Muga Reserva Selección Especial 2000** (\$35) from Rioja is a world-class Tempranillo that will continue to improve with age, but already shows great dusky wood and strawberries notes. As a total splurge, **Mas d'En Gil's Priorat** (\$100) was a provocative stunner. Priorat is one of Spain's trendier, more expensive wine-producing regions. It typically creates notable terroir-driven wines. Mas d'En Gil's offering consists mostly of Grenache, and has full, smooth tannins. This would go well with roast meats. I had the pleasure of meeting Mas d'En Gil's Marta Rovira Carbonell at this event. Carbonell, whose family owns the winery, was kind enough to invite my student group to visit when in Spain.

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I continued my virtual vacation at an Italian wine event held in Beverly Hills, hosted by trade organization **Vinitaly**. We started with Sicilian wines. Worth seeking out is **Benanti's Pietramarina Etna Bianco Superiore 2000** (no price available). This 100% Carricante bottle comes from vines on the east side of Mt. Etna. Dry and pleasantly

acidic, the pale yellow wine has ripe apple overtones that make it good with food. I also liked the well-structured, ruby-red *Nero D'Avola Principe di Corleone 2003* (\$10) from *Azienda Agricole Pollara*. Last but not least of the Sicilian offerings were the *1998 Taurasi DOCG Aglianico Reserve*, from **Feudi di San Gregorio** (no price available). Muted and subtly elegant, this dark-red specimen had nice minerality and a long finish.

From the Puglia region, I thought highly of the *Galatina Negroamaro DOC 2003* (no price available). Negroamaro literally means 'bitter black', and the varietal produces muscular dark red wines. This bottle was blended with 15% Montepuciano to smooth the edges, and the end result was a fruity wine easy on the palate.

Sadly, many of these wines are not yet available at a store near you. I hope to see distribution grow over time.

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Although less exotic than the Mediterranean, I actually physically visited Sonoma late in 2005. I swung by two old favorites: **Kunde** and **B.R.Cohn** wineries. Kunde produces 120,000 cases annually, and B.R. Cohn produces 30,000.

At Kunde, I found the wines to be good, drinkable, and refreshingly affordable. I bought a full-bodied *2001 Port* (\$23), made from old zinfandel vines. Rich with berry and vanilla, it was a great buy. Also notable were the fruity but dry *2001 Reserve Chardonnay* (\$35), the sweet but well balanced *2004 Estate Chardonnay* (\$16), and the grapefruit-tinged *2004 Sauvignon Blanc* (Magnolia Lane Vineyard, \$15).

I got to taste the *2003 Merlot* straight from the barrel. It's already smooth, balanced and nicely fruit-forward. The *2001 Merlot* (\$18) showed similar traits, but unsurprisingly was more complex. I particularly loved the zesty *2002 Zinfandel* (\$30)! Made from 120-year-old vines with 14.5% alcohol, this was a hearty bottle.

We moved on to B.R. Cohn, a beautiful winery. During our visit I particularly enjoyed the *2003 Silver Label Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$20). This wine nicely balanced cherry and berry fruits with tannins and spices. The *2001 Olive Hill Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$50) deservedly got ranked 90 by *Wine Spectator*. This big cab is elegant and complex, and shows a cedar-tinged finish. Also notable is the earthy, plummy *2002 Cabernet* (\$50), which is enlivened with a hint of mint.

From Sonoma to a stint at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa, I had a remarkable trip. My thanks to everyone who made it possible: Joanna Walker, Karen McNeil, the *Wine Enthusiast*, the Larsens and the Busses.

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Raise a glass to the new year. May it be full of pleasant discoveries, old favorites, and great wines.

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