

The 29th edition of the Hilton Head Island Food and Wine Festival is officially underway. The first event was the International Wine Competition held this past weekend (Jan 25th and 26th) at the Westin Hotel on Hilton Head. This was a closed door event; however I was given the privilege of observing the procedures with the promise that I would remain quiet and not be obnoxious in any way (I did not even dare sneeze.) All kidding aside, just imagine you are in a room with 28 judges, each one pretending to wear a "do not disturb" sign with concentration being the number one priority.

I covered this event last year. Day one was essentially the same as last year. The judges were divided into four groups of seven; with one being the lead judge and recorder. The task at hand is to evaluate over 500 wines in two days and to arrive at a "best-of-show" wine. (It was at this point that I saw a big change from last year. There were less wineries submitting wines in the competition. This was not a bad occurrence because the growers that did enter wines in the competition entered a broader range of varietals. The judges were in agreement that the overall quality of wines to be judged was a significant improvement over previous years.) This is a tribute to the festival. The international producers of wine realize that the Hilton Head event is a world-class competition.

Prior to the competition there is a weeklong preparation period when the wines are lined up to be transported to the judges. This procedure has to be perfect and so it is checked many times over. When the staff is satisfied that all is ready, the wines are served to the judges by way of a small pour. The glass is tagged with an identification of the varietal and a four digit number. The judging begins. From the start a very serious silence descends on the room. Concentration and evaluation is followed up with discussion. The judges have knowledge and experience on their side and they express themselves in a very professional manner. Opinions of some of the wines do differ, and why not? Agreement is not always unanimous. The discussion phase is important because the wine being evaluated is going to end up with a medal or be cast aside. Should the wine be awarded a medal, it is then up for additional discussion. Maybe the wine under discussion will be awarded a higher medal. (A higher medal would be gold, double gold, or best-of-show.)

The above process repeats itself many times over the weekend until the judges arrive at a Best-of-Show winner. This year the winner was Alexander Valley Vineyards 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon; a 100% SINGLE VINEYARD selection. This wine comes from a vineyard founded by the Wetzel Family in 1975. The fruit for this wine was harvested from a single gently sloping vineyard with older mature vines. These low yielding vines produce loose clusters of pea-sized grapes that ripen evenly and have incredible concentration of flavor and color. The color of the wine is a deep purple. The wine carries aromas of black cherry, oak and cassis. The lingering flavors are chocolate and dark fruit. Before bottling the wine is stored in French Oak for 22 months. It retails for \$40 and will be available in the Lowcountry near the opening of the Wine Festival in March of this year.

A very strange coincidence happened at the wine judging this year. The wine that finished in second place was from the same winery as the winner. It is called CYRUS. This is a classic Bordeaux Style BLEND of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Malbec. (It is up to the winemaker as to what percentage is used, however the wines are listed

in order of strength.) I inquired if this phenomenon had ever happened before – that the first and second place finishes were from the same winery. Not a single person could recall. The voting by the judges on the first and second place finish was close. Some very spirited debates took place. Being witness to the debates only made me feel that the wine industry is very safe; that it is being protected by people with strong knowledge and opinions and that they fear nothing when it is time to state their case.

WINESPEAK

A word about the Alexander Valley (not to be confused with Alexander Valley Vineyards). In your search for cabernet sauvignon wines, consider some choices from the Valley. You will find that it is typical for the wines produced there to be very rich in flavor. I was challenged to find out for myself and so I visited the Valley. It was well worth the trip. Your visit to the Valley can be combined with a trip to Sonoma and Napa, as they are grouped together.