THE WINE GUY

A toast to the wine world's biggest stories

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To paraphrase an old saying, there were a million stories in the wine world last year. Here are five I found compelling:

CONTINUED CONSOLIDATION

These days, wine is big business, and in the business world that means mergers and acquisitions in an endless quest for the competitive advantage. One of the most dramatic stories in 2004 was the sale of Robert Mondavi Corp. to Constellation Brands, the world's biggest wine conglomerate, sporting such brands as Estancia, Franciscan, Ravenswood, Simi and Ruffino. Now Constellation is trying to buy Vincor International, Canada's largest wine company.

The trend continued last year with the merger of Beringer Blass Wine Estates (Beringer, Chateau St. Jean, Chateau Souverain, Wolf Blass and Castello di Gabbiano, among others) and Southcorp Wines (Lindemans, Penfolds and Rosemount, among others) to create Foster's (yes, the beer company) Wine Estates. The new company operates more than 20 wineries on four continents and an international portfolio of more than 50 brands.

Allied Domecq, a giant British-owned drinks company, was sold to French company Pernod Ricard, which picked up Champagne Mumm, Perrier Jouet and Mumm Napa Valley. The deal also resulted in American-owned Fortune Brands gaining American wineries Clos du Bois, Buena Vista and William Hill.

THE YEAR OF THE WINE MOVIE

By now, almost everyone is aware of "Sideways," the wine-oriented road movie/buddy film. Although the film was released in 2004, it won Golden Globe and Academy awards — and a boost in popularity — in 2005.

The film's success gets some of the credit for the increased popularity of pinot noir and a parallel decline in merlot.

As lighthearted as "Sideways" is, "Mondovino," a film by Jonathan Nossiter, is serious and controversial. Also out in 2004 but not hitting the U.S. in wide release until 2005, this documentary takes a firsthand look at the debate over globalization in the wine business and concerns about a concomitant homogenization of wine styles.

The film presents contrasting portrayals of small, family-owned wineries that highlight the winemakers' dedication to tradition and culture. It's available for $30 from various Web sources, including amazon.com.

ALTERNATIVE PACKAGING

The march to screw caps as the bottle closure of choice continued unabated in 2005. Many wine producers also are using synthetic corks, but screw caps are the most popular and are finding their way to wines in all price ranges. Some wineries, such as Hogue in Washington, Bonny Doon in California, Kim Crawford in New Zealand and Two Hands in Australia, are closing all their wines in screw caps.

Many wineries also are seeking to provide consumers with more convenient packaging for their everyday wines as part of ongoing efforts to demystify the beverage (and boost sales, of course).

For instance, Wine Block released a 2004 chardonnay, 2002 cabernet sauvignon and 2002 merlot at $10 for a 1.5 liter, boxed wine. Three Thieves went even farther, releasing a 2002 cabernet sauvignon ($7) in a one-liter "Tetra Pack," the same type of carton that holds fruit juice, milk and soups. So far, the wine quality has been pretty good. We all may have to re-evaluate our preconceptions about jug wines.

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

Last year, I wrote about the growing trend toward sustainable practices in wine. I've since become aware of even more wineries implementing this philosophy.

One of the most impressive is Quivira in Sonoma's Dry Creek Valley. Quivira is a leader in responsible stewardship, having farmed their 90 acres sustainably for 23 years. They also are involved in a river restoration effort; they've converted the entire winery to a solar electric system; and they'll soon be certified biodynamic.

Others, too, are making progress. Handley Cellars in Mendocino just received its organic certification. Growers in the Walla Walla Valley of Washington state have created an organization to promote sustainabl
Sokol Blosser, a sustainab
gon winery, is using biodi
its tractors.

GOOD FOR GALLO

The United Farm Wor
a huge victory for vineya
when the UFW and Gall
reached agreement in Se
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described as important
and employee rights.

Gallo is one of the wo
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Chateau Ste. Michell
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contracts with the union
support.

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