

Aspen event offers discoveries

By Rich Mauro

The Food and Wine Magazine Classic at Aspen, the 24th edition of which was held this past June, is, for me at least, all about discovery - culinary and vinous exploration.

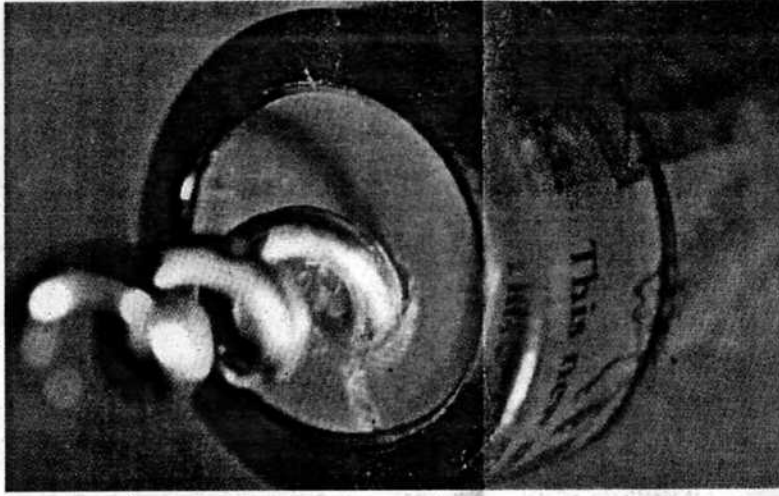
One place where the adventure comes to you is in the Grand Tasting Pavilion, where the most fun is the delight of happening upon something completely unexpected.

This year it was the fortified dessert wines of Chambers Rosewood Vineyards of Australia. I tasted their Muscat, Muscadelle-Tokay, Grand Muscat, Grand Muscadelle-Tokay, Rare Muscat and Rare Muscadelle-Tokay. The regular blends average from six to 10 years old; the Grand blends include wines over 80 years old; and the Rare blends include wines over 100 years old. They were, across the board, amazingly complex, powerful, concentrated and unctuous. Although the Grand and Rare wines are very expensive, the regular blends are outstanding values.

The Classic is also the place to learn about current trends in wine. For example, in Spain, that means the emergence of lesser-known regions and the revitalization of the country's best-known region. I tasted wines from two such lesser-known regions: from Bierzo in the northwest, a fresh, fruity 2002 Quatro Pasos, made from an indigenous (and biodynamically farmed) grape called mencia, and from Cigales, just to the west of the Ribera del Duero, an aromatic, concentrated Finca Museum 2001 Real Reserva from old vine into fino, the local variant of tempranillo.

The big news, though, is the reemergence of Rioja, a region many felt had declined in recent years. Wines such as the 2002 Ondalan Reserva and those from El Coto (2004 Bianco, 2005 Rosado, 2002 Crianza and 2000 Coto de Imaz Reserva) and Baron de Ley (2000 Reserva, 1996 Gran Reserva and 2003 Finca Monasterio) proved Rioja is still a place to find quality and value.

Some producers use the Classic as a prime opportunity to make a big splash with the introduction of new products. One example of this was Champagne Salon and the amazing 1996 Salon Le Mesnil (\$300), presented at an exclusive reserve tasting. The folks from Salon



There also are unique opportunities for special tastings. I found winemakers who hosted a vertical Tasting of Treana Red (cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah from Paso Robles) and White (marsanne/viognier blend from Mer Soleil vineyard in Monterey County). Tasting through every vintage of both wines, dating back to 1996 for the Red and 1997 for the White, I was most impressed with how well they all had developed.

Inniskillin, the renowned Canadian producer of icewine, treated invitees to the 2004 Cabernet Franc, 2004 Vidal Oak Aged, 2004 Riesling, and a 2004 Sparkling Vidal. Inniskillin's icewines are intensely sweet and flavorful, but balanced with crisp acidity, which gives a clean finish.

G.H. Mumm rented a lavish house in town to showcase its current portfolio - Mumm de Cramant rare single vineyard Champagne; Grand Cru, a blend of five grand cru vineyards; Cordon Rouge, the company's most recognizable wine; Brut Rosé, a pinot noir and chardonnay blend; Carte Classique, refreshing and slightly sweet; and Joyesse, dessert style, which is the best top to bottom I've tasted in 25 years.

And Moët Hennessy USA used a luncheon tasting to highlight eight wineries from its impressive international portfolio.

Even though only food and wine are mentioned in the event's title, a fair amount of beer and spirits are also to be found. The most notable beer participant was the Boston Beer Company, makers of Samuel Adams. Charismatic founder/owner Jim Koch has been on a five-year mission at the Classic to show us wine lovers that fine, craft-brewed beer has a place at the table with fine cuisine every bit as much as wine does.

This year there were spirits of every kind at the event, but none more incredible than The Macallan, which put on a lunch on Saturday at the Hotel Jerome to announce the release in the United States of 75 additional bottles of a very rare 50-Years-Old Single Highland Malt Scotch packaged in a Lalique crystal decanter. Those of you with \$6,000 burning a hole in your pocket can get a whiskey of uncommon depth, concentration and complexity, with an amazingly smooth and viscous texture. ■