

# Penn State **Extension**

## Perspective on the Pennsylvania Wine Industry: Thoughts from a National Wine Blogger

In August 2012, Joe Roberts, [1WineDude.com](http://1WineDude.com) national wine blogger visited with several Pennsylvania winemakers and tasted Pennsylvania-grown wines from throughout the state. Joe was enthusiastic about the quality of the wines tasted and featured several selections on his Twitter feed (@1WineDude).

However, Joe also raised several points of interest with regards to Pennsylvania wines. I thought his insight to be rather valuable as he sees the wine industry on a global level, feeding the mass market of consumers in the U.S., and has no real affiliation (or bias) for or against Pennsylvania wines. The following is a short summary of those comments.

### **Prevalence of “herbal” (e.g. dried herbs) and “savory” characteristics in [*vinifera*] red wines**

Joe pointed out that these [herbal and savory] characters did not so much pertain to the fact that they were present in red wines, but to the fact that these characters *dominate* the flavor profile over the fruit (e.g. red fruit, cassis, berry, plum, etc.) characteristics. With most of his tasting notes, he described many of the wines as being “black currant” with a “balsamic” character. Although these descriptors indicate “fruitiness,” Joe said that it doesn’t overpower or outlast the herbal/savory characteristics.

Why is this a problem? Is it a problem at all? I would suggest considering Joe’s perspective: he mainly reviews wines that will appeal to the *mass American* market. And to some degree, one can speculate that this market has created a high demand for fruit-driven, soft red wines – something that has become known as the “international style” and is well accepted by many wine lovers, writers, and critics. I appreciated Joe’s comment, “Pennsylvania should embrace the fact that they’re different, but having wines that bridge the gap between fruity (what [consumers] know) and savory (what Pennsylvania does well) I think would entice more people over to them, and would certainly get more critics paying attention.”

On one hand, the dominance of these herbal/savory characteristics does not necessarily have to be a problem. After all, is wine not an expression of the *terroir*? The reds are not being described as herbaceous or green, which is quite characteristic of unripe grapes or over-cropped fruit. Instead, “herbal” and “savory” flavors are being tasted. To some degree one can argue that this is the style of red wines the eastern U.S. is capable of producing annually; that these characteristics are, indeed, a reflection of our *terroir*.

On the other hand, most consumers expect (and want) fruit-driven wines. Let’s face it. The small percentage that appreciates the complexity in wine flavors is just that – small. You, me, and maybe several fine wine critics may appeal to those red wine styles. But, is that the preference of what the majority of domestic consumers (let’s say more than 50%) want? The answer: probably not. The truth speaks in those wines that dominate sales across the U.S. Many of them are economical (<\$20) and very pleasant, fault-free, soft, fruit-driven wines.

However, this point makes the assumption that all winemakers (or winery businesses) want to make wines that fit into the “international style.” I am not completely convinced that everyone feels as if they A) want to make a wine in this category and B) can make a wine to fit this category.

# Penn State **Extension**

But if you are a part of winery that wants to make a wine in this category, what can you do? How do we bump up the fruit nuances ever so slightly to get a little more “fruit” and less abrasiveness (e.g. tannin) on the palate? Well, there are several options here.

1. Always make sure fruit is ripe – not just in its Brix content, but in its *flavor*. If you do not understand how to “measure” this, please contact me with regards to learning Berry Sensory techniques.
2. Experiment with yeast selections as some yeasts have greater potential in producing “red fruit” flavors during fermentation compared to others.
3. Tannin additions that either add red fruit flavor or reduce herbaceous flavors without contributing to the mouthfeel.
4. Wines can also be softened with inactivated yeast or polysaccharide products. These additions tend to “trick” the mind into thinking the wine is fruitier.
5. It appears that rotary fermented wines, if used properly, may have a reduction in those herbal/savory characteristics while obtaining concentrated fruit notes. Although, I’m unaware of any scientific research that supports the anecdotal sensory observations made at tastings.

Nonetheless, I think the most important thing to take away from this comment is that winemakers should know what kind of red wine they are making *before* making the wine. Know your goals for the product and what consumers you want the wine to appeal to when the wine goes on sale. Bottom line to this comment: know what your consumers are expecting from the wine that is handed to them. At the very least, you can always tell a critic what style of wine you are making for him/her to review.

## **The quality differential among wines within one winery is too great.**

This can probably be said of any winery around the world with very few exceptions. Where one wine is considered “above average” the next is “sub par.” But, for a region that is trying to build a reputation, this is a very valid point. Sure, we can stick to the old saying, “just add sugar to it and it will sell” but this mentality does nothing to improve the reputation of that individual winery *or* the Pennsylvania wine industry. The mentality that “Pennsylvania does not produce good wines” has probably stuck because some producers are still following this perceived magic-bullet sugar addition.

When a region is in its building years, the most important feature in enhancing its reputation is quality. Because, let’s face it, it’s human nature to keep putting the underdog down. The expectation for “good” becomes higher than average in those regions that are trying to build a reputation. Joe continuously mentioned on this point: we must continue to focus on quality.

This section will focus on several points of quality enhancement for Pennsylvania wines. You will find those main points underlined in the following paragraphs.

**Eliminate flawed wines.** There are many wines in Pennsylvania that are being sold with flaws. Yes, I know that we can find flawed wines everywhere around the world. Yes, I know that many consumers do not know if a wine is flawed. And yes, I know that the wines will probably be purchased anyway. And, okay, some wines may be “questionable” in terms of how flawed the wines are or are not. But, again, the point is build Pennsylvania wine’s reputation. The writers, critics, and enthusiasts – the people that sell your wines for you by word of mouth – they know flaws. That means that each individual winery must become tighter and tighter with quality control capabilities and enhance reliability in producing a clean, appealing product in order to meet the demands of those wine savvy individuals. Otherwise, the

# Penn State **Extension**

national and/or global wine industry will always be “surprised” to find good wines in Pennsylvania and point the finger at our bad quality.

The opportunity to learn flaws is now. Penn State Extension Enology hosts the [Pennsylvania Wine Quality Initiative \(WQI\)](#) workshops every January. This two-day intensive course is made to help winemakers learn to identify wine flaws, prevent them, and fix them. As it is currently subsidized by a Specialty Block Grant via the Pennsylvania Winery Association (PWA), now is the best time to get your money’s worth and learn those faults with a lot of hands-on training.

**Make small quality enhancements throughout the entire business.** Enhancing quality does not have to be difficult. Steve Menke, who was the previous Extension Enologist for Penn State, made a very valid point to me when I first started here in Pennsylvania. He had said that sometimes quality enhancement can occur in small steps. For example, let’s start with the tasting room. For those tasting rooms that still pour wines in little plastic shot glasses, this instantly changes the perception of quality (*negatively*) in the mind of the consumer. It doesn’t matter if you are making \$400 wines. The consumer believes wine is meant to be tasted in wine glasses. Making that small change to wine glasses is an enhancement in quality for that individual winery.

Other small quality enhancements include:

- Rotate fresh wine bottles in the tasting room frequently. Again, the tasting room employees are making the assumption that most people won’t know that the wine is oxidized and has been opened too long. (Or maybe the employees don’t know the wine *is* oxidized...) But there are people that do *know*, and that number is steadily increasing as it is becoming “trendy” to know wine culture. Why risk your reputation?
- Annual production equipment *scrubbing* because as time progresses (10+ years), lots of biofilms form on everything in the winery including stainless steel tanks. If you have wood in the winery, cleaning becomes even more necessary.
- Fix leaky pipes to avoid still standing water in the production area.
- Upgrade the tasting room to enhance consumers’ experiences when visiting from afar. A beautiful tasting room will elicit stories when those travelers return home.
- Make ceiling upgrades in the production area to make cleaning and sanitation more manageable.
- Make floor upgrades in the production area to make cleaning and sanitation more manageable.
- Educate tasting room employees on wine language and wine styles so that they come across as knowledgeable to consumers. Sutter Home Winery in Napa, CA has one of the best training programs for their tasting employees. Employees are approachable, kind, but also very knowledgeable about several different aspects of the winemaking process, the wines they are pouring, and wines from around the world.
- Improving sanitation protocols, which is just common sense. Sanitation ensures quality.
- Hire a label designer to improve wine labels. Americans are prone to selection based on how a label (or marketing scheme) appeals to them. A bad label automatically equals bad wine... no matter what is in the bottle.
- Learn to reject bad fruit. Know what classifies fruit as “bad fruit.” We all say that 90% of the wine quality comes from the vineyard. If your fruit quality is on 20% “good,” then the hopes of making a fine wine out of that fruit are slim to none.

# Penn State **Extension**

The list of small quality enhancements is endless, and these options will vary from production. Starting points may also be reflective of winery economics. It's Okay to not do everything at once. The point is to identify where quality can be enhanced, make a list, and develop a plan to tackle each of those points.

**Minimize extreme vintage variation; improve consistency on an annual basis.** Another hard reality of working in a cool-climate region is the year-to-year variation in wine quality. These huge alterations in vintage years (e.g. 2010 vs. 2011) lead to unreliable and inconsistent quality in red and white wines. True, many of us believe that this is what defines a great winemaking region. But, again, in looking at it from Joe's perspective, or (more importantly) the consumer's perspective, many of them want consistency. Joe's belief is that consistency in quality is key to catch interest in the eyes of the consumer.

Managing the extreme differences in vintage years can be quite challenging for red wines, especially *vinifera* red wines. How does one manage consistency when Mother Nature is inconsistent? Many have discussed back year blending. Reserve a small volume of your red wine each year to blend into another year (keeping in mind the legal obligations and percentages) to help create a more consistent product on an annual basis. Keep in mind that this suggestion is primarily focused on *vinifera* reds.

Additionally, one can say "no" to producing certain varietals (like Cabernet Sauvignon) during those most challenging years (like 2011). The consumer has an expectation on what Cabernet Sauvignon tastes like because it is familiar wine variety. Consumers do not want to be told something is Cabernet Sauvignon when it does not redeem those characteristics that they remember. Use that variety for lower end blends, or do not make it at all if your production can afford that option.

**Reduce the number of wines produced.** Finally, Joe was shocked to see that many Pennsylvania wineries are making between 15 to 30 different types of wine. At one point he asked me, "Isn't that stressful on the winemaker?" I would assume that the answer is yes! Having such a large portfolio extends the capabilities, not to mention the stress level, of the winemaker. It also drives lack of focus. More focus will drive higher quality... and *that is the point*.

This large portfolio has been the baseline production model for Pennsylvania wineries for many, many years. For larger wineries (~10,000 cases or more), having such large portfolios may not be a big deal. But I'm not convinced *all* wineries need to follow this business model to survive. My perception is that wineries (and winery owners, winemakers, etc.) are resistant to change.

For those that make the "we need sweet, more sweet, and sweeter yet" to make the demands of Pennsylvania consumers, I will point out that Moscato, a huge seller in the national market right now, does not contain 12% sugar and is relatively well received by a lot of consumers. This same principle holds true for White Zinfandel. Additionally, from an academic standpoint, our sensory system can taste changes in "sweetness" intensity up to a point (and that point is not as high as many winemakers think it is). What this means is that at some percentage of residual sugar the wine is just "sweet" no matter how much more sugar one keeps adding.

Joe's advice for smaller productions was to start focusing on a minimal number of wines (an arbitrary number may be 6 to 10 wines). Work hard to improve quality and complexity of those wines. Make those wines the feature of the winery! A part of me believes that in reducing the number of wines

# Penn State **Extension**

offered at a winery, the more energy a winemaker will have at maintaining quality consistently, and annually, for those wines.

## **Sweet wines need to meet a certain quality standard.**

This could be considered another token to quality enhancement, but it is one that is often overlooked. As I stated above, the #1 excuse I hear in Pennsylvania for “fixing” a wine flaw is this: “Just add sugar to it, and it will sell.” I want to go out on a limb and say, that it is not enough anymore to accept this as an answer. The industry is actively trying to enhance Pennsylvania wine reputation and help drive wine sales. Sweet red wines (i.e. Barefoot’s Sweet Red, Moscato, White Zinfandel) are national best sellers. We have plenty of wines in PA that are just as good that *could* compete with those wines if every sweet wine producer made their wines to the quality level (fault free, pleasant, *and* makes the consumer feel like a serious wine drinker) that larger producers are doing on the west coast. As individual wineries start to push their quality bar higher, then those wineries that are not following suit will slowly start to drop out of the market place.

## **Sweet wines were good, but they will not be able to compete on a national scale price-wise.**

Again, this point may affect those wineries in Pennsylvania that are looking to compete on a national (or global) scale, but it is dependent on the direction and focus of the winery’s production and business plan. Some consumers, especially those that live by the “eat local-drink local” mentality, may be willing to pay the \$10 to \$15 price point for sweet, simple wines. However, the question remains: how does one convince the average consumer to buy the \$10 to \$15 bottle over the \$5 to \$8 bottle of equal or better quality? This is something I’ve thought about over and over again since I came to Pennsylvania. I’m afraid I don’t have a good answer to this as I know many producers cannot afford to drop the prices of their sweeter wines, and I by no means recommend it. The price differential is most likely a function of volume, but this is something to consider as a winery starts to plan for national distribution.

To this point, Joe also emphasized that wineries should continue to use the profit of sweet wines to fund quality improvements for dry wines. He seemed to believe that as dry wine quality increases, the recognition of Pennsylvania wines by national and global professionals will also increase. Sweet wines for profit, dry wines for reputation. Both are needed to survive and thrive. But both styles need to be clean and of sufficient quality.

## **The power of investment... for marketing**

Joe stated that for Pennsylvania to show the world they are a serious wine industry (assuming that is the direction the state’s industry is choosing to go towards...) then more money would be needed towards marketing, in addition to constantly improving wine quality. Joe’s suggestions included:

- Better advertising in consumer-based *and* industry-based media that emphasize there is a wine industry in Pennsylvania
- Organizing “extravagant” trips to Pennsylvania with tastings for wine writers and critics. Wine and dine those that talk so that, at some point, the media will come to us. (I put “extravagant” in quotes to emphasize how critics are treated in Napa, St. Katharines, Bordeaux, Long Island, the Finger Lakes... just to name a few regions... when coming to taste and review wines.)
- Take an initiative to organize tastings for sommeliers and restaurants in Pennsylvania, specifically those cities (e.g. Philadelphia, Lancaster) that push local wines.

# Penn State **Extension**

- Find a leading wine sales advocate (or two) to get Pennsylvania wines sold in multiple outlets.

These are a few examples, but are good starting points. The basic point is to get people inside and outside of Pennsylvania talking about the wines to create a buzz.

## **Keep tasting wines from other regions and know the benchmarks**

I cannot emphasize this point enough, and I am glad that Joe hit on it as well. Tasting wines from around the world should be mandatory at every winery in the state. We need to know where we stand against the world, what kind of wine styles we are trying to make, and how our wines compare internationally. The only way to gain this perspective is to *taste a lot of wine*. How do you know what *Wine Variety A* should taste like if you have never had one from outside of Pennsylvania? And does our Concord blush really taste like White Zinfandel? The answers lie in one's tasting experience.

How does a winery install tasting wines?

- Have the owner purchase 4 wines every other week (or every week) and taste as a group. Take notes individually, first, and then discuss as a group.
- Start individual tasting groups with others interested in wine.
- Use guidelines created through Sommelier organizations on tasting through wine regions. Many books are also helpful guidelines and include, but is not limited to [World Atlas of Wine by Hugh Johnson](#), [Windows on the World Complete Wine Course by Kevin Zraly](#), and [The Oxford Companion to Wine by Jancis Robinson](#)
- Take a wine appreciation class. Many exist locally or are available online.

I do think these points hold some value and require some thought. Many have found some of the comments a bit unnerving. For those that feel that way, I would suggest taking some time to ponder over the points and consider the outside perspective. Keep in mind that these suggestions are points made to enhance quality of Pennsylvania wine, as well as improve the reputation of the state as a whole in the eyes of the consumer and/or critic. I'd be happy to discuss any of these points further and would also welcome any feedback. One can reach me by email ([dxg241@psu.edu](mailto:dxg241@psu.edu)) or phone (814-867-0431) for comments or questions.

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August 2012*