

TASTINGS By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

OTBN: Ports (and Rosés) in a Storm

Open That Bottle Night 10 was a back-to-basics, here's-to-comfort affair for uncertain times

(The following is an excerpt from the above-titled article.)

On Saturday night, Feb. 28, in Charleston, S.C., James McCoy ate meatloaf -- with 1994 Opus One, a fine California red that his oldest son gave him years ago. In Chicago, on the same night, Ernie Malik also ate meatloaf -- with 1982 Château Lynch-Bages from Bordeaux. And in Euless, Texas, Greg Forshay finally enjoyed his 2004 Two Hands Shiraz from Australia -- with meatloaf.



It was Open That Bottle Night 10, the world-wide celebration of friends, family and memories during which all of us finally drink that wine that is otherwise simply too special to open. It was observed from Antarctica (2005 Nicolas Potel Volnay) to Maui, Hawaii (1978 Lafite Rothschild in magnum), in groups big and small. It was celebrated with a wine called Kistücsök Vörösünk in Budapest, Malbec in Caracas and Pommard in Turkey Ford, Okla. And it was celebrated with 1988 Cristal Rosé Champagne in the Cayman Islands because George and Barbara Sponseller of Oakland County, Mich., took the bottle with them on vacation so they wouldn't miss the event. They had been saving the Champagne since 1995.

The world is a different place now than it was for OTBN 1 through 9, and the celebrations were different, too, as the meal of choice -- meatloaf -- attests. OTBN 10 was more restrained, with many wines that were less showy and more special for their memories than their pedigree, price or scores from critics. The food was generally also less dramatic. Longtime OTBN celebrants Mark and Ben Segal of Southampton, Pa., who usually prepare elaborate meals, "made the theme this year 'back to basics,' so Ben cooked risotto with peas," Mark wrote, as they listened to their "specially prepared iPod OTBN playlist." Dan and Trowby Brockman of Barrington, Ill., "created a frugal but

elegant dinner of cheese soufflé and a green salad." Magda Krance of Chicago had an "open that fridge and freezer night" as she made virtually everything for her celebration "from ingredients on hand -- appropriate for the current economic times."

A few years ago, lamb was the most popular main course. This year, there was a lot of chicken -- though not just any chicken, of course. Diane, David and Ashley Schick of Clearwater, Fla., had macadamia nut and goat cheese chicken with a 1997 Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Rosé ("we had been 'saving it'").

Toasting the Memories

Ultimately, of course, it's all about the memories. At many OTBN parties, the participants took turns telling the stories behind the wine they brought. No one summed up that special part of the night more succinctly than Kathy and Bill Newlands of Winnetka, Ill., who listed some of the wines and the stories from their 36 guests:

Dom Pérignon both 2000 and 1982 (engagement wine and wedding wine).

Stag's Leap Wine Cellars Fay 2000 (first trip to Napa -- the best of the trip).

Opus One 2001 (engagement wine).

Domaine Zind Humbrecht Pinot d'Alsace 2006 (urban legend says that Obama drinks this when he dines out at Topolobampo here in Chicago).

Vincent Arroyo Petite Sirah 2002 (favorite winery on first wine country bike tour).

Talenti Brunello Riserva Vigna del Paretaio 2001 (Italy trip and Viagra story -- let's leave it there).

Friends celebrated together who weren't even together. "On OTBN night we opened a bottle of 2003 Spice Route Malabar from South Africa," wrote Jurgen and Carmen Meyer-Cuno of Lake Wylie, S.C. "Our friends Hal and Marty from Denver did the same thing. Both of us had bought the wine on location at the same time and so it brought back memories of a great trip, friendship and a fabulous environment, even though we were thousands of miles apart at the opening of the wine. What a terrific experience."

Even more than usual, though, many couples celebrated alone, with intimate memories spurred by a special bottle. More genuinely special, long-held bottles than ever were opened this year, which is probably why there was a true epidemic of broken, shattered and pulverized corks. Why weren't these bottles opened until now? No good reason, really. Ask Rick and Candi Tipton of Carlsbad, Calif.: We finally gave up on all the excuses we have been making to avoid opening our most treasured bottle. In 1980, while vacationing in Northern California and two years before we were married, we went to Napa Valley and bought a bottle of 1975 Heitz Cellars Martha's Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon. We paid \$25 for it and thought it was a king's ransom. At first, our excuse was the need to age the wine to perfection. After that, there was never a good enough reason, not even the births of our three children, several graduations from high school, college and grad school, and many other perfectly suitable occasions.

For the special occasion, we chose a nice restaurant and imposed on a kind young bartender to perform the honors. He was nervous, and commented that the wine was three years older than he was. The cork broke, adding to our nervousness. He decanted the bottle for us, using a strainer to catch bits of cork and sediment. Incredibly, against all odds, the wine was absolutely amazing, the best we

have ever had. While a bit earthy for the first several minutes, it gradually opened up its amazing flower to us. The dense aromas contained hints of black cherry, tobacco, pencil lead, cannabis and oak, and the flavor yielded even more. We were reduced to tears, both from enjoying the wonderful wine and reminiscing about the wonderful 29 years since we bought the bottle.

What It's All About

The real point of OTBN, of course, is to open memorable wines for no reason at all, all year long, not just on one special night. OTBN reminded Marta Kikena, of Washington, D.C., how very special a bottle of wine can be:

I recently returned to western Ukraine, my homeland, after 16 years of not seeing my family. I was excited to see everyone, but in particular my paternal grandparents, who raised me until I left when I was seven. One evening we were talking around the kitchen table after yet another delicious meal by my grandmother. To my surprise, they told me that when I was born, my grandfather had bought the best and most expensive bottle of champagne available in the Soviet Union at that time -- in fact, he had to get it all the way from Moscow -- to be opened when I turned 18. It's called "Golden" and was guaranteed to only get better with age. Since I returned when I was 24, it should have been even better than six years earlier. So we opened it. It took three strainings to get the pulpy haze out, there were no bubbles and the champagne had in effect turned into a flat wine. We joked that just like the Soviet Union, it was promised to last forever but turned into something totally different instead. Nevertheless, it was the best champagne I have ever had.

The message of OTBN, especially in these times, is a simple one: What are you waiting for? Wine, like life itself, should be enjoyed. But we can't make that case any more clearly than Bill Skvarla of Bethel, Ohio, who wrote:

When I first heard of OTBN a few months ago, I was enthralled with the concept of folks the world over, coming together with one common goal, to drink fine (and sometimes not so fine) wine among friends while you have the time on this earth to share.

I am the owner and winemaker of an obscure little farm winery in the southwest part of Ohio called Harmony Hill. My wife, myself and a group of our closest friends and staunchest winery supporters spent the evening in a celebration of life. Not our own lives, but instead the life of a devoted husband, a dear friend, a passionate animal and wildlife supporter and a fine neighbor. Our dear friends Jackie and Phil spent many an afternoon relaxing at the winery, sitting under the canopies while enjoying the summer sun, the country setting, and some fine wine. We lost our friend Phil one month ago, at too young an age, to colon cancer. Jackie and those of us who knew Phil best decided that there was not a more appropriate time than OTBN to honor Phil's life and eat Phil's favorite: Dewey's pizza. It was a night to relinquish some long-held-onto treasures, to examine the essences of life, the essences of those fine wines, to relish in the joy, and move on. As the wine flowed, so did the stories, our tears, the memories, pictures and music.

I could go on and on about the many wines we consumed, but to be honest with you, the wines would all play second fiddle to the main theme of the evening. Toward the end of Phil's life, he asked that there be no sadness, no fanfare -- and no fine wine left undrunk.

Melanie Grayce West contributed to this article.

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