

The Maryland Governor's Cup Judging

"How is Maryland wine?" is not only one of the most frequently asked questions that I field, but it inevitably is paired with very specific body language; a grimace, dry heaves, feigned retching, the universal finger pointed down the throat are just a few. My favorite is the "lean forward and speak in hushed tones" pose; in generations passed, a pose that was used exclusively to speak of someone's supposed homosexuality, the "slow" child that was hidden from the world or any number of deemed aberrant and amoral behaviors, predilections or do I dare say evolutions!

Maryland wine has definitely been relegated to the second class citizen of the wine world. It's the wine you drink when there is nothing else to drink; it's the wine that is hidden in the nether regions of the wine cellar; it is not spoken of, maybe thought of, but quickly shoved from the mind like an improper thought. And it shouldn't be!

In 2003, I was young and ready to shred the wine world, knock it off its arrogant, lofty pedestal, but I had a few preconceived notions myself I had to dismantle! 2003 was the first year that I judged the Maryland Governor's Cup. I was honored to have been asked to judge but the thought of trudging through 50 mediocre to bad wines was not a way I wanted to spend my Sunday. Thank God, I was completely wrong. Were there mediocre wines? Of course, but take your pick, California, France, Italy and Spain make mediocre wines as well; have you tasted half of the thin and herbal swill that is labeled Burgundy lately? But the handful of world class and affordable wines I discovered was an absolute revelation and I was hooked.

Since 2003, I have judged the Maryland Governor's Cup another five times. The number of wineries has increased from 15 to 50 and the number of wines from 50 to 150. There are now three teams of 5 judges instead of 2 teams; the blue team, red team and now green team, which I believe, is a bit of an unfortunate moniker for a wine team; perhaps, I should suggest purple as a much more appropriate color. The number of good wines has increased exponentially and the very best wines are sublime!

This year was the year of the whites. The wines made from the grapes Vignobles, Seyval Blanc and Vidal Blanc were as expected, delicious. These French hybrid varietals do very well in the Eastern United States weather and soil. When the Chardonnay flight of 7 wines was rolled out, the thoughts of heavy oak barrels lumbered in our heads; perhaps the national trend to more judicious oak has reached Maryland because the flight had all of us smiling. The wines were rife with fresh apple and pear flavors with undertones and I stress undertones of vanilla, crème brulee and cinnamon which are imparted by oak. These Chardonnays had wonderful backbones of acidity and the fruit still lingered on the finish.

The reds seemed to have had a few challenging vintages, but there were world class wines in the mix. A hand full of Cabernet based wines and Cabernet Franc s had very rich black fruits mingling with ripe red cherries, touches of menthol and earth without any hint of bitter green bell peppers; an aroma and flavor that is a huge bone of contention between myself and a few of my friends. Bell pepper smells indicate an under ripe wine or grapes that have been picked when the sugars are at the appropriate level but the grape itself is not physiologically ripe; most likely the seeds are bitter and green not nutty.

After all the sediment settle, this was another successful Governor's Cup; success defined by the reaffirmation of the health of the Maryland wine industry, the gold medal selections of wines from emergent wineries, the introduction and formidability of new styles and varieties such as the blockbuster rosés, viognier and pinot gris tasted and finally the professionalism of not only the judges but everyone involved with the Maryland Wine Association. This is serious business that just happens to taste damn delicious!