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WINE NOTES

By DOROTHY J. GAITER AND JOHN BRECHER



Something Completely Different

December 29, 2007; Page W9

Melon wine, anyone?

Right now, as a new year is set to begin, you should resolve to try different wines in 2008. Winemakers all over the world are experimenting with interesting varietals in different places and it's always fun to try them. Consider Melon.

Many years ago, we enjoyed a wine called Muscadet from Daniel Gehrs Wines in California. Muscadet is the name of the inexpensive, seafood-friendly white from the Loire Valley of France and we'd never seen an American wine called Muscadet. This one was lovely and perfect with shrimp. When we met Mr. Gehrs some years later and complimented him on his Muscadet, he sighed and said he didn't make it anymore. He explained that federal officials had allowed him to use the name for three vintages, but then rescinded their approval after the third. American vintners aren't supposed to use place-specific names from other countries -- this has been reinforced through recent trade agreements -- and, while there is no town called Muscadet, it is a specific region. The authorities told him he could label it with the formal name of the grape that Muscadet is made from, Melon de Bourgogne, but he declined. "I didn't want to call it Melon. Who would buy Melon wine? I decided I didn't want to fight that battle." Actually, we have had a couple of American Melons over the years -- we especially liked one from an old winery called Merlion -- but they are rare.

All of this came back to us recently when we were in a store and saw a Melon wine (which is actually pronounced Meh-LOHN). It was made by Elemental Cellars in Oregon. It was the 2005, it cost \$16.50 and it was quite good: fruitier and less neutral than Muscadet, but with a similarly earthy, lovely, acidic and dry finish. It was excellent with stone-crab claws. It turns out that a small band of American winemakers, especially in the Northwest, feel pretty passionately about Melon. One small winery in Washington called Perennial Vintners even has a charming Web site devoted to the varietal in the U.S. at melondebourgogne.com.

So we called Elemental Cellars to ask: Why do you make Melon wine and what is it like trying to sell it? Steven Westby, who owns Elemental Cellars with his wife, Sonja, and who is its winemaker, has been making Melon since 1997 and produces 200 to 300 cases a year. "There's not much fruit to be had," he said. After we told him Mr. Gehrs' story, Mr. Westby said: "It's even more complicated here in Oregon, where we are not allowed to use place names. The grape's name is Melon de Bourgogne, so we just called it The Melon." Actually, he says, "we call it our 'Lucy and Ricky wine' because there's so much 'splaining' to do" because of the name. "Whenever I'm presenting it, like at an event, people always ask if it's made from melons."

But he enjoys making it anyway. "The wine is 100% Melon and it is barrel fermented in neutral cooperage because it rounds the mouthfeel out. Tank fermentation can really narrow a wine. The aromas might be brighter but the neutral oak helps to flesh out the middle and it also has beautiful aromas, I think. There's no oak in the wine." Elemental Cellars' wines, which he says are made from "esoteric" grapes, are made at

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