

A PHANTOM BOTTLE OF WINE IN PLAIN SIGHT

Contributed by Sandra Lewis
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Call me a coffee snob, but I'm no wine snob. I drink \$10 bottles of wine and enjoy them just as much as the \$40+ ones.

But the pleasure of drinking wine is not about the price tag and certainly not about the quantity. For me it's about the sensual experience – the bouquet, the interesting combination of flavors on the tongue, and the taste that lingers on the palate.

I'm interested in knowing more about the grape varietals, where they're grown, and how the simple grape is coaxed into producing its intricate flavor using methods as old as civilization itself.

I often think of Maya in the movie “Sideways” who explains why she likes wine and what it makes her think of:

“…I do like to think about the life of wine, how it's a living thing. I like to think about what was going on the year the grapes were growing, how the sun was shining that summer or if it rained... what the weather was like. I think about all those people who tended and picked the grapes, and if it's an old wine, how many of them must be dead by now. I love how wine continues to evolve, how every time I open a bottle it's going to taste different than if I had opened it on any other day. Because a bottle of wine is actually alive -- it's constantly evolving and gaining complexity. That is, until it peaks…and begins its steady, inevitable decline…”

Every bottle is an adventure.

I made my first trip to California's wine country a year ago. It was by sheer luck that I visited on “Barrel Tasting Weekend”; the most fun weekend of the year when winemakers offer tastings straight from the barrel accompanied by cheeses, olives, and other goodies that pair well with their wine. The theory is if you like it in the barrel you'll like it even more after it's aged and properly bottled.

I bought two bottles of wine that weekend from a boutique winery in Healdsburg, CA, Arista Winery. The proprietor's wife is the daughter of my pastor and my daughter Ariel played at her wedding; that qualifies me as family. (The photo below is of the Japanese gardens surrounding Arista's tasting room.)

Shortly after returning home I opened my first Arista bottle, a Longbow Pinot Noir, although I don't remember with whom or the meal we shared.

Without intending to I snuggled the second bottle away; snuggled in the figurative sense because it rested in plain sight on my wine rack.

Yet time and time again I passed it over choosing instead a less expensive, more recently purchased wine to serve with dinner.

I hadn't given this behavior much thought until last week when my friend, Mark, shared an article from the Wall Street Journal about “Open The Bottle Night.”

Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher, wine writers for the Wall Street Journal have designated the last Saturday in February as the night to open that special bottle of wine you've intended to open but never have.

It was then that I realized my remaining Arista bottle had unintentionally become a prize, the embodiment of a delightful memory of my inaugural wine country trip. And as such I wanted to be more respectful and give more thought as to the when and with whom I chose to consume it. However, no moment had been special enough in 2006 and no extraordinary events were looming in 2007.

I had passed it over so often that I had to check my wine rack to ensure my phantom bottle was still there. It was.

So Arista Winery's Russian River Valley Pinot Noir will be my offering when I gather with friends on “Open The Bottle Night,” February 24, 2007.

We've all had an “Arista” experience – denied ourselves the simple pleasure of enjoying that

which we've purchased or have been given for fear of regret once it's gone. I've done it with chocolate, perfume, and bath salts.

I have a friend who loves Tequila. He buys the really expensive stuff, but confessed that he doesn't enjoy it as often as he should. Mark bought a case of 1970 port wine several years ago and he's still hanging on to half a dozen bottles.

So I like the idea of a designated "special" day set aside to gather with friends to uncork and enjoy.

Otherwise we may never get around to it.

I'll open my bottle and toast the simple, warm memories of the wine country from a year ago and all that is good in life now.

And I'll be wondering which bottle I'll snuggle away in 2007 to uncork next year.