



VINE TALK: THE HUNT FOR A NEW-WORLD TERROIR

NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) -Given the choice, few people would travel from Argentina to New York City in January.

But Mike Evans did, leaving behind his idyllic vineyards in Mendoza to take some meetings in New York and Washington, both of which were grey and wet.

Evans is the owner of Vines of Mendoza, a kind of time-share operation for rich Americans who want to buy a micro-vineyard for \$50,000 an acre or so and make their own vanity wines.

His operation hasn't been around long enough to actually produce its own wine yet, but after I predicted that his output would be comprised of standard-issue high-alcohol fruit bombs, he invited me to lunch at Keen's Steakhouse to show just how interesting Argentine wines could be.

The wine he brought certainly piqued my interest: the 2005 Laborum from El Porvenir, a small winery high up in the Andes, is made entirely from tannat grapes, which are mostly infamous for being the prime ingredient in barely-drinkable Uruguayan reds.

Here's a classic old-world combination: local winemakers, using local grapes, making small-batch wines full of individuality and local character.

Except it didn't work out that way.

The wine was young, and tight: despite decanting, it didn't really even start to open up until our lunch was almost over. But at the same time it was also very much the kind of new-world wine that many adventurous wine drinkers these days are getting a little bored of: high in alcohol, fruit-forward, sweet.

If you told people it was an expensive California cabernet, they'd definitely believe you.

Still, Evans was unwilling to concede that wines of character and subtlety don't exist in Argentina.

After he got back south, he sent me two more bottles, which I drank on a lovely warm May evening with grilled venison and bison, as well as some delicious bone marrow.

One of them -- a 2003 Monte Cinco malbec -- was, again, a bit on the sweet-and-fruity side. It was not a bad wine, by any means; it just fit very easily into the Bordeaux-inspired globally-homogenized wine template, which is designed to appeal to men drinking lots of different wines in a blind tasting.

The other wine was a bit more interesting. A 2002 Poesia, a blend of malbec and cabernet sauvignon, it had more bite and acidity than you'd normally expect in an Argentine wine, and was a delicious accompaniment to the food.

All the same, I didn't feel as though I'd discovered anything which could reasonably be called Argentine terroir.

The Poesia is a very good wine, but when you drink it you're not tasting the unique characteristics of the land it's grown on, in the way that you do with regional wines from Germany or Italy or -- most wonderfully of all -- Burgundy. It's still a wine crafted by winemakers, to a particular taste.

Maybe that's hardly surprising, since there's lots of good reason to believe that new-world terroir doesn't actually exist.

Terroir is something which emerges, almost spiritually, from generations of winemaking in the same place, usually in the same family.

There's enormous amounts of mysticism in the wine world -- just ask any biodynamic winemaker -- and indeed the very concept of terroir is almost impossible to pin down in an accurate or helpful manner. It can't just appear out of nowhere in the practical and commercial new-world wine market

Or so people say.

I'm not convinced.

One reason why is the white wine which my dinner guests brought over to kick off our meal, which we drank with a lovely spring salad. A Sonoma albarino, it was made from just half a ton of grapes bought by a couple of small garagistes who call themselves Robot and Skeleton. They were picked early in the season, with low sugar and high acidity, from a vineyard which is completely savage and unpruned.

The wine tasted like no albarino I've ever had from the variety's historical homeland of Galicia, and it was full of off-beat acidity and funky character. Very California counterculture. And, wonderfully, it's only \$10 a bottle, if you can find it.

It reminded me of another utterly unique American wine I had recently: a 2008 wine from Sutcliffe Vineyards, made from 100 percent cinsaut, and which comes, of all places, from the tiny town of Cortez, Colorado.

Neither the albarino nor the cinsaut would likely win any prizes in a blind-tasting contest swarming with soi-disant wine experts sipping and spitting dozens of wines. But they're fascinating, funky wines, full of acidity and character, great with food, and highly conducive to conversation and enjoyment.

I hope that they mark a trend from big to small, from sweetness to acidity, from high alcohol to low, from expensive to affordable, and from global to a local and genuinely American sense of new-world terroir.