

A toast to Texas vintners

By DALE ROBERTSON Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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In a blind tele-tasting, Texas wines stood up to wines from established California and international wineries.

Yet another miracle of modern technology brought the plight of Texas wines into perfect focus for me recently.

The enthusiastic folks in Austin who are marketing the state's juice (www.gotexanwine.org) organized their first "Texas Two-Sip Tele-Tasting," bringing together a smattering of critics from around the country with two expert host-tasters, Devon Broglie of Whole Foods Market and Craig Collins of Prestige Wine Cellars, to blind sample five Texas wines against similar bottlings from other countries and California.

Broglie, set to take his master sommelier exam in July, and the former Houstonian Collins, who holds an Advanced Certification from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust, swirled and spit and offered their expert observations while the rest of us dutifully followed along on our computers via the Internet, swirling and spitting ourselves and e-mailing questions or comments when necessary.

A confession: I sneaked a few three- and four-sips in along the way. The end results were telling. The Texas "team" more than held its own, prevailing in two of the five head-to-heads on my score sheet and tying on another. As it happened, I was meeting my monthly Chronicle panelists for a tasting afterward, so I gave them the chance to weigh in, too. They favored three of the Texas entries.

Proof that Texas belongs in the game? Absolutely. But, in a word, here's the elephant-in-the-room problem: price. In all except one case, the Texas wines were more expensive than the competition's.

To me, it begs the obvious that only the most hard-core loyal Texan, the kind of guy or gal whose garden is full of yellow roses, is unlikely to pay five bucks more for a Panhandle tempranillo than a famous Spanish tempranillo that's of equal quality — as was the case with Dan Gatlin's 2007 Inwood Estates Vineyards Cornelious versus the 2005 Tinto Pesquera from Spain's Ribera del Duero.

Another example: A competition last fall conducted by Glazer's Guy Stout, a master sommelier and rabid Texas wine booster, identified the 2006 Kiepersol Barrel No. 33 Texas Wish cabernet-merlot-sangiovese blend from the Tyler area as a superb wine, never mind the surprising appellation. But, for \$50, it should be.

My readers, most of them Texans, remind me almost daily that they're looking for wines for less than \$15. Although the 2007 Llano Signature Melange, a red "Mediterranean blend" that we tele-tasted fits the bill at \$11 and scored higher with my group than the comparable 2006 La Vieille Ferme Rouge, I thought the French entry was markedly better (8.7 to 8.2 on a 10-point scale), and it's almost 30 percent cheaper at \$7.99.

Hence, I see no easy way for Texas wines — however well made some of them may be — to escape their niche market status. But let's toast the noble efforts of the state's vintners anyway. They're doing surprisingly good things under often adverse conditions.

THE TEXAS TWO-SIP WINES

- **2008 Brennan Vineyards Viognier (\$19) vs. 2007 Yalumba Eden Valley Viognier (\$17.99):** I scored it a virtual dead heat (8.9 to 8.8 in favor of the Aussie), as did the Chronicle panel, which gave the Comanche wine a slight advantage. Both were quite good.
- **2007 Llano Signature Melange (\$11) vs. 2006 La Vieille Ferme Rouge (\$7.99):** Eight of nine Chronicle panelists liked the Côtes de Ventoux better, although neither wine excited anyone.
- **2006 McPherson Sangiovese (\$18) vs. 2006 Badia Coltibuono Chianti Classico (\$25):** The High Plains grapes made as good an impression on my taste buds as the famous Italian ones — both got 8.7s — but the panel favored the Chianti.
- **2007 Inwood Estates Vineyards Cornelious (\$39.50) vs. 2005 Tinto Pesquera (\$35):** Dan Gatlin's well-crafted wines are my Texas reference standard, but they are a tad pricey for everyday drinking, as are the best Ribera del Dueros such as the Pesquera.
- **2005 Texas Hills Orange Moscato (\$17.50) vs. 2007 Quady "Electra" Orange Muscat (\$12.99):** I thought the Texas sweetie-pie was hands-down better than its California counterpart (8.8 to 8), but only one of the panelists agreed with me.