

North Coast Wine Challenge winners revealed

By Diane Peterson

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Glasses of wine being tasted during the first North Coast Wine Challenge at the Hilton Sonoma Wine Country Hotel in Santa Rosa, California on Wednesday, May 29, 2013. (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)

The ultimate winner in the first annual Press Democrat North Coast Wine Challenge, held last week in Santa Rosa, was the Beaulieu Vineyard 2009 Tapestry Reserve, a classic red Bordeaux blend.

Two dozen judges sifted through 930 wines in the blind tasting, then voted to find the best from throughout the heart of Wine Country. When their scores were tabulated, a total of 121 wines received gold medals, six won Best of County awards, five won Best of Class and the Beaulieu red was judged to be the biggest winner of all, the “Best of the Best.”

The Rutherford vineyard was established in 1900 by Georges de Latour and has served as a benchmark for Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon ever since. The wine garnered 98 points and inspired one judge to comment, “Please pour this over my naked body.”

“Best of Sonoma County” was a three-way tie for winner, among Sivas-Sonoma 2011 Sauvignon Blanc; Kokomo 2012 Grenache Rosé, Pauline’s Vineyard Estate; and Trombetta Family Wine 2011 Pinot Noir, Gap’s Crown Vineyard.

The Kokomo 2012 Grenache Rosé, Pauline’s Vineyard Estate, also won the Best of Class award for “Best Rosé,” garnering 98 points for being “elegantly made.”

The Trombetta Family Wine 2011 Pinot Noir, Gap’s Crown Vineyard, sourced from vineyards in the Petaluma Gap region of the Sonoma Coast AVA, was deemed “soft, sultry, deep” by the judges, who gave it a score of 98.

Double win

The Navarro Vineyards 2012 Late Harvest Gewurztraminer won “Best of Mendocino County” and received 97 points for its “bright honeysuckle” flavors, perfect for outdoor sipping. It also won the Best of Class award for “Best Dessert” wine.

Shed Horn Cellars, 2010 Non Typical Red Blend, which combines zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon, petite sirah, barbera and syrah grapes, won the “Best of Lake County.” Judges awarded it 96 points, praising the Middletown winery’s unusual red blend for its “bright, clean, good fruit.”

“Best of Marin County” went to the DeLoach Vineyards 2010 Marin Pinot Noir, a wine produced by Boisset Family Estates of St. Helena. The wine was sourced from four different vineyards in Marin County, one of the coolest American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) in California. The cool temperatures translate into a longer growing season, resulting in balanced wines with natural acidity.

“Best of Solano County” went to the GrapeHeart Vineyards, 2010 “The Beat,” Proprietary Red, Estate Grown. GrapeHeart Vineyards was founded by local heart surgeon Dr. Ramzi Deeik and his wife, Isabel, who are dedicated to promoting heart health.

The contest, co-hosted by The Press Democrat and Vineyard & Winery Management, was open to wineries that source fruit from the North Coast, including the AVAs in Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino counties and parts of Marin and Solano counties.

Winning the Best of Class award for “Best Sparkling Wine,” the Breathless Wines North Coast NV Brut received 98 points and was described as “perfectly balanced” and “delicious” by the judges. The sparkler was made with a blend of chardonnay and pinot noir grapes using the venerable “méthode champenoise” (a secondary fermentation in the bottle).

Strength of field

Led by Chief Judge Daryl Groom of Groom Australian Premium Wines, the judges, drawn from all over Northern California, holed up for two days at the Hilton Sonoma Wine Country Hotel in panels to work through the entries. Groom noted that the winners amounted to about 14 percent of the wines entered.

“That shows the strength and caliber of these wines and reinforces that we are undoubtedly a world-class growing region,” Groom said.

The Press Democrat will host a public tasting of the winning wines on July 14 at Santa Rosa Junior College’s Shone Farm near Forestville.

The goal of the contest was to bring new focus and attention to the wines of the entire North Coast region, said Steve Falk, CEO of Sonoma Media Investments, which owns The Press Democrat.

“Most people agree that many of the best wines in the world are produced right here in Northern California ... and many wine competitions have repeatedly confirmed that fact,” Falk said.

“There has never been, however, a wine competition that focused solely on the North Coast and tried to determine the best of the best.”

The competition was managed by Vineyard & Winery Management, a multi-media company based in Santa Rosa that publishes a wine trade magazine, puts on wine trade shows and manages several other wine competitions as well.

“This one is more local... from the epicenter of the North Coast,” said Robert Merletti, owner/chairman of Vineyard & Winery Management. “We wanted the six counties to come together and compete for bragging rights.”

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Judge Chris Munsell samples rose wine. (BETH SCHLANKER/ The Press Democrat)