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RAY'S RETROSPECTIVE

It happens every year. Well, it's happened every year for the last 19 years. The call goes forth from the good folks at Ray's Boathouse at Shilshole to wineries in the Northwest—Oregon, Washington, Idaho and, more recently, British Columbia—to enter a wine competition: the Annual Retrospective of Northwest Wines. The idea is that Ray's wine director—for the last few years, David Carreon—assembles a group of local wine professionals to taste as many entries as show up—300 this year. Their task is to choose the single best example from each of nine

categories, the winners to be served at a pair of dinners held at Ray's Boathouse.

The meals are spectacular, multi-course affairs, the dishes chosen to show off the virtues of the winning wines. At the most recent event there were seven scrumptious creations paired with nine very impressive wines. And, because the rules state that the wines must not only have been for sale in the preceding year, but also be currently available for consumers, the diners who attend know they can find their favorites out there somewhere.

I've been able to attend the dinners on several occasions, and this year's was as satisfying and delicious as ever, because of the following.

We were given a glass—a taste, really—of a delightful 2004 Benton-Lane Pinot Gris (*Oregon, \$15*) when we entered the dining room. It proved to be refreshing and lively, with fine acidity and plenty of ripe fruit on display without being overly fruity. Its balance made it a fine foil for the passed appetizers, an inventive paper-thin slice of baked Anjou pear topped with chevre cheese and an exciting seared scallop wrapped in Salumi smoked paprika salami. I would have had more of these but I knew how many courses—and how many wines—were to come, so I restrained myself, reluctantly.

The 2004 Three Rivers Winery Chardonnay (*Washington, \$17*) was the wine chosen to accompany an elegant first fish course of olive oil-poached sablefish. I enjoyed the crisp style of the Chardonnay; it was oaky without being ponderous, and the citrus note in it showed off the herb and citrus sauce on the fish. This is a Chardonnay to enjoy with food and a good value at the price.

The second fish course was a great example of a modern Northwest classic: Pinot Noir and local salmon, gilled this time and served with spinach, fennel and a chanterelle sauce. The wine was impressive: 2004 Belle Vallee Pinot Noir "Grand Cuvee" (*Oregon, \$48*); I was particularly delighted by its light, earthy notes and velvety texture adding complexity to the ripe fruit notes, spicy oak and fine length. My notes read: "Burgundian."

A pair of wines came with the succulent lamb course, both done in

the International-style: 2003 Fort Walla Walla Cellars Merlot (*Washington, \$28*) and 2003 Basel Cellars Syrah (*Washington, \$45*). The Merlot seemed tight and over-oaked when first poured—it was difficult to tell what the grape variety was, even though it was declared; nonetheless, it was a tasty wine. With a bit of time and swirling I was able to discern the sweet cherry and herbal note of good Merlot. The Syrah was equally oaky, but the spicy/gamey fruit flavors of the grape showed through, a sweet and sexy combination. No wonder the judges gave it the nod.

A wonderful beef course—tenderloin and braised short ribs in tandem—accompanied the next pair of reds: 2003 Basel Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon (*Washington, \$36*) and 2001 Powers Meritage (*Washington, \$27*). The styles on these two were noticeably different. The Basel Cab was very much like its Syrah above: fleshy and rich, soft and seductive, very much an International-style wine. By contrast the Powers Meritage, meant to be a Bordeaux blend, was exactly that: complex and sophisticated, with earth and game notes, even a touch of Bordeaux "lead pencil" in the nose. Classicist that I am, I was impressed in a way I usually am not by Powers wines.

There were two dessert wines, one so lightly sweet that it barely qualified as such, the other intensely sweet—dessert in a glass. The first, 2005 Hogue Gewurztraminer (*Washington, \$7*), was delightful; but for my taste it might do better as an aperitif or as a partner with Asian cuisine. It was delicately spicy and lightly sweet, with fine acidity—perfect Gewurz, in other words.

By contrast the 2004 Apex Gewurztraminer Ice Wine (*Washington, \$40*) per half-bottle, was focused sweetness—as all ice wines are. Bold, concentrated flavors of apricot and peach were saved from being mere syrup by the bracing acidity that balanced all that richness. I could have enjoyed another glass, but by that time the food and wine were beginning to overwhelm me.

So I opted for a cup of coffee to see me home—it's a long trip from Ballard to Bellevue. And I started thinking about next year's dinner ... and the wines!