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MOONING OVER GOOD WINE

Have I got a wine for you! But more about that later.

For now, let's go back to 1972, the first time I stopped at Valley of the Moon winery in the Sonoma Valley. In those days the reason to stop there was their exemplary jug wines—great-tasting reds in half-gallons at remarkably cheap prices. All the Italian restaurants in San Francisco served them by the glass, all the wine guides recommended them. A quick tasting proved the point; we brought back two cases.

In 1972, still in college, we needed good, cheap wine.

Did I mention things have changed?

Fast forward 34 years. Valley of the Moon honors those jug wine days, and all the years that went before—the estate dates back to 1860. But the emphasis today is on quality, and they're serious enough about it to put their wines up against the best in the country. That's how I got invited to a blind tasting recently, an opportunity to compare their Bordeaux-style blend—Cuvee de la Luna—against five other really good wines. Really good wines.

Oh, they played it pretty cute—wouldn't tell us what the other wines were. All we had was the promise of five famous, expensive wines and a fine lunch thrown in for good measure. Turns out our hosts were right on both counts.

Facing six anonymous red wines can be daunting. But it's a fascinating challenge and a bit of fun too. And I always learn a thing or two along the way.

The thing that surprised me—and the other tasters at the table—was how difficult it was to pick a favorite. We had a half-dozen impressively fine wines in front of us, that much was very clear. The tricky part was picking a favorite—and a weak link.

Yet we did. In our collective wisdom, eight of us, a combination of wine merchants and sommeliers from around Seattle, tallied our scores and found the wine we liked least (sort of):

2001 Dominus (*Napa, \$100*). In any other tasting this would probably be the winner, with its deep, dark color, concentrated fruit, spicy oak and fine length. It was fifth on my scorecard, marked down only because of its firm tannins. Over all, it was impressive and well-balanced. (Note: Historically, Dominus takes a few years to show just how good it is; I'd like to retaste this in a few more years ... or after it had been decanted for an hour or so.)

The group's fifth-place wine was third in my estimation: 2001 Joseph

Phelps "Insignia" (*Napa, \$100*). It showed big fruit flavors in the nose and on the palate, and a smooth, lingering finish with slightly dry tannins. It may have been the most purely delicious wine we tasted.

Three wines tied for second by scoring the same number of points; I will list them in reverse order by the number of first-place votes they garnered. So fourth place went to the host wine: 2001 Valley of the Moon "Cuvee de la Luna" (*Sonoma, \$30*). I chose it second, in large part because of its seductive style, its combination of sweet oak, spice, berries and soft, smooth finish. It was perhaps less complex than some of the other wines, but oh, so tasty.

The third-place wine was the 2001 Cain Five (*Napa, \$90*), my personal favorite (as it so often is). Darkest of the wines, it was also the boldest, most showy in style with a toasty note in the nose and fine richness on the palate. It took a few minutes to open, then became impressive indeed.

2001 Niebaum Coppola "Rubicon" (*Napa, \$90*) came in second with the group (I picked it last). Smoky/spicy, it had a soft, smooth style and nice length, was tasty enough but lacked a bit of complexity. But give me a glass anytime.

Drumroll, please. The group's favorite wine (and my fourth-place wine) was the 2001 Ch. St. Jean "Cinq Cepages" (*Sonoma, \$60*), a perennial favorite. It had a sweet, soft style along with a light charred oak note in the nose. The finish was long with only slightly dry tannins showing; my impression was that it is a finesse wine rather than a showy one.

The representatives of Valley of the Moon didn't expect to win the tasting, only to prove that their best wine was in the same league as the best of California. All of these wines are 90-point or better in quality, but one of them is much more, ahem, attractively priced than the others. The name may be less impressive, but the taste is not. I know which one I'll be buying for myself.

