



April 22, 2011

### **DEATH to the “CULT” AND BIRTH of the DOMESTIC FIRST GROWTH**

One of the more interesting aspects of the domestic wine world over the last fifteen years has been the phenomenon of the “cult” winery.

You can count the true “cult” wineries on two hands. Denoted by critical success, reputation, limited volume, inelastic demand with wait lists, and profitable aftermarket value, you can almost name them off the top of your head – Harlan, Screaming Eagle, Scarecrow, Colgin, Bryant, Dalla Valle, Hundred Acre, Araujo ... The rest of the hundreds of wineries that suggest they are of “cult” status are a mix of allocated wineries trying to up the ante and some wannabes that want to be allocated. Some have the pedigree to emerge into this classification. Most do not.



The net outcome based on those that wear the crown and those that desire to ascend to the throne is a real dilution in the meaning of “cult” wine. This meaning has been further diluted by the lingering economic malaise that has also metaphorically centrifuged the contenders from the pretenders.

This brief reflection would be apropos to nothing were it not for a couple of emails I received from a flash wine site recently that described an unknown Paso wine with its “cult-like” following. This did nothing but reinforce the “contender from the pretender” notion in my mind. Just as the denizens of a Phish concert gives off a wafting hint of b.o. intermingled with da kine, a flash wine sale for a wine with a “cult-like” following at 60% off of list price gives off a hint of b.s. intermingled with desperation.

The reality is that the word, “cult” like “boutique” before it, and “artisan” in the near future has become meaningless: An unoriginal euphemistic phrase no more convincing than calling a used car a “pre-owned” vehicle.

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We're not fooled by the phrasing.

In the wake of the co-opting of a phrase that has been stripped of meaning coupled with an economic environment that has re-calibrated most wine price points and demand to rational levels, I think what we're subtly seeing is the very early emergence of a New World Order in the domestic wine world, at least as far as the inelastic upper echelon of wine is concerned.

Borne out of necessity, true "cult" wines are morphing into a new category: a Premier Cru class; – a Domestic First Growth equivalent – both in perception and reality.

While this isn't the time nor place to discuss the differences in between a French classification system that is based on tradition and history and a U.S. based system that rewards vision and moxie, I will note that any winery in this lofty position has to carefully navigate the gauche indelicacy of outright calling themselves a Domestic First Growth wine. That designation has to be anointed just as they were anointed as a so-called cult wine(ry).

However, wineries can and do politely suggest, via their vision, that this is the case, as Tim Mondavi has done when he says at the Continuum web site, "Our goal at Continuum Estate is to produce a single wine to be recognized among the finest in the world." Continuum is one of a select few wineries that aren't yet mentioned in the same breath as Harlan, but for whom their potential will surely place them in this category in the next couple of vintages.

Combining premium location, a singular focus, a 'spare no expense' meticulousness to detail that would make an OCD man anxious, we're starting to see the germinating market elements with these wineries who are not only emboldened coming out of the recession, but also the beneficiary of some wind at their back by virtue of the French first growth wine sales in Asia.

Call it an educated hunch: Humans love mental order and things that fit into a realm of understanding. With a re-balanced demand curve, a very muddled "cult" meaning, and upper-tier wineries that have effectively shaken the ankle-biters that are other would-be elite wines, we're going to see the emergence of a new classification of Napa wine – they'll be geographically clustered (Pritchard Hill, for example), they'll be expensive, they'll be scarce and they'll be the future darling of the insatiable luxury wine market in Asia in the not too distant future.

Call these wines the scourge of the everyman, call them Domestic First Growths (DFG), just don't call them, "cults" a phraseology that has lost its relevance in the wine world.

- Jeff LeFevre  
Founder & Editor of The Good Grape