



January 28 & 29, 2017

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Best of 2016, Volume I

By Michael Franz
Dec 13, 2016

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I'm well aware of the fact that I've got the World's Best Job, and I'd know that even if people didn't tell me all the time (which they do). Grateful man that I am, I believe it is good karma to tip my hat to outstanding performances that I've encountered each year, and here are some profiles that will be followed by a second set in four weeks. Having logged more than 70,000 air miles in 2016 and tasted over 9,000 wines, it is fair to say that I've been around the block, and here are some of the best things I encountered along the way:

Best New Producer: Viña Vik

Norwegian entrepreneur Alexander Vik embarked in 2004 on an effort to make a truly great wine in South America, searching for a superb site and searching with the best viticultural team he could hire. He settled on a location two years later, buying ... an entire valley. I have never met the man, but I did see the place last year, and I can say with certainty that he doesn't mess around. Along with his wife, Carrie, Vik has built an eye-popping enterprise on more than 10,000 acres roughly 2 hours south of Santiago in Chile. The spectacular vineyard, winery, lodging and restaurant are set in the Millahue Valley, or "Place of Gold", as named by the indigenous people.



Now that we've worked the word "gold" into this account, I'm obliged as a journalist to acknowledge that almost anybody can produce something striking if they've got sufficient funds. However, not just anybody can create a genuinely distinctive and beautiful (as opposed to ostentatious) winery and hotel. Moreover,



not just anybody can set up a vineyard that makes downright great wine *from the very start*, and the French would tell you that it is impossible to make a great wine with vines planted for less than multiple decades. Well, one Frenchman in particular, Bordeaux-born Patrick Valette, has proved this wrong, and the 2011 release he has wrought along with winemaking partner Christian Vallejo proves the point absolutely convincingly. I'll be writing more on Viña Vik in the coming year, as there's much to be learned by examining just how this winery and vineyard got so good so fast. But for now, let's just focus on the flagship wine:

Viña Vik, Millahue, Cachapoal Valley, Chile 2011 (\$150): This is just the third release of this wine, made from extremely young fruit, but it already shows a mind-boggling level of complexity and class. Blended from Cabernet Sauvignon (55%), Carménère (29%), Cabernet Franc (7%), Merlot (7%) and Syrah (4%), it shows beautiful and deep color extending all the way to the



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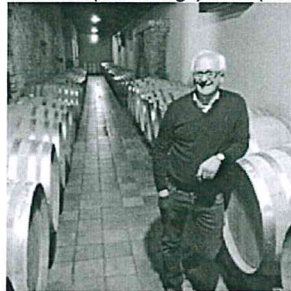
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well as Dolcetto and Barbera), made in absolutely immaculate conditions in a gorgeous little winery located in the Barbaresco district. If you find yourself anywhere in the neighborhood, this will prove to be one of the sweetest winery visits you'll ever enjoy. As for this particular wine, it shows highly distinctive scents of menthol and peppermint get this wine off to a striking start, and the flavors really follow through with a rich, open sweetness that perfectly offsets the high-toned aromatics. If you'll permit an audiophile analogy, this has perfect balance between treble and bass. The wines from Ca' Rome' are all on the expensive side for their types, but the quality is so high that all of them offer excellent value. 94

Best Barolo:

Paolo Manzone (Serralunga "Mariame") 2012 (\$70, Quintessential): This designated cru wine from Serralunga standout Paolo Manzone is the one to buy from the 2012 vintage if you can afford the somewhat higher purchase price, as it shows greater overall complexity and dimension than the standard Serralunga village Barolo. Yet, this latter wine is so good--regardless of its lower price--that we should start with it: **Paolo Manzone (Serralunga) 2012** (\$55)



My blind-tasting scores for the wines of Paolo Manzone were already rising for the past couple of years, prior to my first meeting with him in May of 2016, and it is perhaps also worth noting that this wine was also tasted and scored prior to my first encounter with this infectiously enthusiastic man. This is a terrifically impressive "village" wine with no cru designation, showing the overall attention to quality at this estate. Soft and sexy and

very deep in flavor and texture, this shows wonderful integration of its fruity and savory and woody elements. Terrific! 94. Moving on--and up--to the **Serralunga "Mariame" 2012**, it is even silkier in texture and more elegant in character than the village wine from Serralunga, yet the fruit shows darker tones and more grip and firmness in the finish, suggesting a longer period of positive development ahead of it. Billowing, sexy aromas and impressively dark color draw immediate attention, and things only get better from there, with gorgeous notes of cola and dried black cherries accented with savory hints but virtually no overt oak at all. Both Manzone wines are stunning from 2012, and both should be bought without a moment's hesitation, but this is the one that should make you take a hammer to your piggy bank. 96

Best Aged Wine:

Meulenhof (Mosel, Germany) Erdener Treppchen Riesling Spätlese 1990 (NA; current 2015 vintage, \$30): I've tasted way more than my share of exceptional older wines during the past year, often thanks to the generosity of others. But this is one that I purchased upon release, and have dragged around with me through multiple relocations, and it has never been treated to refrigerated cellaring. The cork was very crumbly and the wine showed deep coloring indicative of significant oxidation over time, and yet the aromas and flavors were still phenomenally vibrant. Scents of pressed flowers and black tea lead to flavors centered on mandarin orange marmalade, and though the wine is still quite sweet, the acidity is still almost electric after all these years. Indeed,



the acidity was actually too much for my wife (to whom I ran with the glass...yelling, "Taste *this!*"), who loves bright wines. As for me, the acidity was absolutely perfect in relation to the wine's luscious sweetness and open fruit. I'm writing about this not to gloat about an experience that you can't replicate, but rather to encourage you to buy (and age) German Rieslings at all levels of sweetness--precisely so that you can indeed replicate this experience. These wines remain seriously under-priced in relation to their quality and the costs entailed in their production, and they remain the world's purest expression of the vintner's art. 97