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Fifty States of Wine

By Joel Stein

I'm not sure why my instinct, upon learning that all 50 states make wine, was to try one from each. If I found out that every state has a water park, I wouldn't try to go to each one. That's because water parks can't get you drunk.

But besides some patriotic call of duty, I think I wanted to try a wine from each state to see if, as I increasingly suspected, good wine can be made anywhere. Great wine keeps coming from surprising new places--New Zealand, Lebanon, Slovenia--so why not Nebraska? In 1976, as recounted in the new indie flick *Bottle Shock*, experts at a blind tasting in Paris were astonished to find they preferred California wines to Bordeaux. Would my experiment rearrange the wine world and create legions of devotees of Montanan merlot? And if so, would John Cusack play me in the movie?

One reason some regions have trouble building up their wine cred is that Europeans, and now Californians, contend that the specific soil their vineyards sit on makes their wine good, that the flinty rock or dusty earth imparts a distinctive flavor. But Fred Franzia, maker of the popular \$2-a-bottle Charles Shaw, told me that terroir--a French term embracing all things regional, from soil to climate to topography--is a concept winemakers use to overcharge. "Anything will grow with sun and water. We can grow on asphalt," he said. "Terroir don't mean s_____."

But my attempt to debunk terroir was more difficult than I had anticipated. Though all 50 states make wine (ever since North Dakota joined the pack in 2002), it's not so easy to get a bottle from each state. Most wines are sold only locally, and Alaska won't even ship its product, which is made from grapes from other states. So if you try to duplicate this project, know that it's best undertaken slowly while traveling around the country--or during the summer, when you have a lot of interns.

In reviewing somewhat randomly selected bottles priced around \$15 to \$20, I learned a few general truths. White is easier to make than red. Wines made at golf courses are not good. And the importance of terroir is definitely questionable, since no region of the country seems ill suited for winemaking except the Deep South, all of which I think Sherman salted. Though I didn't touch the dirt on these vineyards, my impression is that it's more a matter of finding the right grape for your climate. (Michigan's riesling was one of my favorites.)

I also learned that you can make and apparently sell some truly disgusting wine: six of the bottles I tried with a dozen friends were unanimously deemed "undrinkable." But 11 of them were quite good, and while all the expected states made this list (California, Oregon, Washington, New York, Michigan and Texas), so did a pinot grigio from Delaware, a white from Kentucky, a muscat from New Hampshire, a cabernet from Colorado and a chardonnay from North Carolina. Of the remaining wines, 21 were pretty decent and 12 were bad. In general, the wines were better than I predicted, given the newness of many operations, but all the people who tasted with me thought the U.S. had let them down. "Overall, there were some stinkers," said Gary Vaynerchuk, author of *101 Wines Guaranteed to Inspire, Delight and Bring Thunder to Your World*, who joined me in trying to guess which bottles were from which states. "That being said, the wines showed the potential of better things to come over the next five to 10 years."

Sure, most of these wines were overly simple, and I could get a much better bottle for the money from Spain or Portugal, but I got to try several grapes I'd never heard of. Chambourcin is being used on the East Coast to make weird, interesting reds. And I loved the Midwest's big, tannic Norton grape. I had a dark red grape called Marechal Foch from Pennsylvania that was really different. After all this, though, I still don't know if terroir matters. It could be that the South's muscadine grape is inherently horrifying or just that people who drink sweet tea should not make wine.

After a lengthy tasting session where we tried 20 wines, my drunken friends encouraged me to drink from the spit bucket. I took a whiff and instantly realized it couldn't taste as bad as the red from Cape Cod, which was the worst beverage of any kind I'd ever tasted--and I had to swallow barium for an upper-GI test. As I took a swig and swirled it around to gross out my friends, I thought it tasted like America. It was sweet, funky, simple, aggressive and not as bad as you'd been led to believe.

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