

Debugging the Myth

2001 Vintage and the Ladybug Issue

By now, most readers have heard about the ladybug issue with Ontario wines. For those who haven't let us recap.

In 2001 a spike in the soybean aphid population in the Northern United States occurred. Moving Northward in search of new crops to devour due to over population, Ontario became a prime target. And when the swarms of aphids came-THEY CAME! So many that on one particular evening, the Skydome had to stop a baseball game and close the roof to protect fans from inhaling the little monsters.

Now, Mother Nature with all of her checks and balances had her own answer to the aphid crisis-the Asian Lady Beetle. This version looks very much like your run of the mill ladybug except for pincers on its rear. Regarded as a beneficial insect due to its predatory nature towards pests, it reduces the need to use pesticides in the vineyard. Entering into Canada 3 week later the ladies had one serious buffet on their food of choice-aphids. The only problem, with such an over abundance of nourishment available, they were able to breed faster than tribbles. After devouring their prey and with summer winding down, the bug ladies started to look for a small source of sugar before bunking down for the winter. Low and behold Southern Ontario's fruit belt.

The dry year of 2001 combined with high ripeness at harvests and the arrival of rains, caused some grapes to split open. Effectively allowing the ladies to crawl into some clusters and extract the much needed fructose. Once picked and vinified with the ladies inside, a certain 'peanut shell flavor' developed in some wines. This compound called Pyrazine is also naturally occurring in all grapes. In some more than others, such as Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet

Franc.

The Lines Become Blurred

A few critics have taken upon themselves to lead the charge against any and all lady wines. Great and I applaud such commitment to customer awareness. What is not right is that in their rush to be the first one out of the gates to point out a lady taint, that the lines in some cases of taint vs. non taint have become blurred. In years of extreme climatic conditions i.e. lots of rain or drought (such as the case in 2001), secondary metabolites (aromas) become more evident. The wines of 2001 are definitely packed with fruit flavors but also higher than normal (still minimal in the grand scheme of wine) levels of Pyrazine and other chemical compounds. In most cases there is no way to effectively tell the difference between what is taint or which is vintage conditions. So you may want to ask yourself then what exactly is ladybug and what is not? Even worse is that there are wines out there that have no evidence at all of taint, and have been labeled lady. Last year I did an in depth barrel tasting of the 2001's (September's Issue) and what must be remembered is that it is indeed a top notch vintage. The whites are rich, fruity and aromatic and the reds deeply colored, tannic and ageworthy. Should a form of hysteria and/or self promotion eclipse a great vintage?

Furthermore all members of the VQA tasting panel, have been trained to detect the ladybug aroma. The normal failure rate for VQA wines runs around 15 percent. This years batch of wines has only increased to 20%, and that doesn't take into account vintage variation.

Fair Play

That is not to say that if a wine with excessive amounts of ladybug does show up on the market place, I will not call a spade a spade. Wines that are seriously affected by lady do not belong on retail shelves. In fact I have had a few opportunities to sample with winemakers, wines with high levels of Peanut. They confirmed to me that they would not be releasing these derelict wines to the marketplace as it would be detrimental to their reputation. This is the right and honorable thing to do and hats off to those wineries willing to bite the financial burden for the sake of quality.

A problem in 2002?

The big question on everyone's mind! The answer seems to be no. High population of predatory insects relies on high population of prey species to survive. After emerging from hibernation this spring, there was no real food source to sustain such a high population of ladies, so most of them perished. As for the next time the industry will be better prepared to deal with such invasions. Winemakers have already started talking about hand picked fruit and sorting tables to exam grape cluster by grape cluster, so there is no reoccurrence of this type of incident.

Ultimately it is up to you the consumer to discover what you like or don't like with the wines of 2001. As I said earlier, there are many great wines all across the price gambit. The best solution is to try the wines first. If you don't have that luxury and feel that the wine you purchased might

have a problem- return the bottle. Just don't let the bug bite you!