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## Uncorked Sip, sip, Syrah for B.C.

*Uncorked* By Jurgen Gothe

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Elizabeth Ferber illustration

More classy couples from our little corner of the wine world, following a recent brisk tasting tour in the Okanagan Valley. Many—probably not all—of these wines should still be obtainable. Of course, that pronouncement comes with caveats; things can change in the blink of an eye, or the sip of a Syrah.

A microcase in point: a fellow pulls into the driveway of the just-opened Seven Stones Winery, near Cawston, and saunters in to taste some. His manner of speech announces him to be of Antipodean background. Winemaker and co-owner George Hanson is behind the counter, pouring the samples. The visitor makes his way through four of the five on offer, but declines the Hansons' pride and joy, a not-for-sale-except-at-the-winery Shiraz.

"Naw," he drawls, "Canadians can't make Shiraz." Hanson is cut to the quick but puts on a brave face and cajoles the guy into taking a taste. Which he does, reluctantly. He does the three Ss—swirl, sniff, and sip—but not the fourth: spit. Puts the glass down without a word and walks out of the tasting room.

"Rude bugger," says Hanson to himself, chalking one up to the way the biz is, just as the guy comes back: "Went to get my wallet. What's the limit per person?" And he takes his allotted two bottles and disappears down the road.

The day Laughing Stock stops making noise, waves, history, and outstanding wines is the day the world packs it in. The Ennses continue their assault on popular misconceptions, especially about local red-wine-making, with low-volume, high-end, brilliant blends in both official colours. Take the Pinot Gris 2006 (\$19.90)—please. Yes, you'll get dizzy reading the ticker-tape label; I'll do it for you to save you twirling the bottle round and round: "Whole cluster pressing for a clean fruit profile...barrel fermented... stirred sur lie for seven months...barrel-aged in second-fill French oak".

Great colour starts it off, then a stupendous Pinot Gris nose, followed by full, deep flavour. This might be B.C.'s best yet Pinot Gris: extraordinary balance, lovely lemon-slate finish, just a great wine in every way. Were I disposed to copying Parker's 100-point rating scale, I'd say 97. If last year's



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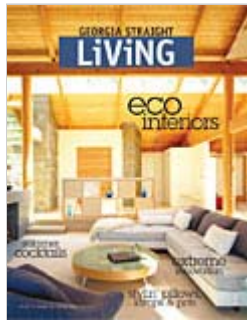
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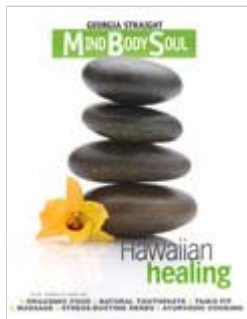
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was "a stunning wine", to quote this column, this one is even stunning-er; 360 cases got out.

But blending is what Laughing Stock has developed into high art, and here comes another to add to the portfolio (which includes its other famous red blend, Portfolio). Blind Trust 2005 (\$28) follows in the tradition of cheeky nomenclature that the stock-oriented-if not -optioned-winery established with its initial releases.

It's a fine Bordeaux-type blend featuring the requisite varieties. A blind trust being a financial trust in which the executors have full discretion over the assets and the trust beneficiaries have no knowledge of the holdings, this wine, according to the description, "might contain some but not all of these: Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot". Twenty months in French oak of various woods; 124 cases all told, and it's been out since May, so quantities will be diminishing.

Soft, mellow, lavish, and so easy to sip-now and for a few more years. Here's more proof of the (re)emergence of blended wines with proprietary names. These people are on their way to Rothschildification.

Sitting in a big white tent on the Mission Hill winery grounds last weekend, helping the Okanagan Symphony Orchestra raise funds, I was again struck by what a glorious setting this is. And what a grand kitchen, which, under Michael Allemeier's inspired direction, produces such glorious food. (If you can get your hands on a jar of his Oculus Cherries preserves, hold on tight.) To say nothing of the wines. Well, let's say something.

Mission Hill Reserve 2006 Pinot Gris (\$21.99) is an elegant, crisp and clean, ultra-light, fresh wine with lovely balance. The copy line "finishes with a flourish of tamarillo tree" left me puzzled-and I've actually eaten tamarillo-but never mind, the wine transcends the copywriter's botanic zeal, as it's stylish and bright and just plain delicious. Yeah, I'd spend that 22 bucks again.

Mission Hill Reserve 2005 Pinot Noir (\$29.99) doesn't quite show the fresh-fruit aspect I expect from a Pinot Noir (like the aforementioned Seven Stones version); while they refer to "complex black cherry" here, some of that complexity has descended into raisin-ness. But there's a nice little zap of plum juice to it and a handsome softness in the finish. It's all very tasty, if a touch steep in price.

Let's wrap up with a handsome Nk'Mip couple from the Qwam Qwmt line of high-enders. First, the 2005 Syrah, all peppery and plummy, rich and beefy, with full-bodied texture and ripe, intense flavours. One for major meat, such as marinated roast venison loin, spice-rubbed partridge with savoy cabbage, or baked lamb kibbeh. Excellent dinner wine; of course, \$34.99 means dipping into the kids' back-to-school money, but what the hell. Here's another of those fabulous Shirazes (aka Syrahs) we Canadians aren't supposed to be able to make.

For dessert, you won't beat the Qwam Qwmt 2005 Riesling Icewine (\$60.08 for 375 millilitres), in the now-obligatory tall bottle that characterizes all B.C. icewines. Great fruit and lovely acidity, a breeze-in-your-face freshness, full but treacly texture, it's a handsome thimble-sipping wine, one for the textbooks. A rare treat for when the spirit moves you, or the windfall of cash comes. Some day, when my ship comes in, I'm going to buy up all the rest of the stock, truck it up to my mountain redoubt, and that's it, then.

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