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Can Midwestern Wines Compete With California's?

To find out, wine columnist Lettie Teague traveled to Kansas City for one of the country's premier wine competitions. The last of a three-part series on wine culture in the Midwest



By

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I LEARNED A NEW acronym when I was in Kansas City, Mo., a few weeks ago for the Jefferson Cup Invitational Wine Competition: DNPIM, or Do Not Put in Mouth, a term judges use to describe particularly unpleasant wines. “We used to get wines like that all the time,” said Patricia Wamhoff, a Missouri-based wine wholesaler and Jefferson Cup judge. “But it’s much rarer now.”

Indeed, winemaking in the heart of the country has improved dramatically since the competition was founded 18 years ago. I’d traveled to Missouri hoping to taste the scope of that progress, as an observer and a guest judge. Under the direction of Doug Frost, a Kansas-based Master of Wine and Master Sommelier, the “Jeff Cup” is one of the most prestigious wine competitions in the country, honoring the best wines from across the U.S. Past winners have included quite a few Midwestern wines.

Wineries from 27 states entered 743 wines. Some were made from vinifera grapes, including classic European varieties such as Pinot Noir, Merlot and Chardonnay.

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Other wines were made from non-vinifera hybrids, the result of crossing one variety with another to create grapes that will thrive in specific conditions, such as extreme cold, heat and/or humidity. Hybrids represented at this competition included St. Vincent, Chambourcin, Marquette and Norton, the signature red grape of Missouri.

The Jefferson Cup differs from other national competitions in that it champions both vinifera and non-vinifera wines as worthy examples of American winemaking. It offers a unique platform for wines from states other than California to gain nationwide recognition.

The 19 Jeff Cup judges were a well-qualified group of wine professionals from all over the U.S.—sommeliers, wine merchants, wholesale sales reps and even research oenologists at universities—though the majority hailed from the Midwest. Most had served at previous Jefferson Cup competitions, and quite a few had judged other wine contests, too. At dinner the night before the competition began, I overheard lively discussions of Jefferson Cups past. One of my favorite lines: “Remember the time that Gallo box wine won a double gold?”

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The first day of tasting was essentially a series of elimination rounds, with the judges divided into small tasting panels assigned different sets of 100 or so red, white, sparkling and fortified wines. The wines were poured into glasses by a large group of local volunteers who kept the bottles hidden behind a curtained-off portion of the room. Only the grape varieties were revealed to judges tasting the wines.

Each panel was expected to determine if the wines they were assigned deserved a bronze, silver or gold medal, or no medal at all. My panel included Denver-based Ashley Hausman Vaughters, a young Master of Wine and wholesale wine salesperson; Katrin Heuser, a restaurateur in Kansas City; and Wayne Belding, a Master Sommelier and consultant in Boulder, Colo., who was our head judge.

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Before all the panels began tasting, Mr. Frost outlined the difference between bronze-, silver- and gold-medal wines for all the new judges. “A bronze wine is a wine you can imagine someone really liking even though you might not like it. A silver wine is ‘I really like this’ wine, and a gold is ‘If you don’t love this wine like we love this wine, then you are out of your [expletive deleted] mind,’ ” said Mr. Frost with a laugh.

If a majority of judges on a panel rated a wine a gold, it was awarded a gold medal. The wines that each panel of judges unanimously rated a gold qualified as double gold, and these would be re-tasted the following day by the entire group of judges to determine if they deserved a Jefferson Cup.

Mr. Frost also provided background and descriptions of the various hybrid grapes we would be tasting, especially as many of the judges were unfamiliar with how Chambourcin should taste or what a good example of a Marquette might be. Furthermore, as Mr. Frost pointed out, some of the grapes under consideration have only been in existence “for seven or eight years.” I was particularly looking forward to this part of the competition, since I had so little experience tasting good wines made from hybrid grapes, which are so important to winemakers in the Midwest.

We tasted only red wines in the morning and white in the afternoon, in part because whites are easier to taste later in the day, when one’s palate is more fatigued. My fellow panelist Mr. Belding, who has been a Jefferson Cup judge for the past 18 years, offered a further reason: “Because Doug likes it that way.”

We delivered our verdicts aloud, going around the table, pronouncing a wine “gold,” “silver,” “bronze” or “none.” As we voiced our opinions, Ms. Heuser’s was consistently the most positive voice. Even if she didn’t like a wine, she imagined someone else would, and she often called a wine “gold” when others said “bronze” or “silver.” She frequently spoke of a wine in terms of suitability to food: “I think this wine has a lot of versatility. You could pair it easily with many things.”

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As the morning progressed, our group awarded more bronze than gold or silver medals—and I wasn't at all sure my wine-drinking friends would like the wines we awarded bronzes any more than I did. Our panel was pretty much in agreement on most wines, but, listening in on neighboring tables, I could tell that other panels weren't exactly in alliance. I overheard one judge demand of another, "You'd give this wine a gold? Seriously?" In an equally spirited exchange, two judges challenged each other's knowledge of what constitutes a good rosé.

I tasted a couple of Cabernets I thought worthy of golds, and a few Chambourcins I liked just as much. Chambourcin is a red hybrid particularly popular among growers in the Midwest thanks to its cold-weather hardiness. This fairly light-bodied, high-acid red grape is also great for making rosé. When I said that the grape was one of my favorites, Mr. Belding nodded. "We tend to like Norton and Chambourcin," he said, with all the authority of 18 years of Jeff Cup judging.

Our panel found a number of golds among the reds, but fewer in the afternoon, when we judged the whites. Ms. Hausman Vaughters commented after an oak-chip Chardonnay, "I wrote down 'college' because it was like the cheap Chardonnay I drank in college." I found the white wines made from hybrids uniformly more interesting than those made from vinifera grapes. One standout was a crisp sparkling Vidal Blanc, a fruity hybrid particularly popular in Michigan, Ohio, Missouri and New York state. I wanted to give it a gold, but the other judges declared it a silver, so silver it was.

The next morning, when the judges convened again to taste the previous day's double gold medal winners, I was surprised by the large number of potential Jeff Cup recipients: 61 reds and whites from 13 states. Mr. Frost cautioned us to be especially discriminating in this final round.

We tasted the reds first, then the white, sparkling and fortified wines, raising our hands to indicate whether we believed a wine deserved a Jefferson Cup. Judges could publicly defend or criticize wines, and only a simple majority could declare a winner. By and large the group was in agreement, though one Chambourcin light red

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proved controversial. Some thought it too sweet; others loved it. (It ultimately won a Jeff Cup.) The unanimous favorite and my personal favorite of all the finalist reds was the bright, lithe 2016 Left Foot Charley Michigan Blaufränkisch—an example of the success growers and winemakers in cool-climate states have had with this red grape from Austria.

I was impressed not only by the wines but also by the judging process. My fellow professionals spent a great deal of time talking about and evaluating the wines. They approached the proceedings seriously, as a real job. But I still might hesitate over buying a bronze-medal wine if I saw one on a store shelf.

That Blaufränkisch was one of only 16 wines ultimately awarded the Jefferson Cup this year. (Find a complete list here: thejeffersoncup.com.) A number of hybrids won the cup, too—a testament to the high caliber of winemaking in states like Michigan, Missouri and Kansas.

Before moving on, I'd like to offer a big thank you to the many, many readers of The Wall Street Journal who have responded—in emails, letters, comments and social-media posts—to this series devoted to wine in the Midwest. Your stories of growing up, tasting and learning about wine in the Heartland have been truly heartening for this Hoosier wine columnist.

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