

Little island winery plays hard to get

The news from Saturna Island Family Estate Winery is the classic scenario: there's good and there's not-so. The good news is there are three fabulous whites and a nice little red out now. Then there's the not-so: supply. Let's make that two fabulous whites and a couple of reds. Stand around talking much longer, and the balance will change again.

Just before Christmas, four new vintages were released: two 2005 Chardonnays—the Reserve (\$19.95) and an unoaked model (\$14.95)—plus the 2005 Pinot Gris (\$13.95) and the 2004 Pinot Noir (\$15.95). Bold new packaging—screw-cap closure and bright, clean labels—announces the 100-percent estate-grown and -bottled wines.

Then, of course, Christmas got in the way of normal life, and by the time the wines finally found their way into glasses, the unoaked Chard was sold-out. Oh, you can locate the occasional bottle here and there—restaurants grabbed what was available early on—but if you want a supply for the cellar, or even just till picnic season, you're looking at the Reserve.

Things could have been worse: this time, the Pinot Gris turned out to be my favourite of the three whites, and apparently there is still plenty of that to be had. Ditto the '04 Pinot Noir, and to put it in perspective, there's also the 2005, just released, so you can indulge in one of my favourite wine sports: staging your own mini vertical.

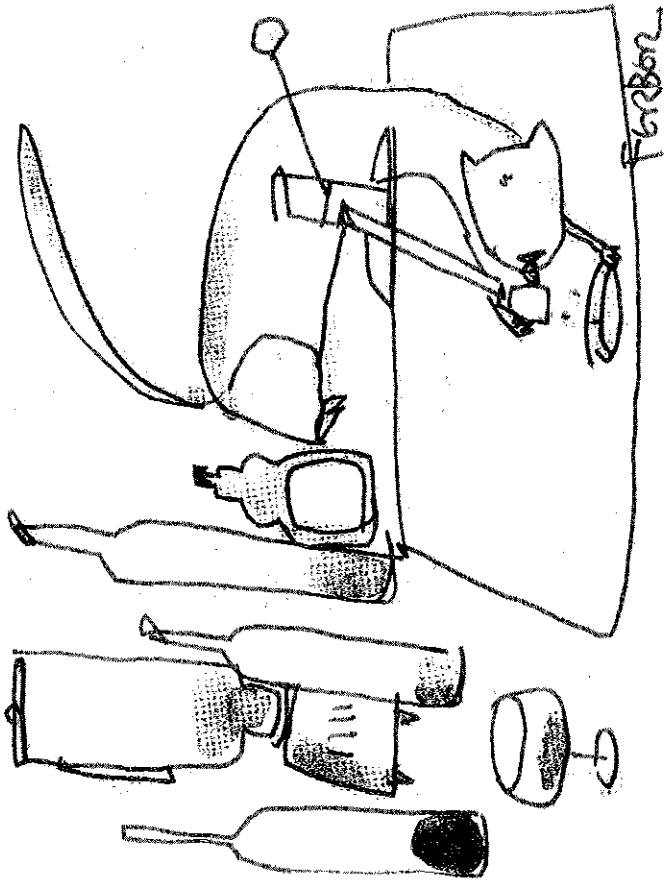
A few tasting notes. The unoaked Chardonnay showed short fruit but considerable richness on the palate; the finish didn't last all that long, but there were good weight and a variety of simple, subtle flavour components highlighting citrus and a touch of pear. It would have been nice to hang on to a few bottles and check on them again in the summer. You'll be doing that at your favourite wine-savvy restaurant now.

The Reserve Chardonnay is—no surprise—headier and bigger, the oak very prominent, something sweet hits the palate and then gives way to a long, rolling, almond-oil aspect in the finish. There's more complexity here than in the unoaked, as there should be, but—and this happens so often now with B.C. wineries that produce two versions of the still-favourite-grape wine—it's tough to pick one over the other.

The Pinot Gris was the hands-down favourite of the trio this time: lush and mellow, somewhat lighter than most PCs coming to us from the Okanagan Valley, an excellent wine with beautifully balanced sweetness and fruit. I particularly appreciated the lower alcohol: at a time when many Pinot Gris are clocking in at up to 14 percent, this one sits sedately at 11.5. This is the case that went into the basement to be brought out regularly for roast-chicken and grilled-fish suppers ahead.

Both vintages of Saturna Island Pinot Noir continue in the Burgundy style that the winery

Uncorked
Jurgen Gothe



established a couple of vintages ago. The 2004 announces its subtle presence with a very light colour, and the flavours are fresh and lean. This is one of those wines that hit the palate immediately as good dinner companions for just about anything.

The 2005 is perhaps just a shade darker (but still light) and shows a slight smoky edge to the fruit, which is principally cherries and a hint of something spicy. It's fresh and bracing, especially if you give it a touch of chill (or even—gasp—put a cube in it) and bring it along to the company potluck. I think the 2004 has the edge, if only by a grape skin. But the good thing is you can, in this case, do the comparison if you know where to look for your supply.

Apart from quick-off-the-mark restaurant cellars and select VQA stores and other privates, the best source remains the winery. And a little jaunt to Saturna Island would surely be a pleasant early-spring outing. Start here: www.saturnavineyards.com/. And sorry about the unoaked Chardonnay being sold-out; there wasn't all that much to begin with. I'll be quicker off the mark myself come November, when the new releases arrive. But a supply of the Pinot Gris would provide some happy moments, and considering the price, your tax-time budget will like it too.

The important thing about these new Saturna releases is that they continue a major shift

up in quality for the little island winery, which got serious a couple of vintages ago. Good tread, nice wines.

DON'T WANT TO send you off on any more wild grape chases, but if you find a bottle of the Oregon winery Sokol Blosser's Evolution white blend, grab it. It isn't cheap, but for what it delivers, it's reasonable (\$23.99)—gentle sweetness and melon, friendly fruit; soft, smooth, and very fresh. At \$15 (which is about where it sits, price-wise, at home in the U.S.), it would be a sensational buy. Here, it is still a sensational wine, but the price does smart. It's another of those everything-but-the-kitchen-sink blends (one of my favourite examples being Noon Gun from Flagstone Winery in South Africa, still available here as a specialty listing for \$13.90), and while Evolution's label makes reference to the fact that it is composed of nine varietals, you have to visit the Web site to find out which. This is the 11th edition of the blend ("Were you trying to do this, or did your leftovers just work well together?" is the question the winemakers are always asked), and it's a mix of Miller-Thurgau, white Riesling, Semillon, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, Muscat Canelli, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, and Sylvaner. Lovely to sip on its own, it's also a terrific food wine for, says the Web site, everything from "light salads to the hottest fusion-style cuisine." ♦

DRINK OF THE WEEK

> BY JURGEN GOTHE

This drink starts out dry, but once you add water, tea, or another beverage, it comes into its own. True Lemon and True Lime are little packets of all-natural crystallized lemon and lime substitutes. They strike me as two of the best new products to hit the market in a long time. There are hundreds of uses for them in the kitchen, but just emptying a packet into a glass of cold water makes a good drink. There seems to be a slight effervescence (more so in the lemon than the lime), and the flavours are well. True. No sweetness, no carbs, no preservatives. No artificial taste, just straight citrus as and when you want it. Unopened, the packets have a 24-month shelf life, and they come in boxes of 40 (the taste equivalent of 10 lemons or limes), for a reasonable \$4.99 at selected Save-On-Foods stores. Winner.