

The New York Times® Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

December 27, 2011

A Year of Acquired Tastes

By **ERIC ASIMOV**

NO doubt about it, I've had the privilege of drinking some spectacular wines in 2011. Most astounding of all was a summer evening that I spent with the sort of great old Burgundies that I never imagined I would see in the first place and that I never expect to drink again.

Yet, as crazy as that lineup of wines was, what I remember most in 2011 were the wines that surprised me, grabbed me and shook me up. Not just wines, in fact, but beers and spirits, too. The French call this feeling of being knocked backward in unexpected rapture a *coup de coeur*. I call it falling in love.

It happened in France this summer, when I was visiting the [Aube region of Champagne](#), long considered the boiler-room grape-supplier to the glamorous Marne, where the vast amount of bubbly is produced. Yet the Aube is proving that it, too, can make wonderfully distinctive Champagnes. If I hadn't known this before, I would have been convinced after visiting Dominique Moreau, who makes tiny amounts of Champagne under the Marie-Courtin label that are gorgeous, precise and elegant, and that I cannot get out of my head.

Even more unlikely than great Champagne from the Aube is the notion of good wine of any kind from England. But that's exactly what I found in southern England last spring. The sparkling wines from Ridgeview Estate near the Village of Ditchling, and from a handful of other producers, are superb and will forever put to rest the notion that England is not capable of [making good wine](#). Best of all, Ridgeview's sparklers may soon be available on American shores.

I can't seem to get away from bubbly, but I would be remiss not to mention the numerous times this year that I've enjoyed Blonde, Andrea Calek's unconventionally delicious sparkling blend of [chardonnay](#) and viognier from the Ardèche. I've been lucky enough to see it in several restaurants. It never tastes the same way twice, but always delights.

Last winter, I wrote about drinking [rosés out of season](#), motivated in part by a wonderful rosé from Domaine Ilarria of Irouléguy in the Basque country of southwestern France. This wine,

which I described as tasting like liquid rock combined with blood and iron, dumbfounded me. It was so good! I've been looking for it fruitlessly ever since, as it seems to have lost its East Coast distributor. If you see it, let me know.

It's been a few years since I've sought out wines from Alsace — they've too often been big, ungainly and unexpectedly sweet. But a wine panel tasting of [Alsace rieslings](#) reminded me how beautiful these wines could be, especially from a taut vintage like 2008. I've especially enjoyed the dry, complex, minerally Zind Humbrech Clos Häuserer.

Closer to home, the leap in quality in the last decade of Finger Lakes rieslings has been wonderful to behold. Of the many superb producers, like Hermann J. Wiemer, Anthony Road and Red Tail Ridge, New York rieslings don't come any better than those from Ravines.

Relax, red wine fans, I'll get to you soon enough. One more white to go, a surprise not because I didn't expect to be wowed by Coche-Dury, one of the most renowned producers of white Burgundy, but because the vintage, 2005, has not been one of my favorites. But there we were, in a restaurant in a small French town, unexpectedly confronted on the wine list with a Coche Meursault Rougeots '05, at a reasonable price, though still a splurge. Rougeots is a village wine, not even a premier cru, yet in the glass this showed a jaw-dropping complexity. The meal ground to a halt as I contemplated this wine, certainly the most profound of the younger wines.

Wines like that are rare, and rightfully so. Less exalted but no less satisfying in the proper context are bottles like the Teroldego Rotaliano, a fresh, lively red from Trentino, Italy, rescued from obscurity by [Elisabetta Foradori](#). She's not the only one who produces it, however. I also love the delicious, savory version from the Tyrolean producer Nusserhof.

What about Priorat, in the hills of Catalonia? Sure, some of these wines are big, oaky and overly dense, but at their best, as with the 2005 Mas La Mola or the 2007 Clos Mogador, the standouts of last winter's [Priorat tasting](#), they can be intense and full of savory mineral flavors.

Wine does tend to dominate my time, but I always have room for beer, like the [Kölsches](#), which I certainly enjoyed in the summer, but haven't stopped drinking yet, and a benchmark beer, like the Cantillon Classic Gueuze, a tart, bright, funky brew that was among the stars of our [sour beer tasting](#).

Spirits? I had an opportunity this year to drink one of the rarest and most astonishing mezcals of all, the unbelievably complex [Del Maguey Pechuga](#), produced (I'm not making this up) with

the addition of a chicken breast.

After that, the fragrant, earthy, cane-fresh [rhums agricoles](#) of the French West Indies might seem rather tame, but try, say, La Favorite Ambré from Martinique and tell me it isn't gorgeous in its own right. For that matter, a recent tasting of the moody, contemplative [Islay single malts](#) was a reminder that these may be the greatest whiskies of all.

Finally, I had some wonderfully aged red wines, like a still fresh and delicious 1988 [pinot noir](#) from Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, a graceful complex 1966 Vintage Selection [cabernet sauvignon](#) from [Charles Krug](#), and a beautiful, precise 1986 Brunello di Montalcino from Biondi-Santi, proof that traditional Brunellos are profound. But the most astounding of all was an evening of legends in the Willamette Valley, courtesy of some very generous collectors.

The litany of wines could have fueled a lifetime of memories, much less one evening's worth: a graceful, complex '93 Mugnier Musigny; a '96 Henri Jayer Cros Parantoux that was pure finesse; a limpid, clear Giroud Charmes-Chambertin '78; a refined '61 Drouhin Romanée St.-Vivant that still possessed the delicious sweetness of youthful fruit; a '49 Giroud Musigny that was powerful, rich and full. And I have not even mentioned the quartet of 1929 grand crus that still seemed staggeringly good. Such wines are not for one meal, but forever.