

OTTAWA CITIZEN



[yellow tail]: a [tale] of success

By RODPHILLIPS WED, NOV 10 2010 COMMENTS(0) WORLDS OF WINE

[TORONTO, CANADA] When I told a few people I was heading to Toronto for a [yellow tail] tasting, I got some incredulous looks. "You're flying to Toronto to taste Yellow Tail?" And I have to say that I understand the tone. [yellow tail] Shiraz hit Ontario a few years ago and caused a sensation. It was the first of the 'frenzy wines' (to be followed by FuZion from Argentina) that consumers couldn't get enough of. It was pitched to a popular taste--fruity, smooth, low in acidity, with some residual sugar--priced well, and had a compelling package. (I saw the [yellow tail] label for the first time in 2002, at the Vinexpo North America show in New York City. I thought it was so interesting that I took several photos of it. And yes, the square brackets are an integral part of the name. I just don't know how to express them orally.)

The famous [tail]. But it's not yellow.

This tasting in Toronto didn't involve the shiraz that's been such a hit, but a new Reserve line of [yellow tail] that's already on sale in many places, but not yet in Ontario. John Casella, [yellow tail]'s winemaker (and member of the family that owns [yellow tail]), was on hand to introduce the new wines, a shiraz and a cabernet sauvignon, and to listen to comments from the wine writers and others invited to the tasting.

What we were faced with was two flights, one of four shirazes, one of four cabernets. The [yellow tail] Reserve 2009 was among them, and the other three in each flight were Australian wines of the same variety. It's an interesting approach, and we were all trying to pick out the [yellow tail] as much as taste and compare the wines with one another.

It wasn't too difficult to find the [yellow tail] Reserve among the shirazes. It had the tell-[tale] texture and flavour and over-all style of the entry-level shiraz, but it stacked up fairly well against the others. The one I thought was best turned out to be Three Rings Shiraz 2007 (Barossa Valley) but the [yellow tail] Reserve was next. I was surprised to find that Angus the Bull Shiraz 2007 (South Australia) didn't show better. Nor did the fourth shiraz, Layer Cake 2009. But isn't that just the thing about blind tastings? They often blind-side you.

Then on to the cabernets. One of these (Mitolo 'Serpico' 2007) was badly faulted, and there was something odd about the Ben Glazer 'Heartland' Shiraz 2008. That left two standing, and I had figured that the third was the [yellow tail] Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2009. It had more sweetness than the others, but it was a lot more interesting than the shiraz. The cabernet was drier, had a texture approaching juicy, and nicely managed tannins. The other wine in the flight, Jim Barry 'The Cover Drive' Shiraz 2006, also showed well.

In all, the [yellow tail] Reserve shiraz and cabernet sauvignon did well against other wines--the others all cost more--which confounds many expectations. I'm not a big fan of the entry-level [yellow tail], although I have no problem with producers making wines for the market. They all do, whether it's the mass or a niche market. Show me a winemaker who makes wine without any regard for sales, and I'll show you a winemaker looking for another job before too long.

[yellow tail] has been a runaway success. When the Casella family launched the brand in 2001, they aimed to sell between 20,000 and 50,000 cases a year. They started off using Rosemount shiraz as their point of reference, and hoped to reach 10 per cent of Rosemount sales. Instead, they sold a million cases in the first 13 months. Now they produce 11.5m cases a year, 8 million of which sell in the U.S. As John Casella puts it, the formula works: good quality fruit, a little sweetness and a little oak. (He uses chips and is quite forthright in his defence of oak chips, which he says are generally misunderstood.) The Reserve line (a mere 200,000 cases) is aged 8 months in French and American barrels (a mix of new and one- and two-fill)--which makes you wonder about the difference between chips and barrels.

As for the label, John Casella calls it "warm and reassuring." It's certainly compelling, and it carries that subliminal tension between the name and the fact that the wallaby's tail *isn't* yellow. It'll be interesting to see how the Reserve line goes, whether the addition of 'Reserve' to the label will be seen to justify an extra couple of dollars for existing [yellow tail] fans and whether it will draw new consumers to the brand.